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The apotheosis of a human ideal: the Young Hegel's conception of the absolute

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The Apotheosis of a Human Ideal:

The Young Hegel’s Conception of the Absolute

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Philosophy

by

Matthew Paul Egan

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Professor Eric Watkins, Chair
Professor Gerry Doppelt
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2008
The dissertation of Matthew Paul Egan is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008
To my parents
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page ........................................................................................................ iii

Dedication ............................................................................................................. iv

Table of Contents ................................................................................................. v

Notes on Sources, Abbreviations, and Translations .......................................... vi

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................. x

Vita ....................................................................................................................... xii

Abstract ............................................................................................................. xiii

Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: The Problem(s) of the Absolute in the Young Hegel’s Thought .... 9

Chapter 2: Hegel the Platonist? ................................................................. 48

Chapter 3: Romantic Pantheism, Intersubjective Idealism to the Rescue? .... 97

Chapter 4: The Apotheosis of a Human Ideal ............................................. 140

Conclusion ...................................................................................................... 206

Bibliography ..................................................................................................... 214
Notes on Sources, Abbreviations, and Translations

Most references to Hegel’s works are to either Werke in Zwanzig Bänden, Theorie Werkausgabe (W), E. Moldenhauer and K. Michel, eds. (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1971), or Gesammelte Werke (GW), Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed. (Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1989). Specific works cited in the body of the text are referred to by means of the abbreviations listed, in chronological order, below. The English translations used, if available, are listed below and are referred to in the body of the text immediately following the reference to the volume and page of the German text. [Thus, a reference to page 372 in the German, 255 in the English, of “The Spirit of Christianity” would be as follows: (SC 1: 372; 255).] I have sometimes felt free, however, to modify existing translations when they are somewhat misleading. References to Hegel’s letters are to Briefe von und an Hegel, J. Hoffmeister, ed. (Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1952), trans. by C. Butler and C. Seiler, as Hegel: The Letters (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984), abbreviated with an “L.” Hegel’s letters are referred to by letter number in the body of the text (e.g., L, # 11).

TE
“Fragmente über Volksreligion und Christentum” (1793) (W 1).

Rep.
“In einer Republik” (1795) (W 1).

Pos.
“Die Positivität der christlichen Religion” (1795-6, 1800) (W 1).

PG
“Ein positiver Glaube” (1795/96) (W 1).
“A Positive Faith.”

Imag.
“Unterschied zwischen griechischer Phantasie-und christlicher positiver Religion” (1796) (W 1).

ESP
“Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus” (1796 or 1797) (W 1).
Harris (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 2002).

**Rel.**

“Religion, eine Religion stiften” (1797) (W 1).

**LR**

“Liebe und Religion” (1797) (W 1).

**Love**

“Die Liebe” (1798) (W 1).

**Comm.**

*Vertrauliche Briefe (von Jean-Jacques Cart) aus dem Französischen übersetzt und kommentiert* (1798) (W 1).

**Mag.**

“Daß die Magistrate von den Bürgern gewählt werden müssen” (1798) (W 1).

**FSC**

“Grundkonzept zum Geist des Christentums” (1798) (W 1).

**SC**


**Germ.**


**I.Germ.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragment</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author and Edition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frag.</strong></td>
<td>“Systemfragment von 1800” (1800) (W1).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diff.</strong></td>
<td>“Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie” (1801) (W 2).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>IAW</strong></td>
<td>“Die Idee des absoluten Wesens” (1801-2) (GW 5).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>LM</strong></td>
<td>“Logica et Metphysica” (1801-2) (GW 5).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ann.</strong></td>
<td>“Ankündigung des kritischen Journals” (1801) (W 2).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intro.</strong></td>
<td>“Einleitung. Über das Wesen der philosophischen Kritik überhaupt und ihr Verhältnis zum gegenwärtigen Zustand der Philosophie insbesondere” (1802) (W 2).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Human</strong></td>
<td>“Wie der gemeine Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme, dargestellt an den Werken des Herrn Krug” (1802) (W 2).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Skep.</strong></td>
<td>“Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie. Darstellung seiner verschiedenen Modifikationen und Vergleichung des neuesten mit dem alten” (1802) (W 2).</td>
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I would like, first of all, to thank all of the members of my committee. Each has supported my efforts to adequately formulate and complete this project, whether by providing trenchant comments and criticisms of early writings or drafts, being willing to join the committee late (after Wayne Martin, a former member and its first chair, unfortunately had to withdraw from the committee after leaving UCSD for a position at the University of Essex), offering helpful advice on researching and organizing the extensive secondary literature on Hegel, or simply showing enthusiasm for the aims and topic of the dissertation. I would especially like to thank Eric Watkins, the committee chair, for graciously assuming this responsibility so late in the game, for his timely reading of drafts, and for his always insightful comments and instructive criticisms.

Without Wayne Martin’s early support of me and my philosophical efforts, I surely would not have completed this dissertation. When, early on at UCSD, I was on the verge of leaving the graduate program, Wayne encouraged me to stay, and knowing my enjoyment of philosophical skepticism, he directed me toward Hegel’s early essay, “On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy.” That began a journey into Hegel’s world, and thereby into the worlds of many other great philosophers. As my first advisor, Wayne spent a great deal of time meeting with me to discuss various drafts and pieces, and he always provided enormous amounts of helpful feedback. He is a philosopher in the original sense of the term: truly energized by the prospect of wisdom. I am indebted to his contagious enthusiasm for ideas and his guidance.
An opportunity to publicly acknowledge the role of loved ones in making this dissertation possible is a pleasure. First, to my mom: I owe to you much of the love of education and wisdom that I have. Your returning to school when I was a kid, your dedication and eventual completion of a Nurse Practitioner degree, your constant encouragement of my intellectual interests and education, and your own enjoyment of philosophy, literature, and the arts was perhaps the major impetus to my pursuit of a Ph.D. in general, and one in philosophy in particular. To my dad: I especially owe to you the work ethic needed to complete the dissertation. You have, among other things, always exhibited to me the value and virtue of hard work and taking pride in one’s work, even though, I have to admit, this project is perhaps the first instance in which I’ve lived up to the model you’ve displayed. To my brother: your many-faceted intelligence has always been inspirational, and your unflagging support of my life and aspirations has always been integral to my self-confidence. And to my wife, Erin: your support of me and this project, during all of its ups and downs and the years of its formation and composition, has truly been remarkable. I am forever grateful to all of the things, big and small, that you’ve done over the last seven years, and equally importantly, to your manner of having done them: positively and patiently, knowing how much finishing what I started nearly a decade ago would mean to me. Needless to say, without all of your love, I would not have completed this dissertation either. For all of these reasons, and more, this is our achievement. I love you all.
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Apotheosis of a Human Ideal:
The Young Hegel’s Conception of the Absolute

by

Matthew Paul Egan

Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy

University of California, San Diego, 2008

Professor Eric Watkins, Chair

Beginning in his Frankfurt (1797-1800) and early Jena (1801-1803) writings, Hegel constructs a philosophy grounded in a distinctive conception of God or the absolute. Three central questions face anyone attempting to comprehend the nature and significance of his philosophical project. First, and most straightforwardly, what is the nature of the Hegelian absolute? Second, given the young Hegel’s fundamentally practical orientation and eschewal of purely theoretical issues, how are we to explain the apparently radical shift in the direction of his thinking in Frankfurt and Jena towards what seems to be purely speculative theorizing about the absolute? Third, given his vitriolic critique of all religious alienation, how can he take seriously any conception of the absolute? Scholars disagree over the proper answers to these questions. With respect to the first and foundational question, some maintain that Hegel propounds a version of theological Platonism, others that he articulates the early romantic, pantheistic worldview, and yet others that he offers a form of conceptual
scheme idealism. Though different in important respects, each of these interpretations identifies a constitutive connection, more or less robust, between human community and the Hegelian absolute, which forms the basis for their respective responses to the second and third questions. In the thesis, I argue that the predominant interpretations are problematic because they either still allow room for some form of religious alienation, vehemently opposed by Hegel in all its forms, or they fail to recognize the overriding importance of ethical life in the Hegelian absolute. More positively, I argue that the young Hegel’s absolute is equivalent to a certain ideal human community, one that embodies what he calls “absolute ethical life,” that expresses that life in a system of legislation, and that worships its own divine nature both in an imaginative religion akin to that of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, as well as in Hegelian philosophy itself.
Introduction

Many of us who have struggled to read and understand the thought of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) can perhaps appreciate the desperate attempt of the great American psychologist and philosopher William James to make sense of Hegel through nitrous-oxide induced intoxications. While James’s method is dangerous and extreme, it cannot be denied that Hegel himself encouraged near Herculean efforts to comprehend his own thinking: “A great man,” he says, no doubt including himself in this elite company, “condemns the world to the task of explaining him.”

Why exert the effort when the goal itself seems to mock our efforts? Why do we keep coming back to such a mystery as are Hegel’s writings? We do so at least in part, I think, because in confronting his often impenetrable words we typically find our own most interesting thoughts reflected back to us from the energies put forth into the text. But more than that interest based on subjective play, we have made some significant progress over the years in mining their secrets and applying the Hegelian point of view to many topics of contemporary concern. Most of us, however, still feel the lack of the comprehensive thought summing up his system. To cite one of Hegel’s own favorite verses, borrowed from Goethe’s Faust:

Who would study and describe the living starts
By driving the spirit out of its parts:
In the palm of his hands he holds all the sections,
Lacks nothing except the spirit’s connections,
“The handling of nature” the chemists baptize it
Mock themselves and don’t realize it.

1 James documents the effects of nitrous-oxide on his psychology and his understanding of Hegel in “On Some Hegelianisms.”
2 The translation is from Walter Kaufmann, Goethe’s “Faust”, p. 199, lines 1936-41. Goethe published these lines first in Faust: Ein Fragment (1790), lines 415-20, and reproduced them without change in
Many of us readers of Hegel feel that we too are missing the spirit of Hegel’s philosophy, and because of this we continually return to find the center of a philosophical system almost unparalleled in its ambition, comprehensiveness, historical influence, and power to simultaneously attract and repel.

In this dissertation I aim to shed some light on the heart of Hegel’s philosophy by focusing on the conception of God or the absolute\(^3\) that he develops and places at the center of his philosophy in his Frankfurt (1797-1800) and early Jena (1801-1803) writings. I aim to write a compelling history of ideas, or rather of one overarching idea, instead of engaging in philosophical argumentation or evaluation. More plainly, I intend to understand the Hegelian absolute as developed in these early writings in particular, not critique it. On the topic of criticism, the only exception I make is a few comments in the conclusion. As I see it, there is still plenty of work to be done on comprehending Hegel’s worldview before responsible evaluation of it can properly take place.

Of course, there have been plenty of others with the same motivation to capture the essence of Hegel’s philosophy before it gets lost in the details of “the system.” Nonetheless, though commentators agree that during his Frankfurt and early Jena years Hegel is engaged in developing a distinctive conception of the absolute,

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\(^3\) The absolute” is Kant’s term for the totality of conditions for all conditioned (limited, finite) things. See *Critique of Pure Reason*, A324-6/B381-2. All references to Kant’s first *Critique* designate both the first (1781 or “A”) and second (1787 or “B”) editions, as is standard in Kant scholarship. Though for Kant the term applies to any of a number of unconditioned totalities of conditioned things, and not just to God, for Hegel it applies only to God. This is primarily because Hegel conceives of God or the absolute as a single whole that has no opposite, and therefore there is no room for any other unconditioned totality.
they are greatly divided over the issue of its nature. Many commentators view the Hegelian absolute in connection with theological Platonism. Others see it as an expression of the early romantic, pantheistic worldview, itself inspired in part by the resurgence of Spinoza’s philosophy in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Still others, motivated in part by the idea of Hegel’s self-consciously post-Kantian perspective—a perspective taken to be incompatible with the metaphysical extravagances of the other positions—, regard the Hegelian absolute as a form of conceptual scheme idealism, in which the normative, intersubjective, conceptual activities of human beings living together in a community are seen as constitutive of reality itself, and so, though surely unconventionally, thought of as divine, or replacing the traditional God.

Over the course of the chapters to follow, I argue that the young Hegel’s absolute is equivalent to a certain ideal human community. It is a community, most importantly, that (1) embodies what Hegel calls “absolute ethical life,” with “love” (absolute ethical consciousness, intellectual intuition, the identity of subject and object) as the guiding principle of the people; that (2) expresses that life in a system of legislation; and that (3) worships its own divine nature both in an imaginative religion (a mythology) akin to that of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, as well as in Hegelian philosophy itself. Among other things, this means that cognizing Hegel’s philosophy and its concept of the absolute is not itself that absolute, and Hegel never intends it to be. Instead, his philosophy is designed to show that the divinity is indeed really the realization of a certain ideal human collective existence; to get human beings to stop alienating the divine from their own lives, whether, for example, in the
form of an objective God, or in the form of an unattainable ideal a la Fichte; to recognize that the potential divinity of humanity can be realized; and to help usher in the ideal of man, which he thinks requires that his philosophical efforts (his inchoately developed system) illuminate and guide the unconscious striving of his contemporaries to embody the highest form of human (or any other) existence.

On the reading of Hegel’s thought to be developed here, the realization of self-transcending social bonds has an overwhelming importance for the young Hegel. There is nothing that he desires more than a resurgence among his fellow Germans of something like the common spirit that bound the ancient Greeks together, and was affirmed and bolstered by their mythological worship. The fact that he tries to conceive of God in terms of a kind of unified human society alone testifies to the intensity of his need. Admittedly, other commentators have identified a constitutive connection between human community and the Hegelian absolute; however, as I argue here, they either still allow for some form of religious alienation, which, as we’ll see, has no place in Hegel’s thought, or they fail to adequately appreciate that what’s absolute about the ideal human community is chiefly its ethical life, in particular its kind of intense communal bonds of friendship that literally bind individuals together into parts of a single organic whole (a common spirit), and the communal worship of that life, which helps to solidify it even further and make it lasting and genuinely “living.” The Hegelian absolute is not merely the conceptual activities within human communities, or even such activities within a very special human community. Those activities can exist without the kind of common spirit Hegel has in mind; they are conceived far too abstractly and theoretically to alone qualify as the Hegelian absolute.
The dissertation will be divided into four main chapters. Chapter 1 will examine three problems surrounding the young Hegel’s development of a philosophy of the absolute. The first and foundational problem is simply: what is Hegel’s absolute? Here we will bring out the importance of God or the absolute to Hegel’s literary efforts, as well as the way in which he conceives of the absolute as the synthesis of infinity and finitude, rather than as something strictly opposed to finite reality. Then we will briefly anticipate debates about the meaning of the Hegelian absolute. However, the bulk of the chapter we will devote to documenting two important, though puzzling, facts about Hegel’s intellectual development: first, throughout the early and mid-1790s, even extending into his Jena years, the young Hegel has a fundamentally practical orientation, eschewing purely theoretical issues; second, he also begins to develop in the mid-1790s a critique of all religious alienation (a la Feuerbach and Marx). Both facts raise at least apparent conflicts with his seemingly purely speculative theorizing about the absolute. Chapter 1 explores these at least apparent tensions in Hegel’s thinking, aiming to motivate and structure further examination of the young Hegel’s development of a philosophy of the absolute.

Chapter 2 will focus exclusively on what we will call the “Platonic” reading or interpretation of the young Hegel’s absolute, one of three such interpretations predominant in the secondary literature. We will discuss this reading’s answers to the three problems identified in chapter 1, supplementing it where necessary with reasonings consistent with its position. Then we will attempt to provide the most persuasive evidence available in its favor. Finally, we will develop a provisional refutation of it by arguing that it overlooks Hegel’s spurious use of Platonic language.
and that it fails to sufficiently appreciate both Hegel’s opposition to all forms of religious alienation and his view that the absolute is identical to a certain form of collective human existence. Passages initially considered in the process of this critique will also help to further orient us toward the Hegelian absolute in the chapters to come.

Chapter 3 continues to examine in depth the secondary literature by presenting a critical analysis of the two other main interpretations of the nature and import of the young Hegel’s concept of the absolute. We will call these the “romantic-pantheistic” and the “intersubjective-idealistic” interpretations. Beginning with the former, we will again present first its answers to the three questions posed in chapter 1, before considering textual evidence in its favor, and finally providing a provisional critique of it. The main criticism we will develop is that it faces a dilemma: either it is sufficiently similar to the Platonic reading to partake of its defects, or it develops the idea of Hegel’s pantheism in a vacuous way, leaving vague precisely what Hegel’s concept of the absolute amounts to. We will then pursue the same agenda with the intersubjective-idealistic reading; only, when it comes to evaluating its cogency as an interpretation of the young Hegel’s thought, we will maintain that it does not sufficiently appreciate that the Hegelian absolute primarily denotes a certain ethical collective existence and the deification of it in absolute, or ideal, religion and philosophy (i.e., Hegel’s own). That reading asserts that the Hegelian absolute is the shared conceptual schemes of human communities, especially the community and conceptual scheme aware of itself as the absolute. The problem, though, is that our sharing a conceptual scheme with someone, no matter what that conceptual scheme is,
does not mean that we are united with them in the kind of friendship constitutive of a common spirit. But that ethical relationship, and the enhancement of it through ideal religion and Hegelian philosophy, is the central element of the Hegelian absolute.

After beginning with a brief summary of the insights gained into the Hegelian absolute through the first three chapters, chapter 4 will build upon them and offer a more systematic reconstruction of the early Hegel’s conception of the absolute through a careful analysis of his theories of ideal religion and philosophy. We will further articulate and fortify here what we will have come to appreciate over the course of chapters 1 through 3; namely, that though Hegel does appropriate Kant’s notion of intellectual intuition, or a mode of consciousness in which subject and object are unified, and uses it roughly interchangeably with the notion of the absolute, he differs significantly from Kant about what being or form of reality instantiates it. For Kant only God, conceived roughly along orthodox or at least rationalist lines, can and does (at least from the moral and regulative standpoints). By contrast, Hegel insists that a proper understanding of intellectual intuition reveals it to be only realized by and through human ethical life, in particular the form of human ethical life he calls “love” and “absolute ethical consciousness,” among other things. The collective existence of the human beings that embody and worship this highest ethical life is for Hegel the absolute. We will attempt to support this reading by investigating Hegel’s views on religious and philosophical alienation, ideal (non-alienating) religion and philosophy, and the progress of history, in which the ideal of man is to be realized, and in which modernity is to return to something like the ancient Greek ideal. Finally, we will spend the last part of the chapter explaining why Hegel conceives of that as the
absolute. On this point, our argument, based upon a reading of several important passages from Hegel’s early Jena writings, will be: Hegel regards the highest form of collective human existence as the pinnacle of the hierarchy of being, the nature of each stage of which (moving from nature to finite spirit) is to approximate as best it can that highest life; by using the dialectical method he thinks he can conceptualize and show this, and that the highest human existence is a necessary existence, even though it can only actually develop out of the matrix of the natural and spiritual (self-conscious) worlds.

At the conclusion of this study, we will have come to appreciate just how much the young Hegel anticipates not only the doctrines of religious alienation propounded in the later philosophies of Feuerbach and Marx, but also their own deification of a certain form of collective human existence. Neither Feuerbach nor Marx abandon the notion of the absolute; they only bring it down to earth. And that is precisely what Hegel aims to do; for just like them, he thinks that human beings will not be able to realize their potential of cultivating the ideal society until the divinity is recognized to be immanent in that society, until humanity’s deepest and most beautiful feelings and thoughts are redirected from a beyond and allowed to come to fruition in a form of life here on earth. Whether or not this dream is satisfactory, not so much from a logical perspective, but from a psychological one, is something I explore briefly in the conclusion to the dissertation.
Chapter 1

The Problem(s) of the Absolute in the Young Hegel’s Thought

From a broad perspective, our inquiry concerns the young Hegel, in particular the Frankfurt (1797-1800) and the early Jena (1801-3) Hegel, and his doctrine of the absolute, or, in more colloquial terms, his views about the nature and significance of God. More specifically, it addresses these problems: (1) what exactly is the young Hegel’s conception of the absolute? (2) Given the fundamentally practical orientation of Hegel’s thought throughout the early and mid-1790s, a point we shall document in this chapter, how can we make any good sense of the apparently radical shift in the direction of his thinking in Frankfurt and Jena towards what seems to be purely speculative theorizing about the absolute? Does he expect that theorizing to yield any practical benefits, perhaps with respect to the less speculative issues that obviously concern him in the early and mid-1790s? And (3) how can Hegel take seriously any conception of God or the absolute, if, as we also shall see in this chapter, he appears in his writings right before his Frankfurt period to mount a devastating critique of all religious alienation?¹

Understandably, given the climate of much contemporary thought, many modern scholars of Hegel choose to bypass any serious study of his doctrine of the absolute. Hegel’s views on topics such as historical understanding, ethical life,

¹ As noted in the introduction, the further issue about how, particularly in the wake of Kant’s Critical philosophy, Hegel can reasonably philosophize about the absolute will not be the focus of our attention in this dissertation. We will not, therefore, provide any reasoned assessment of his success or failure on the matter. Such is the task of another study. Rather, our primary aim is to discern the import of Hegel’s core philosophical positions and to resolve certain (at least apparent) tensions, internal to his intellectual development, that arise as a result of his early pursuit of the absolute.
politics, and the historicity and sociality of knowledge have attracted the attention of
many commentators, particularly in Anglo-American philosophical circles, and these
latter have investigated them, often with much success and many fruitful results,
relatively independently of any in-depth discussion of Hegel’s views about God. Such
an approach to Hegel’s writings is to be welcomed, most of all if the overriding aim is
to look to Hegel for help in solving some of our own philosophical problems, divorced
(for the most part) as they have become of any conception of the divine.

But if we would take a more historical approach to Hegel, an approach most
sensitive to his dominant concerns and the way in which those shape, color, and
suffuse every aspect of his system of thought, we cannot refuse to tackle the difficult
issues surrounding his doctrine of God and prioritize that doctrine, even when
contemplating the other important issues that crop up in Hegel’s writings. ² On this
matter, consider, for instance, one of Hegel’s remarks in his early Jena essay “How
Ordinary Understanding Takes Philosophy:”

…the task that touches the interest of philosophy most nearly at the
present moment [is] to put God back again at the peak of philosophy,
absolutely prior to all else as the one and only ground of everything,
the unique principium essendi and cognoscendi [“the unique principle
of being and knowing”], after all this time in which he has been put
beside other finite things, or put off right to the end as a postulate that
springs from an absolute finitude (Human 2: 195; 299).

Or, consider again what he says in a roughly contemporaneous essay, “Faith and
Knowledge,” regarding the idea of God: it is “philosophy’s sole knowledge” (Faith 2:

² In making this claim, my aim is not to legislate the manner in which we approach philosophical texts
or the history of philosophy, and that includes, of course, the methods and concerns we bring to bear on
Hegel’s thought and development. The relative merits of each approach is beyond the scope of this
paper. I only mean to emphasize that the approach I’m taking to Hegel, which emphasizes his concept
of the absolute, is one sensitive to Hegel’s own primary philosophical concerns, still of interest, as we
shall see, to many contemporary Hegel scholars, and, as I hope to communicate, of intrinsic interest.
302; 68), “the only starting point of philosophy and its sole content” (Faith 2: 302; 67).³ Passages such as these reveal the centrality of the divine in Hegel’s philosophy and recommend an investigation into his conception of divinity, to the extent that we would penetrate the core of his thought and put ourselves in a position to in the future more securely evaluate his mature philosophy’s suitableness for aiding us with our own contemporary philosophical problems. And when we come to take Hegel’s God-discourse seriously, we will, I submit, come upon and need to deal with the three problems outlined above.

We shall not of course be the first to treat, or even prioritize, the young Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute. As we will see more fully beginning in the next chapter, there have been many commentators, contemporary and earlier, who offer an interpretation of the nature of the Hegelian absolute. One recent interpreter with whom we will be dealing in chapter 2 in some depth, Jens Halfwassen, has this to say about the structure of the young Hegel’s thought:

In Frankfurt, Hegel determines for the first time this principle of absolute unity as the truly infinite in the specific sense he adheres to even in his later thought: the infinite must contain the finite and its oppositions in itself, and thus overlap [übergreifen] the finite; otherwise, it would be opposed to the finite, and therefore itself be finite. Since separation and opposition is precisely the defining characteristic of the finite, the truly infinite [i.e., God or the absolute] can neither be opposed to the finite nor separate from it. This thought can be regarded as the fundamental motive that controls the entire Hegelian metaphysic.⁴

³ Incidentally, this conviction is no transitory one: it is central to Hegel’s notion of philosophy and his concept of God even in his later writings, e.g., in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: he asserts there, for example, that “God is the one and only object of philosophy” (P.Rel. 17: 6; 84; 1821 series; Hegel’s own lecture manuscript).

⁴ ”Die Bedeutung des spästantiken Platonismus für Hegels Denkentwicklung in Frankfurt und Jena,” pp. 85-6. Translations of Halfwassen are mine.
Most important for our purposes at this point are Halfwassen’s claims that (1) the concept of the absolute is the dominating force of Hegel’s entire metaphysics, and (2) this concept takes the form of an infinity that does not transcend finite reality, and thus stand beyond and opposed to limited beings and the chain of conditions binding them together—for as such it too would be something limited, because opposed to finitude in general—; but rather, overcomes all oppositions, including the one between the infinite as pure transcendence and the finite world, and so must include the finite in itself. This Hegelian absolute conflicts with the more orthodox conception of God as a purely transcendent being who creates the world as something entirely separate from himself. Halfwassen’s conviction about the general structure of Hegel’s absolute is not peculiar to him alone. Others, as we will see, share the same basic point of view, even when they disagree with him on how to further interpret the precise nature of the Hegelian divinity. Thus, a concern for Hegel’s doctrine of God can be found firmly rooted in certain circles of contemporary Hegel scholarship, as well as certainly having been in the past of chief concern to many commentators. In our work we shall, accordingly, aim most of all to contribute to these discussions of contemporary relevance.

One looking for evidence from Hegel’s Frankfurt and early Jena writings of his concern to articulate a conception of the absolute rooted in the notion of the synthesis of the infinite as transcendence of the finite and the finite itself will not come up empty-handed. Hegel says, for instance, in an important text from his Frankfurt period, “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate,” that “since the divine is pure life, anything and everything said of it must be free from any opposition” (SC 1: 372; 255),
including, presumably, the opposition between a transcendent infinity and finitude.

Less ambiguously, in the same work he maintains that,

the connection of infinite and finite is of course a holy mystery, because this connection is life itself. Reflection, which divides life, can distinguish it into infinite and finite, and only the restriction, or the finite regarded by itself, affords the concept of man as opposed to the divine; outside of reflection, in truth, there is no such restriction (SC 1: 378; 262).

This idea of true infinity also underlies Hegel’s formulas of the absolute as “the union of union and nonunion” (Frag. 1: 422; 312) and “the identity of identity and nonidentity” (Diff. 2: 96; 156), in the “Fragment of a System” and the “Difference” respectively. “Nonunion” and “non-identity” refer to reflection, the understanding, or empirical consciousness, where subject and object are distinguished from one another; conversely, (the second use in the formulas of) “union” and “identity” refer to the unification of subject and object in rational thought. The truly infinite, God or the absolute, combines both of these, reflection and reason, into a single unity of which there is no possible opposite. Finally, in “Faith and Knowledge” Hegel articulates the basic structure of his idea of infinity perhaps more clearly than in any of his other early writings: “The true infinite is the absolute idea, the identity of universal and particular, or identity of the infinite and finite themselves (i.e., of the infinite as opposed to the finite)” (Faith 2: 352; 113). More succinctly put, “[i]n the idea … finite and infinite are one” (Faith 2: 301; 66).

But, despite the fact that Hegel rather clearly tells us that the absolute is the union of the infinite and the finite, it is, to understate the point, not altogether clear what that is supposed to mean. Moreover, while there are a number of interpreters
who attribute this general scheme to him, and recognize its place at the forefront of his philosophical concerns, there is no unanimity concerning its proper interpretation. As we will see over the course of this dissertation, if we abstract from the relatively minor disparities within the interpretative field of the young Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute, three different models of Hegel’s conception of God or the absolute come into focus: the God of theological Platonism, the God of romantic pantheism, and the God of collective human existence. These three models were not propounded long ago, only to be left without any current adherents; rather, there are contemporary defenders of all three models. Thus arises the first and most pressing problem surrounding Hegel’s statements about the absolute: namely, what exactly is his conception of it?

We will begin to take up this question in more depth in the next chapter. Our aim thus far has merely been to demonstrate that the issue of the nature of the absolute is central to Hegel’s early philosophical work, and for this reason, coupled with the fact that it has been of abiding interest to several sectors of the philosophical community, yet without thereby achieving a consensus regarding its proper interpretation, it is worth our serious investigation.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will outline in some depth the two puzzling aspects, identified above, surrounding Hegel’s occupation with presenting a philosophy of the absolute, however orthodox or heretical that may turn out to be: first [problem (2) from above], his philosophical speculations about God appear incongruous with what we know about his practical interests in the early and mid-1790s, interests that, paradoxically, persist into his early Jena years and the beginnings of his philosophical articulation of an absolute-philosophy; and second [problem (3)
from above], for those familiar with his writings from the mid-1790s in particular, it is a bit surprising to find the Frankfurt and early Jena Hegel talking seriously about God or the absolute, at all; beginning in those manuscripts of the mid-1790s, he seems to undermine, on the basis of a theory of religious alienation, any belief in God whatsoever. The resolution of these two topics will emerge slowly over the course of our investigations into Hegel’s conception of the absolute.

In an important sense, the foundational problem of the current project concerns the perplexing things that Hegel says about the essence of God [problem (1) from above], in particular about the relationship of God to man. However, these other issues [problems (2) and (3)], it seems to me, are provocative in their own right, and it is incumbent on anyone dealing with Hegel’s views on the nature of the absolute to try to tackle them; or, at least, it makes for a more interesting and deeper discussion of Hegel’s view of God and the role(s) and importance of God in human life. With this foreshadowing in place, let’s turn our attention now to the first puzzle connected with Hegel’s discourse about God.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Hegel’s intellectual development is the process by which he develops from a very practically oriented young man, with the self-conception of a Volkserzieher (an “educator of the people”) bent upon social regeneration and with a relative disinterest in philosophical problems per se, to, within the span of a decade, a leading proponent of a philosophy of the absolute.

“The absolute”: its name alone repels healthy common sense and the practically-minded man, connoting an excess of logic, even a bit of stoicism perhaps, the fantastical, and alienation from the concerns of ordinary life. Even if we shift discourse from “the absolute” to “God” or “the divine,” as Hegel himself often does, when we read many of Hegel’s statements about the nature of God, we immediately have the feeling that this is not the living God encountered by the spiritual man, so well documented and explored in William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* for example, but rather some kind of frozen, inhuman logical structure perversely referred to as “God” and having little practical import. It does not seem unreasonable to suppose that even the nonreligious can see how, for example, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can compel affection and fear, respect and awe, structure and animate the whole life of man, and thus constitute a “living” God—“living,” that is, in and for the believer. But surely Hegel’s absolute, which he also refers to, among other things, as “reason,” surely this must be unconnected to our earth-bound life—even, as a certain strand of modernity might be tempted to say, a kind of retreat from that life. Thus arises one of the problems of the absolute in Hegel’s development: explaining his interest in and development of a concept that seems totally antithetical to the practical bent of his mind and his preoccupation with the task of social regeneration.

Many familiar with Hegel might as yet remain little affected by this particular aspect of the problem of the absolute in Hegel’s thought, primarily because its presupposition, viz., the idea of a practically-oriented Hegel, is so foreign to many peoples’ preconception of the man and his thought. They do not recognize a (at least
apparent) transition from praxis to theory in Hegel’s development, knowing only a theoretical, logical Hegel—the Hegel of “the system.” We must, therefore, spend a bit of time presenting the practical orientation of Hegel’s early thought and reveal its (at least apparent) tension with Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute. This ought to make this first problem of the absolute in Hegel’s development more concrete, more pressing, and, hopefully, more interesting. It will also, later on in the project, serve as evidence in favor of the interpretation of the nature of the absolute for which we shall argue.

In emphasizing the practical nature of the young Hegel’s thinking, we do not mean that he espouses a form of theoretical utilitarianism or pragmatism, at least as those doctrines are commonly understood. His interests in theoretical issues, whether philosophical or historical, his two main ones, were not prompted by what promotes overall pleasure or happiness, a betterment of the economic standard of living in society, or what proves to be in some more encompassing sense useful. Standing at the crossroads of the Enlightenment tradition and German classicism, Hegel was interested in the moral and political regeneration of society, particularly of the German Empire and his own native Duchy of Württemberg, and his desire was for that renewal to take the form of a revival of something like the political virtue and political freedom manifest in the ancient Greek polis. That vision of the ideal society based on the Greek experience was no doubt rooted in his eleven years of education at the Stuttgart Gymnasium Illustre (1777-88). The curriculum was firmly based in the classics and

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6 Harris’s Hegel’s Development (vol. 1) is replete with interesting and relevant material about Hegel’s early education and influences. So too is T. Pinkard’s Hegel: A Biography.
the ancient world, though it had recently been infused with the spirit and the letter of the Enlightenment. For Hegel the Enlightenment and the Greeks blended together seamlessly. The society he sought was rational and moral, but for him that meant the kind of autonomy and harmonious development of one’s powers once found in the conscientious civic life of the ancient Greeks and the Romans of the Republican era. His theoretical pursuits into the 1790s all clearly served this overarching goal.

His intense desire for social reform is best appreciated against the general background of the constitutional history of the German Empire and the Empire’s situation during Hegel’s time; Hegel himself was acutely aware of that history and his own historical context, as well as the threat these things posed to his political and social agenda. His early pursuit of particular political and social structures was often explicitly directed against certain general features of the status quo in German political and civic life, which in his mind contrasted sharply with the harmonious social existence of the ancient Greeks. More properly, Hegel’s agenda was largely determined by the troubled state of the Empire and its history, coupled with his classical education and the peculiar brand of Philhellenism prevalent in Germany at

7 While direct evidence of the young Hegel’s opposition to the Germany of his time is mainly to be found in works from his Frankfurt period—e.g., “The German Constitution,” “The Magistrates should be Elected by the People,” and “Commentary on the Bern Aristocracy”—, this seems largely due to the fact that Germany’s situation in general, and Württemberg’s in particular, worsened over the course of the 1790s and so elicited more direct confrontation at that time. That the Empire’s problems, especially its social and political fragmentation, were operative in Hegel’s thought even prior to Frankfurt seems to me beyond a reasonable doubt, particularly since already in 1793 he was calling for something analogous to the Greek social existence, and since the Empire as a whole had been engaged for decades in reflection on the lack of social cohesion and in propounding various solutions to the problem, a public discussion of which the astute and conscientious young man could not have been unaware. John G. Gagliardo’s masterful work, Reich and Nation: The Holy Roman Empire as Idea and Reality, 1763-1806, does an excellent job of providing the self-reflective discursive landscape of German political life immediately prior to and during Hegel’s time period. I have relied on his research in the brief sketch of the German Empire that I provide, as well as for placing the young Hegel within that political culture.
the time, which was recently initiated by Wilhelm Winkelman and whose underlying idea was that humanity and beauty had in the Greeks obtained their exemplary embodiment. ⁸

For centuries the Empire had been troubled by an increasing fragmentation of political power, resulting in an increasing impotence to shape its own life and, even more so, the life of Europe as a whole. The princes governing the various lands of the Empire continually appealed to the old slogan “German liberty” in resisting the efforts of their Emperor to cultivate common enterprises and a unified direction and activity for the Empire. The Emperor’s attempts in this regard were labeled encroachments on their privileges and independent rights. Every watershed in the constitutional history of Germany since the Middle Ages, from the Golden Bull of 1356 to the Imperial Deputation’s Final Recess in 1803 and the ultimate dissolution of the Empire in 1806, was marked by the formal or informal hamstringing of the sovereignty of the Emperor, the removal of restrictions on the sovereignty of the component territorial rulers, or both. This translated into relatively independent legal rights, foreign policies, military powers, finances, etc. for many of the Empire’s copious territories. In the end, bent upon their own independence, the will of the most important and powerful territorial princes to sustain the Empire completely faltered. ⁹ In the hour of greatest need, in the war with revolutionary France, important imperial estates (territories) went their own

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⁸ This is about as much psychologizing as I’ll subject the reader to, though it seems to me to be evidently true and relevant for grasping Hegel’s agenda.
⁹ The weaker local rulers generally maintained an intense devotion to the Empire and its constitution, probably, among other reasons, for protection from outside, hostile countries as well as from their more aggressive and powerful German neighbors.
way, some negotiating peace with France for their own advantage, others, abandoned by their fellow citizens, being overrun by her.\textsuperscript{10}

Particularly pernicious was Prussia’s signing of an independent peace treaty (the Peace of Basel) in 1795, thereby ceding the Rhineland, abandoning its oath of loyalty to the German Empire and its Emperor, and withdrawing to the east. Several smaller northern territories of the Empire, wishing to associate themselves with Prussia and the protection it could afford, became essentially absorbed into that larger state. With this move Prussia opened up a clean path for France to ruthlessly reconfigure the map of Germany. The effects were devastating on the weak southern states (e.g., Hegel’s Württemberg), which, with the withdrawal of the north, were vulnerable to predation. France succeeded in its program of annexing the smaller German territories on the left bank of the Rhine and of converting into satellite states much of what they didn’t swallow up. The remnants were absorbed by their larger German neighbors. The French stopped short of the total conquest of the German Empire largely due to the fear of greater complications with Austria and, particularly, Prussia.

A deputation of the Imperial Diet meeting in 1802-3 formalized these developments, and what followed was a political and territorial reorganization and the loss of the essential characteristics of the Empire. Though some of the other key elements of the constitution were retained, the will to make them effective had largely disappeared. To finish the rest of the Empire’s pitiful ending: Napoleon finally

\textsuperscript{10} From April 1792 onwards, a state of war existed between the newly formed French Republic and the other European powers, the chief of which were Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Revolutionary France was bent upon annexing all of the territory west of its “natural” border, the Rhine, and creating a broad band of satellite states farther east.
defeated individually the two main powers of Austria and Prussia; they were deprived of some of their territory and coerced into ultimately unsustainable alliances with France. Those German territories that had joined France by 1806 were allowed to keep or expand their gains since 1802 and were collected into the French-supported Confederation of the Rhine. The Holy Roman Empire, that splintered world of small German states, was a thing of the past.

A word about the particular fate of Hegel’s own Duchy of Württemberg is in order.11 When the longtime ruler and Catholic Duke Karl Eugen died in 1793, his brother Ludwig succeeded to power. Abandoning Karl’s circumscription in foreign affairs, Ludwig joined a European coalition against the French Republic. The result: Württemberg was invaded and overrun by Moreau’s army in 1796.12 Ludwig’s short reign was succeeded by a third brother, Friedrich Eugen, who did manage to secure peace with the French on August 6, 1796. Moreau’s troops withdrew, which pleased most citizens of Württemberg, yet the Duchy had become little more than a satellite territory of the French Republic. Its burden was also significantly increased due to the military levies it owed to the French. Eventually, it became one of the original sixteen members of the Confederation of the Rhine.

Public discussion in Germany surrounding the political fragmentation and problems of the Empire had been growing since the 1760s, only, naturally, to intensify during the crisis of the 1790s. Though over the course of this public debate there were

11 The most relevant and concise description of which I know of the political and social life of Württemberg and its abiding impact on Hegel’s thought is F.G. Nauen’s slim volume, Revolution, Idealism, and Human Freedom, in particular the introductory chapter.
12 Hegel was in Bern at the time, in the capacity of a tutor for an old patrician family, the von Steigers, with whom he was employed from 1793-6.
varying judgments about the state of the Empire and what reforms, if any, were necessary, many Germans felt that the chief culprit in Germany’s political and social woes, and that which eventually allowed France to depredate her lands, territorial princes to splinter her apart, and other foreign powers to meddle insidiously in her affairs, was the near complete evaporation of any German national consciousness and sense of common purpose, which was commonly referred to as “national spirit” or “common spirit” [“Nationalgeist,” “Gemeingeist,” or sometimes “Gemeinsinn”].

Hegel most decidedly was of the same opinion, and all of his early work was motivated by it and directed toward generating a common spirit for the German people, a spirit he believed on the basis of his education to be present in its quintessential form in the lives of the ancient Greeks and Romans of the Republican era. His methods might have represented a minority position, but his goal enjoyed widespread appeal. All of his early studies, philosophical, historical, religious, and other, even his earliest studies, before the war with France became really ugly, sought to create a common spirit, a feeling of belonging to a national enterprise, and ought to be read with this in mind. Theoretical problems per se were not of much interest to the young Hegel.

So what were some of those early studies? Kant and Rousseau, by all accounts, were topmost on his reading list during his Tübingen (1788 – 1793) and Bern (1793 – 1796) periods. What interested him about Kant, though, was not so much his account of theoretical reason—though that did interest him—as his doctrine of moral autonomy and his moral theology, or in general Kant’s account of practical reason and

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13 Cf. Gagliardo, Reich and Nation, pp. 53-6 and 134-40. Well-known representatives of this opinion included Friedrich Carl von Moser, Christoph Martin Wieland, Friedrich Christian Laukhard, and Johann Gottfried Herder.
its presuppositions. Rousseau’s obsession with education and social and moral renewal, and his notions of the general will and a living religion of the heart captivated the young Hegel as well. Lessing’s play *Nathan the Wise*, with its enlightened tolerance and its praise of religious and moral freedom and rationality, is cited more than any other single work in Hegel’s early writings, and always with approval.\(^\text{14}\)

Also studied and loved by Hegel early on in the 1790s were Fichte’s *Critique of all Revelation*, Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*, Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws*,\(^\text{15}\) several of the works of Voltaire and Holbach, Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the writings of the German revolutionary, Georg Forster.\(^\text{16}\) All of these writings were relevant to Hegel because he saw them as contributing to the formulation of and the removal of the impediments to his vision of man as a free and rational being in the context of a thriving and harmonious civic life.

Authors such as Kant, Fichte, Montesquieu, and Rousseau laid some of the more heady, theoretical foundations for his vision. Yet he was never taken in completely by Kant or Fichte’s account of moral man. He preferred to take from them what he wanted. For instance, he interpreted their notion of autonomy and practical reason in terms of his own overriding concern with political freedom and virtue. What impressed him about these authors was primarily their hostility to authoritarianism in religious and ethical life, which he thought contributed to the absence of a true spirit of national self-sacrifice. And for him that hostility was

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\(^{14}\) A fact noted by Kaufmann in “The Young Hegel and Religion,” p. 122.

\(^{15}\) Referred to by Hegel as an “immortal work” in his early Jena essay “On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law” (NL 2: 524; 175).

\(^{16}\) Harris’ *Hegel’s Development* (vol. 1) contains an extended discussion of Hegel’s reading activities and the works that most influenced him during his Tübingen and Bern periods. As mentioned by Harris, these and other works Hegel came across at the seminary or found in the library of the von Steigers.
perfectly consistent with Rousseauian themes. He often preferred to draw on Rousseau’s notion of morality as a function of the impulses and feelings of the heart, and the moral man as one with “a well-ordered sensibility” (TE 1: 41; 55) coupled with a sense of his own moral autonomy.\textsuperscript{17} His early and abiding interest in a \textit{Volksreligion} (a “folk or civic religion”) rooted in the culture and history of a people and a “subjective religion” (TE 1: 14; 33), i.e., one that lives in the believer, animates the believer’s entire life, and unites him in sympathy with his fellow citizens, also stems from his reading of Rousseau and was directed toward his social goals.

Hegel’s historical studies, which were numerous and began during his years at the Gymnasium and extended throughout (and beyond) the 1790s and early 1800s, were all designed in some way to contribute to his social and political vision. The examination of Christianity was mainly a part of the 1790s, but even in the Gymnasium he had the opportunity to compare what he was learning about the Greek and Roman cultures with his education and involvement in Christiandom. When he finally did come around to studying its roots and historical development carefully, he concluded that it was a private religion in origin, unfit for cultivating deep and lasting civic virtue, and in fact guilty of further undermining the political freedom that at one time flourished in ancient Greece and the Roman Republic. His investigations into its origins and development were designed to reveal just this. Whatever he thought about the historical Jesus,\textsuperscript{18} he saw Christianity, in all of its historically prominent forms, as

\textsuperscript{17} On the issues of Hegel’s selectivity with respect to the Kantian vision of autonomy and practical reason, and his enthusiasm for Rousseauian virtue, see D. Henrich, “Some Historical Presuppositions of Hegel’s System,” pp. 40 ff.

\textsuperscript{18} His views on the matter change considerably during the 1790s, though our aim is not to carefully document this aspect of his intellectual development.
a religion fit for slaves and incompatible with his ideal, unlike the glorious folk religions of the ancient Greek and Roman (Republican) worlds. Following many Enlightenment thinkers, he emphasized the historical alliance of Christian religion and morality, on the one hand, and despotism, on the other. He decried its excessive demands on the emotions, its cosmopolitanism, and its lack of patriotism, all of which conflict with his endeavor to reorient the interests of the individual towards a free and rational involvement with the larger civic concerns of his people. Hegel’s other historical pursuits, e.g., into the history of England (based on his reading of Hume’s famous book, the *History of England*), the history of India (based on his reading of Raynal’s *History of India*), “the spirit of the Orient,” the Middle Ages, Italy, and Germany, other than being done for mere pleasure, also centered around this aim of establishing a German republic modeled on the ancient Greeks and early Romans, and thus with a strong sense of patriotism and a deeply ingrained common spirit.

Having laid some of the background to Hegel’s early writings and seen something of the practical orientation of his thinking, we should now be able to better appreciate the puzzling fact that Hegel, in his Frankfurt and early Jena writings, makes his central task that of expounding a philosophy of the absolute. On the surface at least, his discourse about the absolute or God does not seem to have much direct bearing on his practical concerns, either to formulate or to further them. But, it cannot be that he simply abandons all hope of any significant social regeneration and takes flight to the absolute; ethical and political life and the topic of social renewal, expressed in much the same vein, persist strongly throughout his Frankfurt and early
Jena periods. The issue here, then, is: how does a seemingly purely theoretical philosophy of the absolute fit in with his more explicitly practical aims? If it is supposed to further or even somehow articulate those aims, how is that supposed to work?

Clearly, to answer these questions, we need to know what in particular Hegel means by “the absolute.” This is our primary task, but we will not have fully understood the absolute’s importance for Hegel until we are able to answer those questions: for, while there certainly are more purely theoretical problems that Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute is designed to overcome, it remains the case that all of his theoretical machinery is designed to be put to use for thinking about and invigorating man’s social existence, and in particular that of his native Germany. Moreover, as we shall see, we will not even be able to fully make independent sense of his theory of the absolute without addressing these questions, for as he conceives of the absolute, it is inextricably bound up with the social life of man.

Moving on now to the second problem surrounding Hegel’s occupation with presenting a philosophy of the absolute, perhaps the single most perplexing aspect of Hegel’s whole involvement with the notion of the absolute is that beginning in the mid-1790s he begins articulating a series of thoughts that seems to undermine any conception of the absolute whatsoever. He appears to be offering a full-scale humanistic appropriation of religion, along the lines later taken by Feuerbach and Marx. He links religion intimately to the needs of man, notes how religions change

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19 Besides, as we will see shortly, he argues around that time that the flight to an objective God is tantamount to escaping from the deficiencies of one’s social life.
with corresponding changes in those needs, denigrates religious alienation, and challenges humanity with these words, from the year 1796:

Apart from some earlier attempts, it has been reserved in the main for our epoch to vindicate at least in theory the human ownership of the treasures formerly squandered on heaven; but what age will have the strength to validate this right in practice and make itself its possessor (Imag. 1: 209; 159)?

How can the man who, with such conviction, utters these words shortly thereafter develop a philosophy centered on the notion of the absolute? Has he not just undermined the whole idea of an absolute, or a God, much less the project of rendering that idea of any service to the life of man? Must not all of his God-language be mere subterfuge? Has not humanity become self-sufficient and itself, rather than God, of primary importance?

There is more that can and needs to be said on this topic in the early Hegel’s writings, but to do it in the most responsible and profitable manner, we need to provide some background information about Kant’s philosophy of religion, in particular his doctrine of the postulates of practical reason; as exhibited in his writings, Hegel’s theme of religious alienation is born out of his assimilation and transformation of Kant’s postulates-doctrine.

The doctrine of the postulates of practical reason is one of Kant’s central contributions to philosophical theology. While not entirely dismissing the relevance

\[\textit{The following discussion of Kant’s practical philosophy has benefited greatly from Allen W. Wood’s }\textit{Kant’s Moral Religion and his “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion.” I have also found chapter 1 ("Kant’s Philosophy of Religion") of Emil M. Fackenheim’s }\textit{The God Within: Kant, Schelling, and Historicity useful.}\]
of theoretical reason to the origin and justification of theological concepts, Kant maintains that the deepest and strongest root and support of our beliefs in the existence of God, the immorality of the soul, and the freedom of the will is the moral life of man. The term “moral religion” thus aptly applies to Kant’s particular brand of rational religion, based as it is on practical reason, unlike the natural religion, based on theoretical reason, proffered by many of Kant’s Enlightenment contemporaries. Briefly, Kant supposes our belief in the freedom of the will to be grounded in our rational awareness of the moral law, being a condition which must be presupposed and ascribed to our own will if we are to conceive of moral volition as being a possibility for us. He takes the beliefs in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul to be “immanent” in moral volition in the sense that they are subjectively necessary for the functioning of the moral attitude: they are implicit in finite moral consciousness as necessary presuppositions of the highest good, i.e., the single final end for which we are unconditionally obligated to strive.

As Kant’s philosophy of religion hinges on his view of our finite moral consciousness, and as the latter also serves as a good foil for Hegel’s own conception of “practical reason,” it will be worthwhile to consider in a bit more depth what that entails for him. It entails most fundamentally that we are simultaneously finite and rational beings. As finite we are not self-making beings; we are products of nature. With regard to our practical activity, this means that we just have the desires and inclinations that we do have, without any choice in the matter. These are simply

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21 Kant gives his definitive theoretical treatment of the divine in “The Ideal of Pure Reason” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. 
contingent empirical facts about us, just as, he thinks, it is a contingent empirical fact what objects are given to us through sensible intuition. As finite self-conscious beings, our practical activity consists in taking these given desires and adopting them as ends. The one overarching natural end that conditions all the others is happiness. Happiness is what we as finite beings are ultimately pursuing, and every other natural end that we pursue is in its service. This idea of happiness is itself rational since it encompasses the maximum or totality of all one’s natural ends, reason being in one of its essential functions the faculty of totality.

It is also a fact about our reason, however, that it is not merely prudential in this manner. It needn’t simply maximize ends given to it from nature, but is rather capable of legislating for itself the formal moral law: “Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”\textsuperscript{22} Because we are rational in a pure way, we demand of our own and others’ behavior that the particular ends on the basis of which we as rational beings act are universalizable. While it is fine and well to strive for happiness, something our finitude makes inevitable and justified in any case, the pursuit of happiness must be subordinated to the demands of morality. That is, we can and must act for certain contingent natural ends, all ultimately subsumed under the single natural end of happiness (by means of prudential reasoning), but the higher moral calling of our pure practical reason consists in our self-restraint, the subjection of ourselves to particular ends that can be adopted by all other finite rational beings, as well as the attempt to

\textsuperscript{22} Kant,\textit{ Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals}, 4:421. All references to Kant’s works other than the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} are to the pagination of the standard German edition of Kant’s works, \textit{Kants Gesammelte Schriften}, which is indicated by marginal numbers throughout \textit{The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant}, the English translations used here.
contribute to such perfect virtue in others. This is the demand that we as rational beings capable of virtue make upon our motives for action.

What Kant calls “the highest good,” our morally obligatory end, synthesizes our finite and our rational ends into one, just as our finite and rational natures are synthesized into one being. We are both finite beings, i.e., natural products endowed with natural inclinations, as well as rational beings, i.e., beings who legislate for themselves the moral law. As finite (merely prudentially rational) beings our overall aim is happiness. As purely rational beings our overall aim is perfect virtue or holiness of will, both our own and that of others. But we are not two distinct beings, one natural, one rational. We are unified beings: finite and rational, free and determined, at the same time. How we can combine both is beyond our comprehension, but we nonetheless must conceive of ourselves in this way. This means that rather than two independent final ends, one rooted in our finitude and in prudential reasoning (happiness) and one in our pure practical reason (moral perfection in general), there is actually only a single final end or purpose for human action, viz., the highest good: the attainment of moral perfection, for ourselves and for others, combined with happiness insofar as that is compatible with and conditioned by the level of moral virtue attained. Our highest and most encompassing vocation is to strive to realize and endlessly approximate this single final aim, the same for all finite rational beings such as we are.

Kant asserts as a principle of rational action that when someone intends to pursue a certain end, whatever that end may be, and undertakes action in the pursuit of it, then he commits himself to, presupposes, or implies a belief that that end is at least
possible of attainment through his course of action. Thus, and this is the basic strategy of Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, given that there is a single end that as rational agents we are bound to set ourselves, we all have good reason, regardless of any theoretical evidence, for adopting any beliefs that are conditions of the possibility of believing and pursuing the highest good. We have such good grounds, that is, so long as we would not renounce our moral vocation to strive to realize the highest good and so become despicable in our own eyes. The form of argument here is radically *ad hominem*. It does not purport to demonstrate the theoretical inevitability of its postulates, i.e., its hypotheses or assumptions necessary for our overall practical end, but rather only to command assent with the moral nature within.

The first postulate of practical reason is the belief in freedom. Reason commands us not to determine our will on the basis of the object or end sought, but rather on the basis of the legislative form (i.e., the universality) of the end. Moral consciousness, therefore, requires that we stand outside of the natural order, in which all determination occurs in accordance with the law of external causality. Consequently, we must presuppose the freedom of our will if we are to conceive of the possibility of our own moral volition. In this way we are led to see that freedom is a rational postulate: a postulate because it is something that we must assume to be the case, and rational because it must be assumed in order for the moral law of pure practical reason to even be possible.

Kant arrives at the postulate of the immortality of the soul by way of an additional key premise regarding the radical evil of human nature, which consists in
our propensity to choose contrary to the moral law. Because of this, Kant maintains, our striving after moral perfection, both in ourselves and in others, inevitably consists in an endless progression from bad to better. And this gives us a practically sufficient reason for believing in our everlasting existence, so that our moral progress may be pursued further and further.

Freedom and immortality make it possible to strive for holiness of will and endlessly approximate it. But the highest good requires that happiness be incorporated into this scheme. The highest good is not realized, however, merely when the virtuous happen to be happy. It requires the virtuous to be happy precisely because and to the degree that they are virtuous. This requires a systematic causal connection between virtue and happiness, and a progressive system of rewards and punishments for good and bad conduct. Such a system must extend all the way down into the sensible world and the moral activity of man in it, and from there up to the already postulated future immortal life for rational beings. All along the continuum connecting the present life to the future and into eternity, then, we must postulate a systematic relation between virtue and happiness.

Kant thinks that the only way to fulfill this condition is to suppose that there is a personal, living God, an omnipotent, omniscient, just, and benevolent Author of nature through understanding and will: the second component of the highest good, viz., that happiness ought to be proportional to virtue, requires the existence of a

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23 To suppose that in a future moral life, as if in the flash of an eye, we can suddenly and inexplicably achieve a holy will, perfectly in accord with duty, is to Kant’s mind a morally dangerous postulate, and so rationally unwarrantable, as it would encourage man to forego moral labor and wait for some future transformation. Anyway, any such postulate is fanciful and doesn’t take seriously enough the radical evil inherent in human nature, for that evil precludes our practical reason from ever gaining absolute control over our will, whether in this life or any future one.
Providence that knows the true moral desert of everyone and apportions felicity in accordance with it. Thus, independently of theoretical evidence, we are rationally justified in believing in a God. Without such a belief, we cannot consistently conceive of the final aim of morality as even possible.\footnote{We might also briefly mention at this point Kant’s postulate of the grace of God. Because of our radical evil and concomitant guilt, which we can never eradicate, we would lose all hope in our moral endeavors were we not to be ensured that if we do all that, given the deficiencies of our nature, we can, God will justify us through his divine grace.}

Kant’s coupling of practical reason’s need for a systematic ordering of rewards and punishments for virtuous and vicious behavior with the idea of a virtuous and providential God endowed with will and intelligence salvages much of the traditional notion of God, even though it does not prove God’s existence. However, despite Kant’s intentions and the chagrin he would have experienced were he to have witnessed the unintended effects of his theological views on more radical philosophical posterity, already in his moral theology are elements that insinuate the doctrines of nineteenth century post-Hegelian atheism.\footnote{In making this claim, I am following the recent work of Gordon E. Michelson, Jr. He argues in the final chapter of \textit{Fallen Freedom}, and more comprehensively in his later \textit{Kant and the Problem of God}, that Kant’s moral religion both intimates in itself the atheistic philosophies of religion of Feuerbach and Marx and also, in part, directly influenced the latter in constructing their atheistic positions in the first place; they picked up on strands in and tendencies of Kant’s postulates-doctrine that subordinated the import of God to the autonomy of man and man’s rational ideals; they proceeded to jettison the need to postulate the immortality of the soul and the existence of God, claiming that our true final aim is something we are capable of realizing through our own efforts in this world; and they contended that in speaking about God we have all along been projecting humanity’s own highest ideals and greatest potential onto a heavenly “beyond.” According to Michelson, Hegel was a transitional figure between Kant and these later, explicitly atheistic positions, though he does not develop his views on Hegel in significant depth.} As illustrated in the above sketch of Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, Kant’s moral argument for God portrays even the very idea of God as adjunct to human morality. To be sure, while for Kant the idea of God is at least partially defined by man’s needs, he still maintains that it can be formulated independently of man. Thus, in the first \textit{Critique}’s
“The Ideal of Pure Reason,” Kant develops a rather traditional, rationalistic concept of God (as the sum total of all possible predicates, in the form of perfect understanding and will) in a manner unrelated to us and our practical needs. He then argues that his moral argument leads to the postulated existence of this traditional, robust conception of God. Nonetheless, there is a real issue here about whether the moral argument can yield all of the divine predicates of the traditional God. Kant’s successors would argue that it cannot and that it results in a significantly diminished theistic content. Besides, and this is perhaps more to the point, the general strategy of the argument reveals a determination to subordinate the divine will to reason’s own conception of, and interest in, the highest good. God is not the focal point of Kant’s universe. Rather, he becomes a part of a larger narrative regarding the intelligibility of man’s self-determined moral life and his moral regeneration, as well as serves as an aid to his moral encouragement. Man’s moral vocation becomes the center of things, and God is only invoked to ensure that man can ever more closely approximate his final goal. Even traits formerly predicated exclusively of divine transcendence—for instance, self-legislation—become associated with autonomous rationality, so that there becomes less and less for God to do on Kant’s scheme.

Later figures, such as Feuerbach and Marx, honed in on all of this with a keen interest. They were encouraged by these strands of Kant’s work to delete all references to the divine from the narrative of man’s realization of his highest good. This involved abandoning Kant’s own conception of the highest good, wherein man needs outside help from a divinity, in addition to his soul being immortal and his will free, in order to sufficiently satisfy its demands. They argued that man is himself
capable of manifesting on earth his highest ideals; man’s reason sets and realizes its own destiny, which is absent of all otherworldliness. They also propounded the conceptual and psychological point, rooted in Kant’s notion of a close link between man’s moral ideal and the very idea of God, that talk about God is really disguised talk about humanity’s own moral obligations and ethical potentialities and nothing more; it is the “alienation” of human ideals from man, to the extent that they are not fulfilled here on earth, and their unconscious projection into a heavenly realm, where they are worshipped—now in a form distinct from ourselves—under the name of some supernatural being. This basic theme parallels much of the logic in Kant’s postulates-doctrine, but it regards the postulation of theological concepts as an invalid, psychological response to the failure of man to secure his highest good, his final aim, on his own terms, as well as a kind of conceptual confusion about the content of the idea of God. The principle of rationality in practice, which Kant uses to justify traditional religious belief, turns into a principle of the psychological process through which man projects his own essence into the supernatural realm.\textsuperscript{26} In Marx, of course, we see the starkest and most sinister form of this reasoning: to the extent that man is cruelly, materially exploited and subject to economic oppression, and so does not fulfill the social ideal of Communism, he shifts his gaze upward toward God; his

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{26} Recall that the principle of rationality in practice states that one can act rationally in pursuit of an end only insofar as one believes that that end is possible of attainment through one’s actions, and, additionally, only insofar as one holds any other belief to which the former commits one.
\end{footnote}
oppressors love this and justify his situation by means of such a theological scheme, which is only a fantasy and detriment to his economic betterment.  

What begins in Kant as a complex of thinking designed to provide a subjective justification of faith in terms of reasons that are universally valid thus ends up by the mid-nineteenth century, by a process of tweaking certain notions immanent in it and focusing exclusively on some of its strands, completely undermining traditional religious belief. But, it would appear that we needn’t even wait that long after Kant to reach these subversive results; in his early writings from the mid-1790s, Hegel seems to have anticipated some of the core ideas of Feuerbach and Marx, and like them to have done so through the aid of Kant’s moral religion. In discussing man’s moral ideal, he uses the terminology Kant does in his writings on the postulates of practical reason—a fact that in itself betrays Hegel’s familiarity with Kant’s doctrine and is an indication that he conceives of his views as a continuation of a line of investigation begun there—, and he articulates his theory of religious alienation in direct reference to Kant’s postulates-doctrine, while deliberately assimilating it for his own, rather different purposes. The chief aim of his thought at least appears to lie in the direction of the complete autonomy of man to secure for himself on earth his highest good, as well as in unearthing the unpleasant, slavish psychological mechanisms that stand in the way of its appearance.

Hegel’s transformation of Kant’s doctrine is clearly visible in a critical addition to the Bern period’s “Positivity” essay, which he entitled the “Difference between the

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27 One of the clearest and most concise accounts of Marx’s, and to a lesser extent Feuerbach’s, theory of religion can be found in chapter 4 of Daniel L. Pals’s *Seven Theories of Religion*. Cf. Van A. Harvey’s “Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx.”
Imaginative Religion of the Greeks and the Positive Religion of the Christians.” In the following excerpt from that addition, Hegel sketches his non-Kantian conception of the highest good, which is based on his admiration for ancient republican civic virtue, an admiration derived to some degree through his reading of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* and, especially, Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*. Implicit in the passage is a repudiation of Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical reason. But, at the same time, it reveals insight into the psychology of religion grounded in a careful study of that doctrine and an appropriation of some of its underlying themes. Notice the Kantian terminology that Hegel uses to articulate his own practical philosophy.

In public as in private and domestic life, every [ancient Greek and Roman republican] individual was a free man, one who lived by his own laws. The idea (*die Idee*) of his country or of his state was the invisible and higher reality for which he worked, which drove him; it was his final end of the world or the final end of his world, an end which he found presented in reality or which he himself co-operated in presenting and maintaining. Confronted by this idea, his own individuality vanished; it was only this idea’s maintenance, life, and persistence that he asked for, and these were things which he himself could make realities. It could never or hardly ever have struck him to ask or beg for persistence or eternal life for his own individuality. Only in moments of inactivity or lethargy could he feel the growing strength of a purely self-regarding wish. Cato turned to Plato’s *Phaedo* only when his world, his republic, hitherto the highest order of things in his eyes, had been destroyed; at that point only did he take flight to a higher order still (Imag. 1: 205; 154-5; my emphasis).

There is no explicit use here of the term “the highest good” or reference to Kant’s doctrine of the postulates, but Hegel’s employment of the terms “idea” and “final end,” and his jibe at the practical needs of Cato expanding to include the supernatural, leave little room for doubt that he has that doctrine in mind. For Hegel, and supposedly for

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28 At one point in the manuscript, Hegel praises “that type of feeling and consciousness which, under the name of ‘virtue,’ Montesquieu makes the principle of a republican regime and which is readiness to sacrifice one’s life for an idea, an idea realized for republicans in their country” (Imag. 1: 206; 156).
the ancient Greek and Roman republican, the highest good, the final end of all striving, is the collective life of the republic itself, and this is something perfectly realizable in this world, by the republican’s and his fellow citizens’ efforts. Notice too the limited scope of Hegel’s conception of the highest good: while Kant’s conception of the collective aspect of the highest good is informed by the universalism and cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, Hegel retorts that it can only be specified in terms of the free citizen’s relationship to his fatherland. The true highest good for any individual is his free, participatory life in his own country, not in some political world order. Here the idea becomes manifest in reality, unifying the life of man with himself and his fellow citizens. And, as the remark about Cato’s eventual reliance upon Plato’s *Phaedo* suggests, it is only when our highest good remains unrealized, due to some deficiency in communal life in this world, that we alienate it from ourselves. Only then do we “encounter the needs which our practical reason has today when we have learned how to saddle it with plenty of them” (Imag. 1: 203; 152; my emphasis). In fact, when this happens, we pervert the true nature of our final end and come to conceive of it in a different way, as, Hegel would undoubtedly say, Kant has done. Alienation also involves postulating the immortality of the soul—hence the reference to Plato’s *Phaedo*—and, presumably, an external divinity to mediate that ideal and

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29 For Kant, the single final aim of the world includes a global or international social and political scheme.
30 As we will see below, Hegel does not offer a single account of why alienation occurs. Here, it seems to be because external conditions would not permit its realization, and, having to be realized in some fashion, it had to be realized in fantasy. But, other times Hegel explains it as due to the moral degeneracy of the individual, where his sensibility gains control of his reason and saddles it with foreign needs, thus securing the existence of a divinity capable of realizing an end that is no longer purely within man’s control. Either way, however, there is a genuine need to realize the moral ideal in fantasy, if not in reality.
dispense rewards and punishments. Furthermore, it likely involves the perversion of authentic freedom, roughly, the patriotic life of the republican, to something akin to Kantian freedom. In this way, Hegel learns from Kant about the close connection between man’s needs and religious beliefs, but regards the latter, and Kant’s postulates in particular, as grounded in the active “deceptions of the imagination” (Rep. 1: 207) that arise to the extent that our ideal is not manifest in our communal life in this world. The ideas of religion are formed and held dear only as an outlet for man’s socially and ethically rooted dissatisfaction.

That Hegel, at least as far as appearances are concerned, aims to deconstruct the notion of the divine only to jettison it completely comes out more explicitly within the context of his explanation, in the same manuscript, of how Christianity conquered paganism. We shall turn now briefly to Hegel’s account of the event.

This watershed in history occurred when the masses willingly ceded political power to an aristocracy who “corrupted them by their deeds and still more by the use they made of their riches” (Imag. 1: 206; 155), riches gained chiefly through military conquest. A gradual indifference and loss of republican virtue followed, coupled with the event that the aristocracy began to uphold its preponderance by force. The fact that they could succeed demonstrates that the average citizen’s political virtue had

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31 Contrast Hegel’s calling in “The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism” for a community of free spirits who “cannot seek either God or immortality outside themselves” (ESP 1: 235; 111). Though the authorship of this fragment is disputed—which one of the Tübingen friends and roommates was it, Hegel, Schelling, or Hölderlin?—, it is penned in Hegel’s writing and undoubtedly reflects his thinking.

32 Though it is a minor point, I take issue here with Lukács’ claim, in The Young Hegel, that in this essay Hegel explains the triumph of Christianity over ancient paganism in terms of “the development of inequalities of wealth which according to Hegel, and indeed to his French and English predecessors, inevitably brings despotism in its wake” (p. 59). At least here, inequality of wealth isn’t the immediate culprit; rather, it seems to be the complacency and indifference to political virtue engendered by the mesmerizing display of wealth and glory of the aristocrats. The masses were hoodwinked into moral degeneracy. That appears to be Hegel’s account, in this statement, of the beginning of alienation.
already been corrupted. The state became a machine, and the individuals its cogs. Life, which formerly had been lived “for the sake of a whole or an idea” (Imag. 1: 206; 157), viz., one’s fatherland, withdrew into its private sphere. Now work was done for the sake of the private individual, or because one was compelled by others to do it.

In this situation, paganism could no longer quench the highest needs of man: “since all his aims and all his activities were [now] directed on something individual, since he no longer found as their object any universal ideal for which he might live or die, he also found no refuge in his [former] gods” (Imag. 1: 207; 157). Though the Greeks and Romans in their pagan years might have called upon their gods for certain gifts and blessings, religion was for them primarily a play of the imagination. And one thing they most certainly did not need their old gods for, according to Hegel, was to secure the reality of their moral ideal: earlier “Greeks and Romans were satisfied with gods so poorly equipped, with gods possessed of human weaknesses, only because they had the eternal and the self-subsistent within their own hearts” (ibid).

In his oppressed condition, aggravated by the tyranny of the Roman emperors, man required a new religion, with a new conception of an objective divinity.

Thus the despotism of the Roman emperors had chased the spirit of man from the earth and spread a misery which compelled men to seek and expect happiness in heaven; robbed of freedom, his spirit, his eternal and absolute element, was forced to take flight to the divinity. God’s objectivity is a counterpart to the corruption and slavery of man, and it is strictly only a revelation, only a manifestation of this spirit of the times (Imag. 1: 211-2; 162-3).

The reason that man was in this situation “forced” to take flight to a supernatural divinity is because his highest good must be realized, if not in reality, then at least in a
distorted version of the imagination; and it is the divine being of the imaginative realm whose responsibility it becomes to create the social ideal.

Reason could never give up finding the absolute, the independent, the practical, somewhere or other; but these were no longer to be met with in man’s will. They now showed themselves in the divinity proffered by the Christian religion, a deity beyond the reach of our powers and our will but not of our supplications and prayers. Thus the realization of a moral idea could now no longer be willed but only wished for, since what we wish for we cannot achieve of ourselves but expect to acquire without our cooperation (Imag. 1: 208; 158).

Christianity offered its deity as the source of the practical principles and laws that man no longer laid down by himself within the context of his civic existence, as he had given up the life of republican virtue; and besides, the conditions of Imperial Rome would no longer permit that life’s reality. Christianity also offered the early Christians the apocalyptic hope that its deity would soon establish an idea as the kingdom of God: “they hoped for a revolution to be … accomplished by a Divine Being while men looked on passively” (Imag. 1: 208; 158). In particular, they expected Jesus the Messiah to return and usher in their idea. Once that hope eventually faded, “men were content to await this universal revolution at the end of the world” (ibid). Nonetheless, they boundlessly aggrandized the object of their hopes, developing over time the more sophisticated church doctrines about the nature of God (Cf. Imag. 1: 210-1; 161). Such was the glimmer of hope offered to all those craving pagans seeking for something new, and it suited many of them perfectly.33

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33 The new religion also had to hold out the promise to each individual that he would have a place in the everlasting kingdom, for now for the first time, at least as a perennial concern, “death, the phenomenon which demolished the whole structure of his purposes and the activity of his entire life, must have been something terrifying, since nothing survived him” (Imag. 1: 206; 157), i.e., since there was no persisting republic with which his identity was entwined. At this point the immortality of the soul becomes a postulate of practical reason.
We can dispense with much of the further detail of Hegel’s manuscript and the way in which, at this stage in it, he embarks on a discussion of Jewish messianism, Manichaeism, and the progression of theological ideas in Christendom, all in terms of his view of religious alienation. Yet one thing cannot be passed up, as it touches on the apparent (im)plausibility of the Platonic reading of Hegel which we will come across in the next chapter. Right after his discussion of Jewish messianic hopes (other than in the second-coming of Jesus), Hegel gives some concrete examples of certain figures still clinging to paganism, yet poignantly sensing its traditional inadequacy for satisfying the new needs of man, and modifying it accordingly. Among them are two Platonists, Porphyry and Iamblichus.

The adherents of paganism also sensed this lack of practical ideas; Lucian and Longinus sensed that there should be such ideas in human affairs, and their sad experience in this matter was poured out in bitter lamentations. Others again, like Porphyry and Iamblichus, attempted to equip their gods with the wealth which human beings no longer possessed and then to conjure some of it back in the form of a gift. Apart from some earlier attempts, it has been reserved in the main for our epoch to vindicate at least in theory the human ownership of the treasures formerly squandered on heaven; but what age will have the strength to validate this right in practice and make itself its possessor? (Imag. I: 209; 159).

Here we return to that powerful statement calling for the humanistic appropriation of religion. Importantly, it is formulated in direct contrast to (among others) Platonic thinkers like Porphyry and Iamblichus. Such men are to be pitied, Hegel thinks, as they are forced to satisfy their highest need, the need for the life of republican virtue and a common spirit of the people, in the deceptions of the imagination. This passage must be considered along with the above one about Cato’s recourse to Plato’s Phaedo when evaluating the Platonic reading of Hegel’s absolute. If Hegel ever does turn to
some form of Platonism in Frankfurt or Jena, he would either have to turn his back on
these powerful statements of modernity and reverse the whole trajectory of his
thinking in the mid-1790s, or he would need to distinguish between a kind of
Platonism not subject to such religious alienation and one that is.

Before wrapping up this theme in Hegel’s writings, we ought to briefly turn to
another of Hegel’s additions to the “Positivity” manuscript, viz., “A Positive
Religion,” that again clearly builds off of Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical
reason. Hegel’s account here follows along roughly the same lines we have just seen
him traverse, but he offers a more precise explanation of the mechanism of alienation
from the standpoint of the agent’s moral degeneracy. Instead of arguing that religious
alienation is due to external conditions unsuitable for realizing the republican ideal, he
here blames it chiefly on the internal condition of sensibility’s gaining of control of
reason:

Where reason finds a will that is dominated more by sensible
inclinations, and where it seldom finds the opportunity to apply itself
to the will, in such subjects sensibility perceives reason’s voice, its
ought, and it explains this according to its own needs and interprets
this ought of reason as a demand for happiness, but a demand that
differs from the sensible demand of happiness in that it is itself
grounded in the voice of reason (PG 1: 195).

This is stage one in the process. Stage two is the demand of this reason mixed up with
sensibility for a God to secure its new, tainted highest end, an end which it can no
longer secure for itself:

Since reason can no longer realize this mixed-thing, insofar as it is
enfeebled and polluted through this mixture of nature, it demands an
alien being who possesses lordship over nature, which it now misses
and which it now can no longer disdain (PG 1: 196).
In contrast to such a morally degenerate person is the “republican” or “warrior” who fights for honor and country and who “has posited for himself an end of his existence in which there is not to be found the second part, viz., happiness” (ibid), as something purely individual. The former “has an end whose realization depends entirely on himself and thus doesn’t require any foreign aid” (ibid), i.e., a God. The latter, the man who lives in and for his people, realizes by his own means his highest good. His sensibility has not usurped control of his entire being, but is well-ordered and in harmony with his rational civic virtue. Thus, he needn’t resort to religious alienation, unlike the sensuous man who holds reason hostage for the sake of aims foreign to her nature. In this manner and beginning with a careful reading of Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, Hegel seeks to undermine the religious aim of Kant’s original doctrine, while at the same time “psychologizing” it and retaining the intimate connection it recognizes between religious concepts and the needs of man.

Having now seen several of the statements in which the Hegel of the mid-1790s appears to undermine the idea of God and other religious concepts, all on the basis of a theory, inspired by Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, of the psychology of religious belief, I hope that the interpretive problem about how the young Hegel can reasonably propound a philosophy of the absolute is at this point more pressing. The facile answer that in Frankfurt and Jena he completely abandons this subversive line of reasoning, and perhaps alters his conception of the highest good so that, in orthodox Kantian fashion, it yields the desired religious postulates, is contradicted by too much textual evidence. In both Frankfurt and Jena, he still drives home the theme of religious alienation and prioritizes his ethical ideal of living for
How, then, is it possible for Hegel to base his philosophy on a concept that it would appear he rejects as spurious and psychologically suspect? Is all of his God-talk mere subterfuge, simply religious decoration of a fundamentally atheistic position? Is it a ruse intended to make the truth more palatable to an age not yet ready for its starkness? Is Hegel perhaps more of a precursor of Feuerbach and Marx than they were aware? And if not, if he is serious in propounding a philosophy of the absolute, what could it be such that he could simultaneously maintain the views we have just finished outlining?

Were we to take the latter course; were we to suppose that Hegel’s discourse about the absolute is serious—a point, it seems to me, that is beyond a reasonable doubt, given its ubiquity, apparent gravity, and the fact that relatively little of his philosophy would remain, so that we should wonder why he exerted such an effort to say so little—, we could not simply rest content with expounding an interpretive position according to which the absolute is just somehow or other united to man, and therefore not an objective or alienated divinity. We could not because we must explain in particular Hegel’s position, intimated to some degree in some of the passages we have already seen, that God is intimately tied to the communal life of men; Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute is not developed alongside of, and essentially unconnected with, his views on the common spirit of a people; it is inextricably bound up with the

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34 To give just one example of his continued adherence to his doctrine of religious alienation, he states, in the context of his critique of ancient Judaism in “The Spirit of Christianity,” that “… they [i.e., the ancient Israelites] had committed all harmony among men, all love, spirit, and life, to an alien object; they had alienated from themselves all the genii in which men are united; they had put nature in the hands of an alien being. What held them together was chains, laws given by the superior power” (SC 1:355-6; 240). That he still affirms the ideal of republican civic virtue is evident from the following statement from Hegel’s “Natural Law” essay: “As far as ethical life is concerned, the words of the wisest men of antiquity are alone true: the ethical consists in living in accordance with the ethics [Sitten] of one’s country” (NL 2: 508; 162).
latter. This position was alluded to in those passages that refer to man’s “freedom” as his “eternal and absolute element” (Imag. 1: 211; 162) and identify “the practical” with “the absolute, the independent” (Imag. 1: 210; 161). Since for Hegel freedom and the practical, like the highest good, are not the formal law of pure reason, but rather the republican life lived for the sake of the common spirit, it would appear that he for some reason links the eternal, or divinity itself, with public life. Taking Hegel’s absolute-talk seriously means that we must also explain this curious claim.

We needn’t rely on such vague intimations in Hegel’s texts in justifying this demand, however, since the view is expressed more explicitly in Hegel’s Frankfurt writings. He says in them at one point that “God is love; love is God; there is no other divinity than love—only what isn’t divine, what does not love, must have the divinity in the idea, outside of oneself” (FSC 1: 304). Combining this complex of ideas with his roughly contemporaneous assertion that “love … [is] a spirit that lives between men … a living bond … [which] is the highest freedom” (SC 1: 356)—it is, as he says elsewhere, “the living interrelation of men in their essential being” (SC 1: 362; 246)—, it would appear that his claim is that God is equivalent to, or at least inseparable from, a communion of individuals bound together by a common spirit, by a feeling of love and a likeness of life. Unless we decide that these passages are evidence of Hegel’s complete deconstruction of the concept of God, so that God is

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35 Hegel crossed out this passage from his manuscript, but, as the views stated concisely here are prevalent throughout the rest of the manuscript, it is certainly not because he came to reject its content. I have decided to cite it, since it is one of his most felicitous formulations of his notion of love. Cf. (SC 1: 393-4; 277-8).
36 Even more explicitly, after identifying love as “a living bond … this feeling of unity of life” (SC 1: 394; 278), he claims that “[t]his friendship of soul, described in the language of reflection as an essence, as spirit, is the divine spirit, is God who rules the communion” (ibid).
only a postulate of our practical reason to the extent that a common spirit uniting a people is absent, and therefore that his God-language is mere subterfuge, then we have to make some sense out of the idea that for Hegel God is somehow or other at least tied to the national spirit of a people. How can any plausible conception of God be constructed out of such materials?

This puzzling request finishes our outline of the general problems surrounding the young Hegel’s development of a philosophy of the absolute, an outline in which we have also achieved a general orientation to Hegel’s early thought and learned of some internal constraints on his notion of the absolute. Resolving these issues is the task of the remaining chapters. We begin by considering in some depth the Platonic interpretation of the Hegelian absolute.
Chapter 2

Hegel the Platonist?¹

We begin with one of the oldest, most prevalent interpretations of the overall vision of Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute: Hegel the modern representative of late ancient Platonism. Among the candidates, it is probably the interpretation most unfamiliar to contemporary Anglophone audiences, but in many ways it can be the most persuasive, if evaluated with an unbiased eye—i.e., if one is willing to read Hegel in a way uncongenial to our modern perspective, should the evidence so dictate. We will spend the first part of this chapter explaining it in some detail. In the second we will consider the strongest evidence in its favor. Finally, in the third part we will say something about why, despite its interpretive appeal, it fails as an interpretation of Hegel.

§ 1. The Platonic Interpretation of Hegel’s Absolute

Central to the Platonic reading of Hegel’s idea of the absolute is the traditional notion of the divine mind deriving from the Platonic tradition. We will want to spend a bit of time getting clear about it before we proceed to complete the picture and fill in the details. Despite this notion’s being one rooted in ancient Platonism, it is best approached, largely because of its clarity and its influence on all post-Kantian German

¹ I use the term “Platonism” and its cognates in an encompassing sense, to refer not simply to Plato’s philosophy proper, but to the broader Platonic tradition inspired by him, including what scholars since the nineteenth century have designated “Middle Platonism” and “Neoplatonism.”
thought, by way of Kant’s contrast between our cognitive situation and the mental life of what Kant calls “an intuitive intellect.”

According to Kant, human experience is composed of two entirely different kinds of representations or mental states, intuitions and concepts. Intuitions are the raw sensory data for discursive processing that are directly and immediately given to the cognitive subject. They are the representations associated with the faculty of sensibility, i.e., that capacity of ours simply to be affected by objects. In contrast to this passive faculty of sensibility and its intuitions stands the active faculty of understanding or intellect, whose spontaneity generates the concepts by means of which the raw data are thought. Concepts are representations that refer mediately to possibly many data. Their structure therefore differs in kind from that of intuitions. They comprise sets of properties potentially common to many different data. For the experience and thought of particular empirical objects to be possible, these two heterogeneous elements of all our cognition must be coupled; concepts must be applied in a rule-like fashion to the manifold of intuition presented by sensibility. In Kant’s terms, the intuitions received by sensibility must be “taken up” in thought. This organization and subsumption of particular intuitive data under general conceptual rules takes place by means of the activity of judgment, so that the data given in intuition are judged as, say, a book, the sun, or an instance of some law, and thus recognized as the objects they are. Only given these two independent conditions, the intuitive reference to raw sensory without the mediation of any other

2 More accurately, Kant defines a judgment at B141 as the unification of concepts, the ultimate subject of which is always the data of intuition. For example, in the case of the judgment “man is mortal,” the concept “man” is subsumed under the concept “mortal.” But, the concept “man” ultimately relates to certain intuitions that come before us. Cf. Kant’s discussion at A68-9/B93-4.
representation and the active conceptualization of the data in judgment, is empirical thought and knowledge possible.³

According to Kant, that is the cognitive situation of our purely discursive intellects. It is the most elemental fact of human knowledge that we require this application of concepts developed by the understanding to intuitions furnished by sensibility. And this basic fact accounts for our most basic cognitive limitation, viz., that we cannot derive from our concepts alone the existence or complete determination of any particular objects in the world. These must always be contingent relative to our cognitive capacities. The human understanding must therefore draw the distinction between the possibility and actuality of things—between what we think and whether or not what we think is real.

Besides our own discursive intellects, Kant conceives of another conceptually possible cognitive situation. This would be the cognitive situation of what he refers to alternatively as an “intuitive intellect,” an “archetypal understanding,” or simply a “divine understanding.”⁴ In contrast to our purely discursive intellect that is stuck

³ For passages in Kant’s writings pertaining to the rudiments presented in this paragraph, see A320/B377, A51-2/B75-6, A86/B118, and Jaesche Logic (published 1800) sec. 1. In the account just given, we have, of course, greatly simplified the nature and role of intuition and concept in Kant’s philosophy. For instance, we have ignored Kant’s account of the a priori forms of intuition and understanding; we have not dealt with Kant’s notion of apperception and its relationship to sensibility and understanding; and we have left out of our account the role of imagination in cognition. Fortunately, such complexity is extraneous to our purposes.
⁴ Moltke S. Gram, in an article on the idea of an intuitive intellect in Kant and post-Kantian German Idealism, argues that Kant actually has three logically independent senses of the idea: (1) an intellect that knows things in themselves independently of any conditions of sensibility; (2) an intellect that creates its own objects; and (3) an intellect that intuits the sum total of the whole of nature. All three senses would be compatible only in the case of God’s divine intuition of creation as a whole, i.e., only in the case of the divine understanding. See Gram’s “Intellectual Intuition: The Continuity Thesis,” p. 288. Regardless of whether Gram is correct that Kant means to distinguish between these three different senses of the term “intuitive intellect,” I treat them as together comprising the idea of an intuitive understanding for two reasons. First, this is how Kant most often understands the idea (cf.
with applying general concepts to particular intuitions given to it from elsewhere by means of sensibility, an intuitive intellect would not be constrained by the condition of the reception of matter for its cognitive machinery to operate upon. Its intuition, that is, would not, like ours, be passive, but rather the active ground of reality itself, generating the objects and their determinations, whose representations we must receive from outside of ourselves. In conceiving of a being with this kind of intuitive power, we must not contrast its intuition with its thinking: this is what Kant means by saying that for an intuitive intellect “concepts … and intuitions … would disappear.”

We must rather conceive of it as a being that is capable of immediately presenting objects through representations that are simultaneously concepts but yet singular and fully determinate—through “synthetic concepts,” that is, as opposed to our “analytic concepts.” As such, it has no distinct cognitive moments of receptivity of raw sensory data through intuitions and conceptualization of them by means of the understanding. Such a being, Kant makes clear at B139, would still be self-conscious. However, whereas in the case of our discursive intellect, our self-consciousness does not cause the manifold of intuition to exist, in the case of an intuitive intellect its act of self-consciousness would create its own objects.

Because the fundamental dualism inherent in our cognitive faculty would not hold in the case of such an intuitive understanding, many of the distinctive structural features of our experience would not be present in its experience. For instance, it would not need the power of judgment; judgment implies the application of concepts

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B139, B145, and §§ 76-7 in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and second, this composite idea is the one that underlies the Platonist reading of Hegel’s absolute.

5 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 402.
to data given in intuition.\(^6\) Nor would there be any distinction for such an intellect between what is actual and what is merely possible. We think all sorts of thoughts that are not real, but for the archetypal understanding, its thoughts would be constitutive of reality. It could never, moreover, conceive of an object that is actual as \textit{not} existing. In fact, the whole set of modal categories (viz., “possibility,” “necessity,” and “actuality”) would be inapplicable to its mode of experience.

Kant makes it clear that, at least as he sees the matter, the only possible realization of the idea of an intuitive intellect is the divine mind, which he conceives of in terms of that of the Platonic tradition.\(^7\) What makes this divine intuitive intellect roughly “Platonic” is that besides the contingent intelligible substances and the finite natural objects it creates as distinct beings, its thought at an ontologically prior level is also the cause of all the Platonic ideas or archetypes that exist as part of its very own essence.\(^8\) A Platonic idea or archetype is a principle of perfection, meaning the highest degree of reality of its kind, in fact definitive of its kind and completely equal to itself, so that all other instances of that type are grounded in that original model and have a lesser degree of reality than it does; it is in each case the “maximum” or the “absolute.” The intuitive intellect creates all of these ideational models of creation of contingent objects of lesser degrees of reality by virtue of its knowledge, or divine

\(^6\) This implies, explicitly stated by Kant at B145, that for an intuitive understanding the categories, or pure concepts of the understanding, would have no significance.

\(^7\) See Robert Pippin’s “Avoiding German Idealism: Kant, Hegel, and the Reflective Judgment Problem,” p. 133, n. 9, where Pippin cites a passage from Kant’s Reflections: “It is difficult to conceive how any other intuitive understanding should exist other than the divine.” Evidence for Kant’s particularly Platonic understanding of the divine intuitive intellect is to be found as early as his 1770 Inaugural Dissertation (see §§ 9, 10, and 25), as well as in his first Critique (see A318/B375 and §§ 1 and 7 of the “Ideal of Pure Reason”).

\(^8\) It would perhaps be more proper to speak here of a reciprocal causation between ideas and God, since it is not as if, first, God exists, and then, he creates the ideas; rather, his being is inseparable from the objects of his contemplation/creation.
intuition, alone, and they only exist within the province of its mind. The essence of God consists in his intellectual intuition and the ideas he contemplates within himself; the contingent substances he creates on the basis of his ideas stand outside of that essence.

Now for the Critical Kant, of course, despite the fact that this conception of the divinity is naturally generated by our faculty of reason and has some important contrastive and regulative functions to play in our cognitive and moral lives, we

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9 This is why Kant’s idea of God is more Middle Platonic than strictly Platonic, though again we are using “Platonism” and its cognates rather broadly. In Middle Platonism, thinkers such as Albinus place the Platonic ideas in the mind of God, rather than, as Plato himself seems to understand their relationship, outside of God’s mind, yet still serving as models for his creation of objects. The issue here concerns whether or not God creates the eternal archetypes. Albinus and other Middle Platonists say that he does; Plato seems to deny this. Kant, however, writes as if Plato endorses the Middle Platonic conception. For a fascinating and very readable study of some of the history of ancient Platonic theology, which I have found helpful in preparing the material of this chapter, see John P. Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology*.

10 As Kant makes clear in the *Dissertation* and the “Ideal” in the first *Critique*, the contingent substances created by God that compose the intelligible world are subsets of the perfections contained within the divine substance itself, but to a lesser degree of perfection. The causation in question here is emanation: contingent intelligible substances emanate from the divine mind and its storehouse of perfections. Though God emanates from his own perfection all contingent substances, the perfection of his being remains undiminished, and he exists apart and above from them as their extramundane source. In addition, because these contingent substances derive from the same source, it is possible for them to interact, and by virtue of this possibility, they form a single intelligible world. Kant’s account of the sensible world and its substances relies, of course, on the human cognitive apparatus and the actual interaction of human beings and other substances in the intelligible world. As God is the principle of the intelligible world, so man is of the sensible.

11 Kant uses it negatively as a foil for our own discursive intellect and thus to bring our intellectual capacities into relief. He also assigns the idea a positive role as a regulative ideal to motivate and guide our cognitive inquiry. He thinks that we require the idea that nature is created by an intellect, though infinitely greater than ours, for several theoretical reasons. First, our pursuit to impose a systematic order on empirical concepts, a pursuit that reason desires for its own sake, would be frustrated without such a guiding idea (cf. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 20: 209). Second, without the idea of an intuitive intellect, we might not be able to find any empirical concepts or laws for a given manifold of intuition at all (cf. *Ibid.*, 20: 213). Nor, third, would we be able to understand why any particular law, no matter how consistent with the categories on the one hand and the empirical data on the other, should itself be necessarily true (cf. *Ibid.*, 5: 179-80 and 183). And fourth, we need to formulate the idea of a divine understanding in order to deal with knowledge of living organisms (cf. *Ibid.*, § 77). For a clear and more subtle discussion of these reasons, see Paul Guyer, “Kant’s Principles of Reflecting Judgment,” as well as his earlier article, “Reason and Reflective Judgment: Kant on the Significance of Systematicity.” Kant also assigns the idea of the intuitive intellect a positive role as the necessary presupposition of our moral endeavors. As we saw in the previous chapter, he gives an argument that is designed to appeal to our higher moral nature and to point out to us that to the extent that we attend to
can’t even form an intelligible concept of such a being, much less have cognition of its existence. This is because concepts, for Kant, require the possibility of being exhibited in intuition in order to be fully intelligible, and the notion of an intuitive intellect cannot be thus exhibited. Instead, the notion of an intuitive intellect falls under the class of representations Kant calls “ideas,” which are quasi-concepts generated by our faculty of reason and transcending the possibility of experience. The idea of the divine understanding is thus a “logical possibility,” i.e., it is not self-contradictory, but it is not a “real possibility,” i.e., it does not satisfy the requisite conditions for the possibility of experience, and so cannot “really” be made sense of by us. Even more so, then, is the knowledge of the existence and nature of any such being forever beyond our cognitive reach.

The Platonic reading of Hegel’s absolute attributes this Platonic-Kantian idea of the divine understanding to Hegel. It maintains that Hegel accords the idea a constitutive status, unlike the more cognitively humble contrastive and regulative status it enjoys in the Critical philosophy. Some proponents of the reading think that Hegel has a principled, in fact Kantian reason, for upgrading its status. We will get to this in due time. For now we want to begin to outline the Platonic interpretation and see how it combines the idea of an intuitive intellect with finitude in general so as to yield a concept of the absolute as true infinity: the identity of the infinite (the divine mind) and the finite (nature and cognitive beings like ourselves).

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12 Cf. A320/B377
13 Cf. A244/B302.
Hegel the Platonist is an old theme. It arose during Hegel’s own time period, first and foremost from some of his close friends, in particular Friedrich Creuzer and Victor Cousin. Both affirm the close proximity of Hegel’s philosophy to ancient Platonism in general and to Proclus in particular. Karl-Ludwig Michelet, one of Hegel’s students in Berlin, and others from the Hegel-School repeatedly emphasize the same thing. So too does Adolf Trendelendburg. Here’s what Ludwig Feuerbach, a student of Hegel for two years, has to say about the comparison: Hegel is “the German Proclus. The ‘absolute philosophy’ is the reborn Alexandrinian philosophy.” More recently, Wilhelm Dilthey, the discoverer of Hegel’s so-called “early theological writings,” has emphasized even the young Hegel’s similarity to Proclus and other ancient Platonic thinkers, as well as to the medieval German mystics like Eckhart and Tauler that followed in their footsteps. Charles Taylor’s exposition of Hegel’s absolute as “self-positing spirit” also recognizes its affinity to the Platonic tradition’s absolute. The point of contact between Hegel and the Platonic tradition

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14 The following brief history of the Platonic interpretation of Hegel derives from Halfwassen. See below.
17 A. Trendelenburg, *Logische Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, pp. 89 and 100.
19 W. Dilthey, *Die Jugendgeschichte Hegels*, pp. 154, 180, and 253. This is in spite of the fact that Dilthey sometimes refers to Hegel’s position as “mystical pantheism,” the pantheistic conception of God being different than that found in Platonism, where the divine intellect is a separate being that transcends the world. Strictly speaking, as we are organizing matters, Dilthey’s interpretation qualifies as a version of the romantic-pantheistic model—since for him the transcendent divine intellect is not a separate being, but rather simply the highest aspect of the one being—, and this is also how Halfwassen classifies Dilthey’s position. We will have more to say on this later.
20 Cf. C. Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 102. Taylor’s reading of Hegel’s absolute, one of the most popular sources of Hegel’s doctrine in the English-speaking world and one of the chief targets (along with Düsing) of Pippin’s reinterpretation of Hegel, falls squarely within the tradition of interpreting Hegel’s philosophy as roughly the same as many of the ancient Platonists, even though, it must be admitted, Taylor himself
emphasized by many of these various thinkers concerns not just the dialectical method, but the idea of God, an idea that includes not only that of the divine intuitive understanding, but also the return of this divinity to itself by way of finitude, and only as incorporating this return does it truly constitute God, the absolute, or the true infinite.21

One of the most sophisticated and recent exponents of the Platonic reading of the early Hegel’s concept of the absolute is Halfwassen, whose interpretation we will analyze more carefully in order to discern the basic structure of that reading.22 His recent work on the early Hegel aims to fill the lacuna of detailed investigation into the

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21 For a more thorough treatment of the history of the Platonic interpretation of Hegel, see J. Halfwassen, Hegel und der spätantike Neuplatonismus, pp. 18ff. There are a host of other Hegel scholars writing on the early Hegel’s notion of the absolute that fit into this general camp as well, though they approach Hegel’s endorsement of the traditional Platonic divine mind by way of Kant’s idea of an intuitive intellect, rather than through ancient Platonic thinkers proper. Among this group are Klaus Düsing (“Ästhetische Einbildungskraft und intuitiver Verstand,” pp. 117-19 in particular), Kenneth R. Westphal (“Kant, Hegel, and the Fate of ‘the’ Intuitive Intellect.”), Béatrice Longuenesse (“Point of View of Man or Knowledge of God: Kant and Hegel on Concept, Judgment, and Reason,” p. 263 in particular), and Paul Guyer (“Thought and Being: Hegel’s Critique of Kant’s Theoretical Philosophy,” especially p. 202, and “Absolute Idealism and the Rejection of Kantian Dualism,” especially p. 50). None of these figures emphasizes the circular nature of the true infinite and how the intuitive intellect alone does not for Hegel constitute the absolute; and none, except Düsing, emphasizes the Platonic roots of the Kantian idea of the intuitive intellect; yet, they all appear to hold, Düsing most explicitly (op. cit., p. 119), that the intuitive intellect Hegel affirms stands apart from the world it creates, and for this reason, as we will see in more depth, their readings of Hegel roughly qualify as “Platonic,” in the sense of the term as we are using it. Their failure to bring out the circular nature of the Hegelian absolute and the way in which it “overreaches” the finite is probably due to their focus on Hegel’s debt to Kant, rather than on any explicit rejection of the presence of that circular scheme in Hegel’s philosophy; Kant’s “Platonism” does not involve such a scheme.

ancient Platonic sources that the young Hegel had access to and that influenced his position. Before Halfwassen’s work it had been known that Hegel had indirect access to ancient Platonism through Jacobi’s Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn, in which in the second edition Jacobi provides frequent and lengthy excerpts from Giordano Bruno’s pantheistically-reinterpreted Neoplatonism. Further indirect sources had also been known: Kant’s doctrine of the intuitive understanding and its similarity to Nous (Platonic divine mind) theology, and J.L. von Mosheim’s History of the Church, which Hegel studied at Tübingen and Bern, and from which he had access to some passages from the Neoplatonically-influenced medieval German mystics. Hegel had direct sources as well, this time to two Middle Platonic thinkers. In Tübingen Hegel and his friend and roommate Hölderlin had a subscription to an edition of Plutarch’s writings, and it was known that Hegel also had access to the works of Philo of Alexandria. But, one source had continually been overlooked: Eusebius’s Preparation for the Gospel. Halfwassen claims that this apology from the fourth century church father with Greek leanings is the most important source for Hegel’s ancient Platonic tendencies. Eusebius’s aim in that work was to show that Christianity is the heir not just of Judaism, but of all the ancient religions, and in fact agrees with the God-inspired true philosophy of ancient Platonism. As such the work contains a wealth of excerpts, some pages long, from Plato and Platonic authors such as Philo, Plutarch, Plotinus, Numenius, Porphyry, Amelius, and Atticus. Halfwassen points out that Hegel does in fact refer to the Preparation one time in a footnote in “The Spirit of Christianity,” even though the
passage has no real philosophical content. He also claims that Schelling, another friend and roommate of Hegel at the seminary, is known to have read Eusebius’s *Preparation* and cited it in a work as early as 1792, and that Hegel probably read it in Tübingen as well. He thus thinks that there is sufficient evidence for the possibility of the real influence of ancient Platonism on the young Hegel, the proof of which he finds in an analysis of Hegel’s early writings and their similar doctrines and terminology to those of the ancient Platonists.

Halfwassen claims that one of the most significant distinctions that Hegel appropriates from Platonic thinkers is the one between the first God as the transcendent One and the second God as the divine Logos. One of its chief sources is the Middle Platonist Numenius, also the Platonic figure Eusebius most admires and emulates, and whom he quotes frequently and lengthily.

In particular Eusebius sees Numenius’s doctrine of the first God as the transcendent One, which is life and spirit at the same time, and of the second God, which likewise is spirit, but divides itself as the demiurgic world-soul into the plurality of the world and returns from this division again into itself and into unity with the first God, as substantially identical with the gospel doctrine; and in exactly this sense Hegel also interprets the relation of the Logos to God as the One or Being outside of reflection. This hierarchical understanding of divinity first emerges in the Middle Platonic thinkers, who, for various philosophical and theological reasons, wished to see the highest level of divinity completely removed from any direct involvement in the realm of becoming. A consequence of Hegel’s acceptance of this divine “division of

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23 See (SC 1: 276; 191).
25 Kenney’s *Mystical Monotheism* investigates these reasons and the progression of ancient Platonic thought.
labor” is that it is a mistake to characterize his philosophy of the absolute as a “mystical pantheism,” as Dilthey does. Hegel is not a pantheist like Bruno or Spinoza, because Hegel’s highest God transcends the multiplicity of the world and remains untouched by it. On this specific point Halfwassen comments that for Hegel,

[t]he world-founding divine One is not identified pantheistically with the world-whole. The divine One and pure Being of the late Frankfurt Hegel also does not resemble the rigid and inert single substance of Spinoza. It doesn’t lend itself to such a transcendence-less immanence. It is rather transcendent, but as spirit bursting forth into a thinking bound to ideas [als Geist in einer das vorstellungsgebundene Denken sprengenden], a transcendence that overreaches the immanent, which Hegel also later always ascribes to the absolute.

Hegel accepts the doctrine of emanation characteristic of later ancient Platonism, and he takes this idea to exclude divine immanence at the highest level. The highest level of the absolute is not present as such in the divided manifoldness, which would make the world itself divine; yet the world still emerges from the One. We must draw a distinction between the One in its undivided infinite unity, and the One as it loses its divinity through its own division into the realm of multiplicity. The latter is the second God, or the divine Logos.

The first God is more specifically the first or original spirit that, as a result of its self-contemplation, generates and encompasses all of the Platonic ideas within itself as the content of its thinking. It grounds these intelligible beings, and so transcends their plurality, yet it remains undivided from them. It is, in short, the intuitive intellect we outlined above. Commenting on Numenius’s formulation of this notion and its resemblance to Hegel’s, Halfwassen states:

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The divine One of Numenius … is thus in itself a single whole of all ideas, which joins in itself the essential grounds of all things, and is at the same time above all individual ideas as the grounding and encompassing unity of being. As this undivided unity of ideas the first God is for Numenius ‘simple in itself, because it is entirely by itself, without ever being divided.’ This divine principle is thus as the founding One at the same time itself the undivided unity of the being that it grounds, which perfectly corresponds to Hegel’s conception of the absolute being as the infinite unity that is undivided in itself and from all other things.  

Middle Platonists like Numenius developed the view that the Platonic ideas exist within the mind of God, not outside of it, as models of creation. Accordingly, the first God is the divine spirit that creates by the power of its infinite thought all of the divine archetypes and contains them within itself as the content of its thinking. It cannot exist apart from these ideas, and so remains “undivided from them,” yet it transcends them as their creator. As such it is the absolutely simple, yet superlatively rich unity, the first, highest, original, creative Nous. It never leaves itself to descend into the world or assume any demiurgic functions, but still remains connected to creation by means of the Logos, its mediating agent.

The divine Logos, as the Son of God, is the demiurge, or creator God, that mediates between the first God, the Father, and the manifoldness of the world. It “likewise is spirit,” i.e., a divine Nous that contains the world of ideas within itself. But it is a lower divinity that intellectually generates its own sphere of ideas, not by means of internal self-contemplation like the first God does, but rather through contemplating the first divinity. Its ideas are thus imitations of those found within the

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30 Philo, Numenius, and other ancient Platonists frequently use this language of “Father” and “Son” so familiar in the Christian tradition.
highest sphere of reality. As demiurge, it looks simultaneously up towards the first God and down towards the undetermined matter that it fashions according to its eternal models.

Its role as demiurge and mediator can be analyzed into two principle functions: to divide the absolute unity of ideas that it takes over from the first God into relatively distinct units so as to bring them together in various ways with matter to form the sensible world; and to hold together and enliven the realm of multiplicity and relate it to the One. Hegel’s Logos-doctrine, first articulated in his Frankfurt period, is thus equivalent to Philo’s, Numenius’s, Amelius’s, and Eusebius’s. Commenting here on Hegel’s relation to Philo in particular, Halfwassen states:

Just like Philo, Hegel also emphasizes not only the dividing function of the Logos, but equally its “animating” activity that joins together the divided manifoldness of the world and binds it to the original divine unity.  

And just like Philo’s “divider of all things,” the “scalpel” that dissects the unity of ideas and orders matter accordingly, Hegel conceives of the dissection and unfolding of spirit into mundane multiplicity as something that takes place not merely through the Logos, but also in the Logos. Only brute, indeterminate matter as such persists intractably outside. On this picture the world is immanent in the Logos; the latter, in the capacity of the World-Soul, animates the former. Hegel takes over this Philonian doctrine of the Logos, as do Numenius, Amelius, Eusebius, and a host of other thinkers.

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In addition to the One, the Logos, and the world immanent within the activity of the Logos as the World-Soul, Hegel also maintains that an essential moment of reality and spirit is the return of the Logos to the original unity: the second God “… returns from this division again into itself and into unity with the first God,”34 as the first passage from Halfwassen that we cited above states. From its embodiment in the world of becoming, the Logos must rediscover its upward intellectual activity towards the first God, and by means of this glorify and sanctify creation. Only with this return do we have the full picture of the development of the absolute—“the self-development of spirit.” It is precisely this circular movement of absolute spirit that constitutes the truly infinite. It brings together the one-sided infinite—the first God—and the sphere of finitude into a single procession in which the One unfolds itself into the world by means of and within the Logos, and then returns to itself to complete the circle of its development. In this way it welds all oppositions into a single absolute.

The fact that the young Hegel in Frankfurt gives precisely this ancient Platonic interpretation of the Christian faith suggests a Platonic source, and it is to be found in the eleventh book of Eusebius’s *Preparation for the Gospel*. In that book Eusebius carries out his project of reconciling Platonism and Christianity. He favors the Gospel of John, whose Prologue he interprets in the light of the Middle and Neoplatonic doctrines of the Platonic ideas and the Logos. Halfwassen summarizes Hegel’s debt to Eusebius, and by way of Eusebius to Numenius, in the following passage that nicely captures the element common to them all.

Eusebius brings the Johannine Logos into connection with Numenius’s doctrine of the first God and its relation to the second God, which—like the Logos of Philo and John—unites God and the world. While the first God remains eternally in itself, as the transcendent One and Good, yet “growing together” with being, and at the same time is life and spirit, the essence of the second God is likewise spirit. It is originally one with the first God, but divides itself from it, in the process of which it divides itself as the demiurgic World-Soul into the plurality of the world. It does so in order that out of this division—not at all times, but rather, as Numenius suggests, in an historical process—it may return into itself and into its original unity with the first God. Eusebius saw this as substantially identical with the Gospel doctrine of the descent of the Logos into the world and its return to God [in the Gospel of John]. And in precisely this sense Hegel also interprets the relation of the Logos to God as the One or Being outside of reflection. In agreement with Hegel’s interpretations of the Logos and the Trinity, Numenius speaks of the original unity of the second God with the first and its return to this. At the same time he expressly refers the self-division and return of the second God to the human spirit, which for him is an emanation of (the second) God and returns to it and to the first God. This corresponds exactly to Hegel’s spiritual-philosophical interpretation of the Trinity.35

Hegel essentially takes over the view of the descent and ascent of the Logos from Eusebius, who himself takes it over from Numenius. One important point in this whole scheme that this passage clarifies is the vital role of man in the cosmos. The human spirit is originally an emanation of the divine Logos, identical in an intuitive vision to both that Logos and the first God, towards which it looks, along with the Logos. Thus the human being is a microcosm, containing in itself every level of reality, and represents the point of creation at which the Logos can sense itself and the first God and becomes capable of returning to this intellectual state in all its original fullness; the homecoming of the Logos is man’s becoming aware of his real self as identical in intellectual intuition to the divine Logos. Faith in God is the vague feeling

or intimation of union with God that derives from our original divine nature as an emanation of the Logos.\textsuperscript{36} Such faith is perfected through a “mystical unification,”\textsuperscript{37} which Hegel “understands as a purely spiritual, intellectual intuition”\textsuperscript{38} by which we climb upward through the world of multiplicity and resume our divine status, subservient of course, along with the Logos, to the first God. This return that completes the circle of the divine involves an historical process, as Numenius also thought.\textsuperscript{39} The whole process comprises the truly infinite, or the absolute.

This is the basic outline of Halfwassen’s ancient Platonic interpretation of Hegel’s Frankfurt philosophical position. In his opinion, the difference between Hegel’s “early-idealistic position” and the one he begins to develop in Jena only concerns the knowledge of the absolute. Whereas in Frankfurt Hegel thinks that we can only have knowledge of the self-development of spirit by means of a mystical intuition beyond reason, the Jena Hegel wants to achieve a rational cognition of spirit and begins to outline such a system. The basic structure of the system remains intact, however. This is why Hegel’s turn towards system and his transition to the demand for a completely rational knowledge of the absolute, which he immediately carries out at the beginning of his Jena time period, is … most easily understood from the concept of the absolute that Hegel develops at the end of his Frankfurt time period in the latest passages from \textit{The Spirit of Christianity} and in \textit{The System Fragment of 1800}.\textsuperscript{40}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[36] Ibid, pp. 92-3.
\item[37] Ibid.
\item[38] Ibid.
\item[39] The downward process from first God, to the Logos (and its emanations, viz., human souls), and then to the World-Soul is not historical, because it doesn’t occur in time at all; it is an eternal, atemporal process. Only the upward process of return is historical.
\item[40] “Die Rezeption des Neuplatonismus,” p. 125.
\end{footnotes}
Even the Frankfurt idea of the limitations of reason is not transcended in Hegel’s early Jena writings. That is to say, Hegel still thinks at this time that our access to the absolute cannot be rational through and through. It involves, first of all and by way of preparation, the skeptical destruction of all of the fixed determinations of the finite intellect and reflection. In this process, reflection is rational, and its arrangement of finite determinations into antinomies represents “the negative side of the absolute.” Complementing this is the positive knowledge of the absolute given in intellectual intuition itself. Hegel’s early Jena system of a rational metaphysics of the absolute is a combination of these two elements, viz., reflection as reason and the purely mental vision of the divine. The “mystical” element thus remains at this early stage. Throughout the further course of Hegel’s intellectual development in Jena, “this unification of intellectual intuition and reflection as independent sources of knowledge is further developed to their complete melting into a dialectical method unified in itself, which Hegel conceives for the first time in the Logic of 1804/05.”

We needn’t delve into Halfwassen’s interpretation of the mature Hegel’s dialectic, as our emphasis here is on earlier writings. Suffice it to say, though, that he sees the same conception of absolute spirit present in Hegel’s mature philosophy; the only difference being that in Hegel’s mature philosophy conceptual thought can penetrate absolute spirit entirely.

So much for the general structure of the Platonic model of Hegel’s Absolute. It represents a powerful answer to the first problem of the absolute we presented in

42 Hegel und der spätantike Neuplatonismus works this out in detail.
43 Before moving on, it should be noted that there exists a “Hermetic” reading of Hegel, a recent example of which is Glenn Alexander Magee’s Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition, that agrees in all essentials with the Platonic reading we have just seen. And like the latter, the former goes back to
chapter 1, viz., the problem of the nature of Hegel’s concept of the Absolute. We are now in a better position to reflect a bit on that model and to consider the answers it might give to the second and third problems of the absolute in the young Hegel’s thought: viz., why does Hegel bother to develop a philosophy of the absolute in the first place, when it seems so antithetical to his socio-political agenda?; and doesn’t any conception of the absolute conflict with Hegel’s critique of religious alienation?

Halfwassen does not spend a great deal of time discussing Hegel’s motives for developing a philosophy of the absolute in the first place, but it seems evident that on the account he gives it must be one of the young Hegel’s primary motives to synthesize the traditional concept of infinity as transcending the world and the idea of the finite world itself. In other words, Hegel must be largely preoccupied with developing a system of thought in which all oppositions, including the seemingly recalcitrant one between the natural and the supernatural, are overcome.

While this might appear to be a purely logical or theoretical affair, that it is not becomes clear once we take into account, from the standpoint of the Platonic reading,
those souls who achieve an intellectual vision of the divine Logos and the primary
divinity and who, perhaps, have been aided in their quest by the essentially Platonic
philosophy of Hegel. In the Platonic tradition, such a vision and satisfaction of man’s
final good have never been a purely discursive affair, bereft of love, emotion, and
transformative properties, even while dialectic has played a central role. Moreover,
because on the Platonic reading the divinity is not purely objective for man, since man
is identical in intellectual intuition to the Logos and the first God, that reading has the
resources to make pretty good sense out of some of Hegel’s statements regarding
religious alienation: man alienates God from himself as a purely objective divinity
insofar as he forgets his essential identification with the divine in intellectual intuition.

What about Hegel’s more specific claim about religious alienation directed
against the Neoplatonists Porphyry and Iamblichus? Recall from the previous chapter
Hegel’s rebuke of Porphyry and Iamblichus for their attempt “to equip their gods with
the wealth which human beings no longer possessed and then conjure some of it back
in the form of a gift” (Imag. 1: 209; 159). What could the Platonic interpretation say
in response to this seeming refutation of its position? One plausible tactic would be
to distinguish between those Platonists, such as Plotinus, who think that man can raise
himself up by his own powers to intellectual intuition, because at the deepest level of
his being he is identical to the divine intellect, and those, e.g., the post-Plotinian
Neoplatonists Porphyry and Iamblichus, who emphasized the practice of theurgy to
raise the soul to union with God, because man is at a fundamentally lower level in the

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44 It would, I think, be too facile of a response to say that Hegel simply changed his mind; the fragment
in which he lambastes the Neoplatonists is dated 1796, only one year prior to the beginning of his
Frankfurt period, in which he begins to develop his absolute philosophy. Such a radical and rapid
transformation of such strongly held convictions seems to me to be at least psychologically implausible.
cosmos than any divinity. Theurgy involved the performance of religious rites mediated by a priest or theurgist with the express purpose of elevating the spirit of man beyond its natural post in the order of things by means of influencing certain divinities. Were Hegel to join these later Neoplatonists, he would not have been able to sustain his strict line against positivity in religion: he would have had to recognize some form of mediation with God, whether that be pagan theurgy or Christian sacramentalism and faith, as essential to the divinization of man. And he would have had to recognize the divine as something wholly other than man. But the fact that, according to the Platonic interpretation given by Halfwassen, he does accept the thesis of the identity of man and God in intellectual intuition explains why he can simultaneously be opposed to religious positivity, and so critical of certain Platonists, e.g., Porphyry and Iamblichus, yet still abide by the Platonic conception of the absolute. According to the Platonic reading, Hegel’s charge against those Neoplatonists would accordingly be that they stripped the human soul of its higher, divine nature and so had to have recourse to theurgic magic in order to compel the gods to raise man’s soul to something approaching their own higher status. Such at least is a plausible response to the problematic passage available to the defenders of the Platonic reading.

However, even if in evaluating the Platonic reading of Hegel we can stretch our imaginations to accommodate certain practical interests of Hegel and his desire to jettison the idea of a completely objective God, we also must be able to see how that reading can explain, or at least relate to, Hegel’s specifically social and political ideal and the linkage Hegel draws between God and the communal life of man. Certainly,
Platonism can be used to motivate certain social and political schemes; Plato’s *Republic* is an obvious case in point. Yet Halfwassen himself says little on the issue, and we would want to know more specifically what Hegel regards as the precise connection between his absolute, on the one hand, and, on the other, society and politics. Perhaps Halfwassen’s view that Hegel incorporates Numenius and Eusebius’s idea that the reconciliation of fallen man with his higher divine nature requires an historical process might here be of service. Accordingly, man’s communal life over the course of history might be a moment or element of the divine process of self-alienation and reconciliation. And perhaps, even further, this scheme could reasonably be linked not just to man’s social and historical life, but specifically to the life of republican civic virtue, which we have seen Hegel extol and associate in particular with divinity. This line of interpretation is available to the Platonic reading and suggests that the practical orientation of the young Hegel and his subversion of religious orthodoxy is at least not antithetical to that reading. We will return to these issues in section 3 below, after we consider the textual evidence in favor of the Platonic reading.

§ 2. Evidence for the Platonic Interpretation

There is actually a great deal of evidence from Hegel’s Frankfurt and early Jena writings to support the Platonic reading of Hegel’s idea of the absolute, and Halfwassen does a good job marshalling it. We shall consider only the most cogent, starting with Hegel’s Frankfurt manuscripts.
2.1. Frankfurt

Halfwassen is keen to point out that while the Frankfurt Hegel fails to explicitly mention and endorse such key notions as Plato’s “ideas” or “forms” and “intellectual intuition” or an “intuitive intellect,” he does employ a lot of stock phrases, images, and metaphors that certainly seem to reveal the influence of the Platonic tradition. Two brief examples are worth mentioning to give some indication of the parallels.

The first is Hegel’s characterization of man’s awareness of the spirit of God as “his own inflammability [that] takes fire [so that] he burns with a flame that is his own” (SC 1: 382; 266). The simile appears to have been borrowed directly from a fragment of the Middle-Platonist Numenius cited by Eusebius in The Preparation for the Gospel, where the subject is the mode in which the Logos arises out of the primary Nous and the manner in which the latter communicates its knowledge to the former, so that the Logos’s cognition renders it identical to the first God.\textsuperscript{45} The second example is Hegel’s employment of the Trinitarian formula “the unified [das Einige], the modification (separation), and the developed reunification in life and spirit (not in the concept)” (SC 1: 390; 274), a formula he uses to designate the process of spirit and

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Halfwassen, Hegel und der Spätantike Neuplatonismus, pp. 53-5. Christopher Stead, in Philosophy in Christian Antiquity, p. 71, makes an interesting and related point. Regarding the issue of God’s producing his own Logos “from his substance,” both Neoplatonists and Christians maintain that the original divinity suffers no loss in the process, “just as a lighted torch is not cooled when it kindles another.” The image of the torch passing on its light to another torch, an image that Numenius uses and that Hegel seems to have in mind, is thus a common one to ancient pagan and Christian Platonism and is designed to make two points: (1) the identity in intellectual intuition between God and the Logos, and (2) the fact that God is not weakened or diminished by this relation. According to thinkers like Numenius, the same basic relation also obtains between God (and the Logos) and man.
that appears to signify the influence of Platonism, Middle-and-Neoplatonism in particular.\textsuperscript{46}

We might supplement Halfwassen’s insights with a consideration he does not explicitly bring forth. Even the very term “spirit” suggests Hegel’s adherence to the Platonic and Christian Platonic traditions. As A.H. Armstrong points out in his article on “Christianity in Relation to Later Platonism,” Platonically influenced early Christian thinkers, in insistently repeating the scriptural “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth,”\textsuperscript{47} were referring to God thusly as the divine Nous of ancient Platonism. The passage is a particular favorite of the second-century Christian Platonist Origen, and it is also one of Hegel’s (cf. SC 1: 372, 381, 382; 255, 265, 266). It is not at all implausible, then, that Hegel intends the same basic idea as some of these early Christian Platonists, particularly given the importance of the Gospel of John common to them and to Hegel. Moreover, though of course it would soon be declared officially unorthodox and in violation of the inferior and sinful nature of man vis-à-vis the divinity, early Christian Platonists such as Origen, in asserting that the divine spirit must be worshipped “in spirit,” interpret this to mean that there is an eternal, divine-like aspect of man’s being. And this is also precisely Hegel’s view, according to the Platonic reading. Hegel’s talk, then, of God as spirit, being worshipped in spirit, deliberately harkens back to the Platonic discourse of several of the Patristic thinkers and contemporaneous pagan Platonists.

\textsuperscript{46}Cf. Hegel’s repetition of the formula in the so-called “Love” fragment: “the unified, the separated, and the reunified” (Love 1: 249; 308).

\textsuperscript{47}John 4.24.
One stock phrase of the Platonic tradition that is central to Halfwassen’s Platonic reading of Hegel is the “Logos.” In “The Spirit of Christianity” Hegel includes an interpretation of the Logos doctrine from the exordium of the Gospel of John.\footnote{Hegel provides a crabbed and condensed account of the first fifteen verses of John’s Gospel at (SC 1: 373-5; 257-9). The only verses he repudiates, that he cannot find an adequate and faithful rendering for in terms of his own philosophy, are 14 and 15; here the divine Logos appears as an \textit{individual} (viz., Jesus) and as such is hallowed and prophesied by John the Baptist.
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Here are some of Hegel’s words, which analyze John 1.3-4: “by the Logos all things are made; the world is … an emanation, a part of the infinite partitioning, though … in the one who partitions ad infinitum, there is life. The single entity, the restricted entity, … is yet a branch of the infinite tree of life” (SC 1: 374; 258). For Halfwassen, what Hegel is getting at here is the ancient Platonic idea of the self-dividing Logos that creates the universe as a single living being penetrated throughout by the World-Soul.\footnote{Halfwassen, \textit{Hegel und der Spätantike Neuplatonismus}, p. 69.}

Moreover, when Hegel says, in thinking about John 1.1-2, that “God and the Logos are only different in that God is matter in the form of the Logos: the Logos itself is with God; both are one” (SC 1: 374; 257-8), and elaborates by commenting that God and the Logos are distinct only for “reflection” (SC 1: 374; 257) or the “understanding” (SC 1: 373; 256), which fails to grasp the divine “with the
depths of … spirit” (ibid), Halfwassen takes this to mean that Hegel distinguishes between the first God and the second God, just as the ancient Platonists did.\(^\text{50}\)

A final bit of evidence from Hegel’s Frankfurt writings for the Platonic interpretation comes from Hegel’s brief commentary on Matthew 18.1 ff. and the linkage Hegel forges between it and Plato’s idea of the mind’s grasping of true being, or the forms.\(^\text{51}\) The particular passage that interests Hegel is Matthew 18.10, where Jesus warns: “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones [i.e., any child]; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.”\(^\text{52}\) According to Hegel, the import of Jesus’s words is akin to something that Plato says:

In order to represent spirit, the divine, outside of its restriction and the close association of the restricted [i.e., the body] with the living one, Plato separates the pure living being and the limited being through the difference of time. He allows the pure spirits to have lived wholly in the intuition of the divine and to be the same in their later life on earth, except that there they have only a darkened consciousness of that [earlier] heavenly vision. In a different way Jesus here [i.e., in Matthew 18.1 ff.] separates and unites the nature, the divinity, of spirit and the restriction. As an angel, the childlike spirit is represented not simply as in God without all reality, without existence of its own, but as at the same time a son of God, a particular. The opposition of intuiting and intuited, i.e., of subject and object, disappears in the intuition itself. Their difference is only a possibility of separation … But what is lost, what has severed itself [was sich entzweit hat], is re-won through the return to unity, to becoming as children again (SC 1: 386; 270).

Though unfortunately Hegel does not specify where in Plato’s corpus he draws this characterization, it seems likely that he has in mind two places: Socrates’s great

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\(^{50}\) Halfwassen, *Hegel und der Spätantike Neuplatonismus*, pp. 68-69.

\(^{51}\) For Halfwassen’s analysis of Hegel’s commentary, see *Hegel und der Spätantike Neuplatonismus*, pp. 51-2.

\(^{52}\) The translation I’ve used is that of the *New Revised Standard Version* from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. 
Second Speech in defense of love in the *Phaedrus* and, in Book X of *The Republic*, Plato’s depiction of “the pure state [of the soul] which reason reveals to us.”\(^{53}\) The general drift of Plato’s view, articulated most clearly in those places, so far as it concerns us is that the pure soul, in its discarnate state, prior to its fall and incarnation, has an encounter, immediate vision, and apprehension of the forms “above the heavens.” This super-intense intuition of truth and being itself is far from a passive imprinting; it is an active acquisition, which Plato sometimes captures in metaphors involving nutrition and sex. Setting aside Plato’s views on the variation of vision across the spectrum of souls and the complexities of the wanderings of the discarnate soul, this is the way that our souls experience reality in their purest, most discarnate state, when free from the body and occupied with purely rational desires. As such, despite the very serious differences between the experience of mortals and that of the gods, due to the conflicts and shortcomings of the former, pure souls share (to varying degrees) in the divine vision. In the process of incarnation, however, our super-intense vision is lost. All that remains within our normal, incarnate seeing and discursive knowing is an unconscious memory of our earlier primal intuition of the forms, which can be raised to a somewhat less darkened memory through the transformative properties of the process of love and the experience of beauty. Our former, glorious vision can never be fully recovered in our incarnate state. Only after a series of transmigrations and purifications even in its discarnate state can it return to its original, pure vision of true being.

\(^{53}\) 611c. [The Stephanus page]
Such is the Orphic-inspired, Platonic narrative that Hegel likens Jesus’s thought to, and by extension, his own. Hegel’s comparison in the above passage of Plato and Jesus is somewhat confusing in that the historical Plato only asserts that the pure soul has a direct encounter with the forms; he says nothing about any vision of God in his mythological narratives. The only divinities that Plato mentions in those passages that deal with the embodiment narrative are those that escort the discarnate soul in its wanderings and accompany it during its activity of intuiting the forms. We must keep in mind, though, that Hegel is even at this time in his life, as Halfwassen’s research shows, well aware of developments in the Platonic tradition where the forms, or the intelligible world, become inseparable from the divine mind or God. It is not implausible to conclude, therefore, that Hegel ascribes in the passage we are considering, however seriously he intends it as an interpretation of the historical Plato, this later Platonic belief to Plato himself. We must keep this in mind in interpreting his comparison of Plato and Jesus.

On Hegel’s reading the chief disparity between Plato and Jesus is that Jesus rejects the temporal dimension of the Platonic narrative as misleading, or metaphorical at best.\(^5\) Whereas “Plato separates the pure living being and the restricted being through the difference of time,” Jesus holds that the spirit of man always beholds God himself even during its embodied existence. This can only be explained in terms of an unconscious beholding: thus, Hegel says, “the being and

\(^5\) That Plato himself intends this temporal dimension of his narrative to be figurative is suggested by the \textit{Timaeus}, though it is an issue within Plato scholarship proper precisely what Plato’s views are in that later dialogue and whether or not they have undergone a change from the earlier dialogues of the \textit{Phaedrus} and \textit{The Republic}, wherein temporal language is prominent. We shall here stick to Hegel’s literal reading of Plato.
doing of the angels is an eternal intuition of God” (SC 1: 386; 270), an intuition which is “the unconscious, the undeveloped unity, the being and life in God” (ibid).

It would seem that Hegel’s point here is the same made by the reputed founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus: “If we must dare, contrary to the opinions of others, clearly to state what seems to us to be the case, then it is as follows: even our [particular] soul has not come down entirely, but something of it always remains within the intelligible world.”

The eternal model of each one of our human selves exists within divine thought at the same time that it is within ourselves. If we are always in God, though, why do we not perceive this? Again, Plotinus’s reply is apt: “Not everything in the soul is immediately perceptible; rather, it comes through to ‘us’ when it reaches perception. Yet as long as a part of our soul is active but does not communicate [this fact] to the perceptual apparatus, then the activity does not reach the entire soul.”

According to Halfwassen’s admittedly plausible interpretation, this is the doctrine Hegel attributes to Jesus, and this is Hegel’s own doctrine. Both hold that the spirit of man, as a son of God, eternally beholds the divine mind and its contents in such a way that all opposition between man and God disappears: their difference is a mere “possibility of separation,” as Hegel says. And even that separation and the

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55 Enneads, IV 8, 8, 1-3 (where IV = number of the Ennead; 8 = number of the chapter in that Ennead, 8 = number of the chapter of this treatise, 1-3 = lines of this chapter as printed in the majority of modern editions). Plotinus is of course not the first to articulate this modification, but he articulates it well.

56 Ibid, V 1, 12, 5-8. Accordingly, Plotinus interprets Plato’s doctrine of recollection not as a temporal recovery of what the soul cognized in the past, but rather as an awakening of what its true self eternally cognizes. This corresponds to the ascent to the divine that completes the life-course of God from unity, to disunion, to reunion that we saw articulated in the Platonic interpretation of Hegel.

57 A related passage is worth citing: “The mountain and the eye which sees it are object and subject, but between man and God, between spirit and spirit, there is no such cleft of objectivity; one is to the other an other only in that one cognizes [erkennen] the other” (SC 1: 381; 265). This passage more than others seems to bring out the idea that just as the spirit of man has God and the world of the forms as the
embodiment of man’s spirit, to the extent that it does occur, does not undermine the underlying fact that the self at its deepest level always remains in God, and it does not rend asunder the eternal vision. If it did, it would be a temporally prior vision, and that is precisely the strictly Platonic notion—though again, perhaps Plato only intends it as a metaphor—that Hegel and (on Hegel’s reading) Jesus is seeking to modify.

2.2. Jena

When we move to consider Hegel’s early Jena writings, we see further references to Plato that appear to strongly support the Platonic reading. Consider first Hegel’s direct positive reference within the context of his critique of Fichte’s account of reason in “Faith and Knowledge” to Plato’s cosmogony.\(^5\) Hegel laments the fact that in Fichte philosophy “no longer recognizes the truth of what Plato says about the world, that God’s reason gave birth to it as a blessed god” (Faith 2: 422; 180). Such is the case because for Fichte reason is something without any intrinsic content. Its essential nature is negative, in that its vocation is to completely subordinate the world to itself, to overcome its otherness, a task that Fichte thinks it can never fully carry out. For Fichte reason does not produce the world as a blessed god, as Plato and as Hegel think that God’s reason does. An echo of the same Platonically based critique, this time of Kant’s conception of reason, occurs earlier in “Faith and Knowledge:” for Kant,

\[\text{[t]he theoretical reason … lets the understanding give it the manifold which it has only to regulate; it makes no claim to an autonomous dignity, no claim to beget the Son out of itself. We must leave it to its}\]

\(^5\) Halfwassen does not discuss these passages. But, since they seem good support for his Platonic reading, I’ve decided to include an exposition of them from his interpretative standpoint.
own emptiness and the unworthiness that comes from its being able to put up with this dualism of a pure unity of reason and a manifold of the understanding, and from its not feeling any need for the middle and for immanent cognition (Faith 2: 318; 82).

The reference here to the world, inclusive of both nature proper and finite spirit (understanding), as “the Son” clearly indicates some form of Trinitarianism. Setting aside the nature of that Trinitarianism and any specific emphasis on the difference between theoretical and practical reason, it seems clear that the charge Hegel levels here against Kant is fundamentally the same as that which he levels, drawing upon Plato, against Fichte, and so we get the same basic Platonic image of God’s reason giving birth to the world as a blessed god.

The reference to Plato’s idea of God’s reason producing the world as a blessed god is to his *Timaeus*, in particular to Stephanus page 34b of that work.59 We shall now try to fill out some of the relevant ideas of the *Timaeus* so as to better make sense of the idea that Hegel seems to borrow from Plato.60

According to the general structure of Plato’s *Timaeus*, many of whose details remain vague and ambiguous and have lent themselves to variegated interpretations

59 In describing the divine craftsman or demiurge’s creation of the unique universe as one living thing composed of both body and soul, Plato remarks:

Applying this entire train of reasoning to the god that was yet to be [i.e., the universe], the eternal god [i.e., the demiurge] made it smooth and even all over, equal from the center, a whole and complete body in itself, but also made up of complete bodies. In its center he set a soul, which he extended throughout the whole body, and with which he then covered the body outside. And he set it to turn in a circle, a single solitary universe, whose very excellence enables it to keep its own company without requiring anything else. For its knowledge of and friendship with itself is enough. *All this, then, explains why this world which he begat for himself is a blessed god* (my emphasis).

We shall try to explain below the import of these ideas only in enough detail as is requisite for our purposes, keeping in mind of course that we are ultimately concerned with Plato as Hegel understood him, or in terms of how Hegel appears to adapt his thought, and not necessarily with the most accurate depiction of Plato’s own thought.

60 The following summary is indebted to F.M. Cornford’s commentary on the *Timaeus, Plato’s Cosmology*. 
over the centuries, there is an eternal, divine, and rational creator god—Plato also refers to him as a “craftsman,” or “demiurge”—who apparently resides outside of the universe and who, using the timelessly eternal, unchanging forms as patterns, imposes reason and structure on what Plato calls a “receptacle,” a kind of featureless plastic stuff, underlying the objects of the world and itself in continuous flux. The latter material, on which the deliberate constructive activity of the divine craftsmen works, preexists the demiurge’s activities and is essentially chaotic. Plato describes it at one point as “space,” but it is space in which disorderly motion is occurring. Plato’s basic idea about it is that it accounts for the arbitrariness of the universe, i.e., for those factors in the world which have no explanation and that in fact restrict the creative capacities of the demiurge.61 Regarding the eternal model that the creator god looks toward in shaping this brute stuff into the universe with which we are familiar, Plato characterizes it as the eternal or intelligible living creature that contains within itself all the intelligible living creatures. It is thus a complex form or system of forms that transcends yet contains within itself as parts the forms of the totality of all the subordinate species, the members of which reside in the perceptible world. The precise relationship of this grand form of life to the realm of forms as a whole is uncertain. Its function, however, is perfectly clear, and that is to act as the unique, perfect, and eternal model for the demiurge’s construction of the single perceptible universe, not itself a part of a larger whole, a universe whose body is fundamentally composed of a certain geometrical proportion of the total quantity of the four

61 This indicates that Plato’s creator-god is not equivalent to the omnipotent God of (what came to be) the orthodox Judeo-Christian tradition who creates the world from nothing.
elementary constituents, earth, air, fire, and water,\textsuperscript{62} has a spherical shape, a series of concentric circles, and revolves on its axis, and whose soul, which has an existence midway between the real being of immutable and eternal things and the becoming of sensible things, and so partakes of both worlds, is engaged in a continuous process of thought about both the intelligible and the sensible realm.\textsuperscript{63} The World-Soul extends throughout the body of the cosmos from center to circumference, and its judgments and beliefs directed toward the perceptible world are responsible for the broadest motions of the celestial mechanism, e.g., those of the outermost of the armillary sphere over which the fixed stars are to be scattered, those of the seven inner circles revolving at different speeds in the opposite direction, in which the five planets, the sun, and the moon are to be placed, and that of the center of the cosmos, which is where the earth is to be situated. The dialogue proceeds to discuss how the demiurge fashions in their proper places the heavenly beings as everlasting gods composed of body and soul and then delegates to them the task of creating the rest of the living beings, including man.\textsuperscript{64} On this general picture, coupled with the Pythagorean idea of mathematical relationships as the foundation for cosmic order, the objects correlative to the other special sciences (e.g., the objects of physics, chemistry, and physiology) are engendered. Thus, in a very rough form, is the outline of how according to Plato, and

\textsuperscript{62} Plato reduces the four elements to the four regular geometrical figures: the cube (earth), the octahedron (air), the pyramid (fire), and the icosahedron (water).

\textsuperscript{63} It can have knowledge of the objects of the former and true opinion of those of the latter.

\textsuperscript{64} The demiurge himself fashions, with the remnants of the original ingredients employed in compounding the World-Soul, the immortal, rational part of the individual souls that are to be first incarnated in human form. He distributes each such rational part to each star. Then, he sows them like seeds in the earth and the planets. The subordinate divinities, viz., the heavenly beings, must add the body and mortal parts of the soul.
in the words of Hegel, reason gives birth as to a blessed god to the single living being, containing within itself all living beings, that is our universe.

Exactly how much of this scheme and the rest of its details does Hegel accept? Certainly not the details: those are rooted in an antiquated, geocentric cosmology and an associated strain of ancient religiosity (extending well into and beyond the late ancient world) according to which the descent from and re-ascent to the divine literally follows spatial lines: from the most ethereal, outermost edge of the universe to the least heavenly centerpoint (the Earth) and back again. Also, we must keep in mind that Plato’s *Timaeus* is one of the most commented on philosophical works in history, and that in the writings of later Platonists it often undergoes significant transformations. For example, there is ample precedent among several late ancient Platonists for interpreting *Timaeus* 34b and surrounding passages in terms of the divine Logos (in the form of the World-Soul) generating the world.\(^{65}\) And equally importantly, sometimes the late ancient Platonists themselves use the shorthand description of intellect—which on Halfwassen’s exposition above corresponds to the first God—rather than the Logos or the World-Soul creating the world.\(^{66}\) That there are these later Platonic transformations of the literal *Timaeus* doctrine, some of which were surely known to the young Hegel, means that he may have some of them in mind in “Faith and Knowledge” when he sides with Plato against Kant and Fichte. We musn’t suppose that Hegel stringently distinguishes between Plato and later Middle

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\(^{65}\) See, for instance, *Enneads* IV.4.32 and IV.8.1. For an interesting discussion that takes into account Plotinus’s reading of the relevant *Timaeus* passages, see Gary M. Gurtler’s “Sympathy: Stoic Materialism and the Platonic Soul.”

\(^{66}\) See *Enneads* III.2.2 in particular. In general, Plotinus’s two treatises on providence (*Enneads* III.2 and III.3) speak of creation in this way, as his aims in them do not require the precision he displays elsewhere.
and Neoplatonic accretions: to do so would overlook the fact that until well into the
nineteenth century almost no interpreter of Plato clearly distinguished in any
systematic way between Plato’s doctrines and those produced in the tradition of
philosophers he spawned, much less distinguished between various phases in the
doctrinal development of the historical Plato. Were Hegel to seamlessly blend
veritable Platonic doctrines with what we recognize to be later Middle Platonic and
Neoplatonic ones, that would be entirely in line with the predominant trend in the
history of Plato interpretation, both supportive and detractive, and in the order of his
day.67

For these reasons it seems to me entirely plausible to suppose that in Hegel’s
reference to Plato he has the following in mind: (1) even though Plato himself gives no
ground for supposing that the divine reason creates the formal paradigms it uses in
creation, or even that the subjective and objective side of this relationship mutually
entail one another in an all-encompassing, timeless, and contemplative act, as would
become part of the Platonic tradition beginning with the Middle Platonists, Hegel
reads Plato in this way and agrees with him. (2) Even though Hegel follows Plato in
only speaking of reason’s giving birth to the cosmos as a blessed god, he is likely
speaking loosely, as do many of the ancient Platonists in their individual statements.
It is entirely plausible that he accepts the more precise idea that it is the Logos, or the
second God, that produces the world.

67 The point is not that Hegel likely recognizes no doctrinal differences between Plato and later
Platonists—not even the later Platonists defended that robust thesis—, but rather that he is likely not
very concerned with the contemporary scholarly endeavor to precisely delineate the various stages in
the history of Platonism and is probably willing to go along with at least some of the late ancient
Platonic interpretations of Plato’s views.
A final, important series of references to Plato and Platonism which we must consider occurs in an early Jena essay “On the Relationship of the Philosophy of Nature to Philosophy in General.” First, the essay makes a passing reference to the Platonic notions of the eternal ideas and the divine intellect that contemplates them: “God exists … for the sake of his absolute nature, as the idea of all ideas—the idea which of itself comprehends absolute reality within itself immediately” (Phil.Nat. 4: 270; 373). It even refers to what Hegel calls the “[r]ue knowledge [that] turns away

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68 As H.S. Harris’s notes to the English translation clarify, there has been a great dispute about the authorship of this essay that goes back to the preparation by Hegel’s friends of the first edition of his collected works. After starting out as friends at the Tübingen Stift, corresponding cordially after Hegel’s graduation, and working together on Schelling’s “brainchild,” The Critical Journal of Philosophy, from 1800 to the early months of 1803, Hegel and Schelling had a severe fallout not too long thereafter. With such animosity between them, it should perhaps come as no surprise that later in life there would be debate surrounding the authorship of some of the earlier essays they jointly published and sometimes even jointly wrote. “The Philosophy of Nature” is one of those disputed essays. Long after the essay had been written, sometime in the 1820s, Hegel reported to his friend K.L. Michelet and others that the essay was his; yet, in the draft of Hegel’s curriculum vitae of 1804, he did not claim authorship at that time. The conclusion we should draw, Harris asserts, is that Schelling was the original author. But, Harris immediately points out, Schelling’s assertion in 1838 that “there is not a single letter from Hegel’s pen in the essay, indeed he did not even see it before it was printed,” must certainly be false: Hegel was the man in charge of seeing the Journal through the press, and there is evidence that he devoted his editorial attention to that essay in particular. What are we to conclude? Setting aside as implausible the idea that in the 1820s Hegel lied outright, if for no other reason the simple fact, as Harris notes, that there is no other warrant in the published record for Hegel’s lying, and assuming that Hegel’s memories in the 1820s were less misty than those of Schelling in the late 1830s (and others from Schelling in the early 1840s), Harris infers that “at the very least, he [i.e., Hegel] edited the essay stylistically” (Between Kant and Hegel, p. 365). Furthermore, Harris thinks that, we must suppose that the content reflects his [i.e., Hegel’s] influence upon Schelling in conversation. And finally, of course, there is the basic fact that the Identity Philosophy was common to both of them. Whatever the grounds for Hegel’s claims to authorship in the 1820s, there is no doubt that he wanted his students to regard the essay as a document of his spiritual evolution (and not to try to separate his pen from Schelling’s here (Ibid., pp. 365-6).

Admittedly, and this is a point Harris himself makes, there can be no definitive resolution to the problem of the authorship of “The Philosophy of Nature;” however, as Harris’s judicious analysis demonstrates, there is little danger in supposing that at least much of the contents of the essay reflect Hegel’s own ideas. I shall assume this in drawing upon the essay in what follows in order to bolster as much as possible the Platonic interpretation. Again, Halfwassen himself does not utilize the essay to support his reading of Hegel, but I think that some of its passages can plausibly be seen as confirmation of it.

69 Hegel makes his point here negatively in the sense of critiquing what some other philosophers fail to recognize, but his own positive view is evident in the text. His conception of God as the idea of all ideas comes out elsewhere in “The Philosophy of Nature” and in his other early Jena writings in terms
from the mere mirroring [Widerschein] of the infinite in the finite towards the ‘in-itself’ or the primordial knowledge,” a knowledge he identifies with “the soul[’s] being at home in the world of ideas, and dwelling in it as in its own domain” (Phil.Nat. 4: 275-6; 378-9). In this latter statement we can detect Hegel’s use of the Platonic ideas of the intelligible realm of the forms, the soul’s affinity to it, the “in-itself” or the “infinite” (which Hegel also calls here the “pure universal,” the “essence,” the “immortal Being,” and the “highest Good” (ibid.)) as equivalent to a super-intense kind of intellection (“primordial knowledge”), and, finally, the sensible world (“the finite”) as the mere mirroring or reflection of the realm of ideas.70

Then, after enthusiastically citing Plato’s claims in the Phaedo that the soul must withdraw from the body and dwell by itself, that death is equivalent to the soul’s release from the body and its concerns, and that true philosophers are those who most strive for death,71 we get this wonderful imagery of “the stages through which it [i.e.,

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70 Hegel’s apparent acceptance of Plato’s theory of ideas is not isolated to the “Philosophy of Nature” essay. For instance, in the Jacobi section of “Faith and Knowledge,” in defense of Spinoza against Jacobi’s assault, Hegel makes explicit that one thing he likes about Spinoza’s philosophy is its conception of timeless eternity and the way in which it affirms “the rational concept in which there is no before and no after, and everything is necessary and simultaneous … [and in which] finitude and time and succession perish in the highest idea, the idea of the eternal” (Faith 2: 343; 105). Cf. (Faith 2: 348; 109), (Faith 2: 351; 113), (Faith 2: 429; 186), (Diff. 2: 71; 134), and (Intro. 2: 171; 275), where Hegel says that criticism, regardless of the domain of art or science it operates in, requires “a standard derived … from the eternal and unchangeable model [Urbild] of what really is [die Sache selbst].”

71 Hegel cites an abbreviated version of Phaedo 67c-d, giving the actual page number of the Bipontine edition of Plato’s works containing the Latin translations of Marsilio Ficino:

“Purification [of the soul],” says Plato (Phaedo, p. 152), “consists in separating the soul as much as possible from the body, and accustoming it to gather and withdraw itself into itself on all sides away from the body, and to dwell by itself as much as
the soul] attains purification” (Phil.Nat. 4: 276; 379), beginning with “longing” (ibid), and ending with,

the final recognition that it must turn [back] to the eternal Father. Even the King of the gods cannot loosen the indissoluble chain; but he allows the soul to rejoice over the lost good in the images which the beam of eternal light, through the soul’s mediation, wrests from the dark womb of the deep (Phil.Nat. 4: 276; 380; my emphasis).

Now, the “eternal Father,” the “King of the gods,” Hegel here identifies with the highest good, and the highest good he claims earlier is just the infinite, which, given what we’ve seen is plausibly interpreted as the divine intellect eternally unified with the world of ideas. The comment that even the King of the gods cannot loosen the chain would seem to refer to the necessary procession of levels of reality from the highest level, intellect, to what Hegel conceives of as images of the eternal light in the womb of the deep. The concept of the womb of the deep (illuminated by the eternal light) likely refers to matter; matter is continually identified with darkness in the Platonic tradition. And the images of eternity in matter seem to designate bodies. This may be taken to be supported by Hegel’s reference to the notion of body in the paragraph immediately preceding the imagery we are investigating, where he says that “the natural is separated from the divine only in semblance, [ ] the body is only body as distinct from the soul in an incomplete cognition, but [ ] in the ‘in-itself’ the body is the same as the soul” (Phil.Nat. 4: 276; 379). Body does not involve a principle independent from soul or from what soul is in its essence united with. Thus body and

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possible. *Death* is what we call this release of the soul from the body. Those who strive the most for this release are genuine lovers of wisdom” (Phil.Nat. 4: 276; 379).

72 Those who recognize this truth, which derives from an “intuition of the ‘in-itself’ … will practice most the dying of that death, so praised by Socrates, which is the entrance to eternal freedom and true life” (ibid).
soul are really “the same.” However, it is also the case that for a complete cognition and an “intuition of the ‘in-itself’” (ibid) soul is higher than body because it is responsible for the “mediation” of the eternal ideas and matter, and thus the generator of body—images of ideas—in the first place. Reading the passages in this way, Hegel would seem to embrace many of the key points of the Platonic interpretation.

Besides these direct references to Plato and Platonic ideas, there is one other main source of evidence in favor of the Platonic interpretation of the young Hegel’s absolute: Hegel’s seeming embrace of Kant’s idea of an intuitive intellect, which as we saw above, is perhaps the key component of the Platonic interpretation. We will conclude this section of the chapter with a brief consideration of the passages in which Hegel does indeed seem to accept Kant’s notion of an intuitive intellect.

In “Faith and Knowledge” Hegel identifies Kant’s “idea of [the] archetypal intuitive intellect,” which is equivalent with the late ancient Platonic divine mind, with the “Idea of the transcendental imagination” (Faith 2: 325; 89), and “the imagination,” Hegel says, “is nothing but reason itself” (Faith 2: 308; 73)—“reason” being for the early Hegel another term for the absolute. In fact it is quite natural to read Hegel’s entire discussion of Kant in “Faith and Knowledge” in terms of his only lamenting the fact that Kant does not accord his own idea of an intuitive intellect a constitutive status.

In the “Difference” essay, he praises Kant’s treatment of nature in the Critique of the Power of Judgment because of the latter’s recognition of nature’s internal

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73 On the similarity of Kant’s notion of the intuitive intellect to the divine mind of the Platonic tradition, see Düsing, Ästhetische Einbildungskraft und Intuitiver Verstand, especially pp. 117-19.
74 Cf. (Diff. 2: 101; 160-61).
purposiveness, noting in particular the connection of this organic view of nature with
the idea of a “sensuous understanding” [sinnlicher Verstand] (Diff. 2: 103; 163).
Again, his objection to Kant’s position here seems chiefly that Kant denies that we can
have knowledge of these things. For Kant, we require the postulate of an intuitive
intellect, but it is merely a regulative idea of our faculty of reason. Moreover, we,
lacking such knowledge and therefore lacking the perspective of an intuitive intellect,
can never achieve a coherence between our mechanical mode of explanation
(proceeding from parts to whole) and a teleological mode of explanation (going from
whole to parts), a coherence that would indeed exist from the point of view of a
sensuous intellect. Concerning these features of the Critical philosophy, Hegel
remarks that they are “on a most subordinate, non-rational plane because they posit
human reason in strict opposition to absolute reason” (ibid). “All the same,” Hegel
continues, “they do rise to the idea of a sensuous intellect, and sensuous intellect is
reason” (ibid).

Regarding the intuitive intellect in Kant’s philosophy, then, Kant’s problem,
from Hegel’s perspective, is thus threefold: (1) he has not “raised the necessary
supreme idea of a sensuous intellect to reality” (Diff. 2: 104; 163), i.e., he has
relegated its status to a mere idea; (2) he draws an absolute ontological distinction
between the divine mind and man; and consequently (3) he regards the convergence of
the mechanism of nature and the purposiveness of nature as in the end unsubstantiated,
despite the fact that we have to conceive of (at least certain aspects of) nature in both
ways. On Hegel’s view, by contrast, the idea of the divine understanding is no mere
idea; it really exists, and, he thinks, we can know that it exists. Moreover, its
existence is intimately tied to the nature of man and his reason, presumably along the lines of the Platonic (more specifically, Plotinian) interpretation we saw above: man is equivalent in the deepest part of his nature to the divine Logos and the first God, and he can return to his original, pure nature through bringing to consciousness his own intellectual intuition.

We needn’t merely bring forth evidence from Hegel’s critique of Kant’s philosophy in order to bolster the idea of Hegel’s acceptance of the traditional, Platonic notion of intellectual intuition. For instance, in the “Skepticism” essay, directed against Schulze’s modern doctrine of skepticism and its basis in his conception of thinking, Hegel repudiates what he refers to as Schulze’s “distortion” of the doctrine of “the so-called innate concepts,” or “reason,” in the philosophies of Plato, Spinoza, Descartes, and Leibniz, and in the process seems to reveal his adherence to the traditional Platonic idea of the divine understanding. According to Schulze’s reconstruction of their basic argument in favor of the rational, (a) there are subjective concepts, in themselves without reality; then (b) there is reality itself lying outside of them; thus (c) the issue arises of how the two come together; and (d) the proof of the truth of those concepts is given by means of a being, viz., God, that is alien to both the concepts and reality but nonetheless guarantees their coincidence (Skep. 2: 263; 348). Hegel completely rejects this chain of reasoning as representative of his own view of reason and as a distortion of those philosophers’ positions. Rather, they and Hegel merely recognize the reality of “the understanding of God, in which actuality and possibility are one” (ibid), and link that divine understanding
inextricably with human reason. Here, Hegel suggests that he embraces the idea of the divine intellect, but rejects its complete alienation from man. This is the only sense in which he accepts the notion of innate concepts: the deepest, rational layer of man’s thinking is one in which thought and being are inseparable, for it is in fact inseparable from God’s mind. “[T]he so-called innate concepts” of man, that is to say, are inseparable from “the eternal and real cognitions of God”: “the two are one and the same thing” (Skep. 2: 264-5; 349). God does not implant a separate set of concepts in man’s mind so as to ensure the overall veridicality of man’s thinking with the world. Rather, the ground-level of man’s thinking is identical with God’s thoughts, or divine ideas. Such at least is the most natural reading of the above passages.

§ 3. Critique of the Platonic Interpretation

We’ve spent a good amount of time this chapter trying to present as strong a case as possible, drawing upon Halfwassen’s detailed analysis and supplementing it with additional considerations, for the Platonic interpretation of Hegel’s absolute. We have done so because, as I hope is by now clear, it is a compelling interpretation of the gist of the young Hegel’s thought, with a great deal of evidence in its favor, and it should not be lightly bypassed, regardless of how unfashionable it may be to a contemporary Anglophone audience. Nonetheless, I want now to give some reasons

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75 Whether or not Hegel interprets or even tries to interpret those philosophers correctly is outside the scope of our concerns.
why, despite its initial persuasiveness, we should reject it as an interpretation of Hegel. I’ve arranged those reasons in three different categories.

1). On closer inspection we can see that many of the passages that initially seem to support the Platonic reading do not in fact do so. For example, recall Halfwassen’s analysis of the Logos passage in Hegel’s “The Spirit of Christianity.” He argues that in it Hegel (a) distinguishes between God and the Logos, i.e., the first and the second Gods, and (b) embraces the Platonic idea of the Logos as the creator-god. The latter point might plausibly be supported by the passage, but if we look closely at Hegel’s words in the key passage that Halfwassen uses, we will see that (a) finds no support whatsoever: Hegel clearly states that God is “matter [Stoff] in the form of the Logos;” otherwise, “both are one” (SC 1: 374; 258; my emphasis). Since Hegel mentions no other God, by what right can we conclude that he nonetheless affirms the existence of another God equivalent to the first, entirely transcendent God of the Platonic scheme?

Here’s another example. Remember Halfwassen’s interpretation of Hegel’s exegesis of Matthew 18.1ff. He argues that for Hegel the child’s initial, unconscious vision of God refers to the unconscious intellectual intuition that every man has of God according to the Platonic tradition, and that the return to unity, to becoming again as children, stands for the inward “recollection” of that primordial vision. But take a look at a similar passage in Hegel’s “Natural Law” essay, in which the discussion is clearly about the process of the child’s education or socialization into the ethical life of its people:
...the living principle is the development of ethical life, and education is by definition the emergent and progressive sublation of the negative or subjective. For the child, as the potential form of an ethical individual, is a subjective or negative being whose growth to maturity marks the end of this form, and whose education is the correction or suppression of it. But the positive and the essence of the child is that it is nourished at the breast of universal ethical life, lives at first in the absolute intuition of that life as an alien being [i.e., a God], increasingly comprehends it, and so becomes part of the universal spirit. It follow automatically that ... as far as ethical life is concerned, the words of the wisest men of antiquity are alone true: the ethical consists in living in accordance with the customs or ethics [Sitten] of one’s country. ... [Moreover,] in the form of universality and cognition, [the customs ought] also [to] present [themselves] as a system of legislation—so that this system perfectly expresses reality, or the living customs of the present. ... But this ideality of customs and their form of universality in the laws must also ... in turn be perfectly united with the form of particularity, so that the ideality as such may take on a pure and absolute shape, and thus be perceived and worshipped as the god of the people; and this perception itself must in turn have its active expression and joyful movement in a cult (NL 2: 507-8; 162-3).

With respect to the first half of this passage, the only thing missing is the Platonic and Christian-Trinitarian language and references present in “The Spirit of Christianity;” otherwise, it speaks of the same process of undeveloped unity, development, and reunion as we find everywhere in “The Spirit of Christianity” and Hegel’s other Frankfurt writings. In fact, linking the passage from “The Spirit of Christianity” with the one from “Natural Law” in this way shows how the former passage coheres so well with the rest of “The Spirit of Christianity:” that manuscript is primarily about how the true nature of ethics and religion are inseparably bound to living for one’s people, and thus just how significant it is to in fact live for one’s people. The second half of the above passage, which discusses the manifestation of the ethical life of a people in its laws and religion, does little to instill confidence in the Platonic
interpretation’s view that Hegel affirms a transcendent divinity: the only divinity spoken of is the ethical life of the people in the form of religious consciousness, or given a shape by the imagination.

Now, it is undeniable that many of the other passages we’ve looked at—e.g., Hegel’s claim in “Faith and Knowledge” that God’s reason gave birth to the world as to a blessed god, just as Plato says, and his apparent affirmation of Plato’s doctrine of the ideas—can still plausibly be taken to support the Platonic reading. But, we must not be outright seduced by the fact that because Hegel employs certain images, phrases, and metaphors from the Platonic and Christian-Platonic tradition that he embraces the letter of its teachings. It is also true, however, that unless there is a more likely, alternative interpretation of Hegel’s absolute that is coherent and that accounts for his statements and terminology, the Platonic reading may be the best reading on hand. The burden of chapter 4 in particular will be to try to demonstrate that there is such an alternative interpretation.

2). There are several passages in which Hegel is clear that his call for a philosophical synthesis of thought and being in reason is not to be achieved in the way outlined by the Platonic interpretation. For instance, in the Fichte section of “Faith and Knowledge” he summarizes:

The immediate product of this formal idealism as we have seen it arise, has, then, the following shape. A realm of experience [Empirie] without unity, a purely contingent manifold, on one side, is confronted by an empty thinking on the other. … in order to put the antithesis of thinking and the manifold realm of empirical necessity in its pure form, the thought must not be posited as a real active force—i.e., in the context of reality—but purely for itself, as empty unity, as universality completely set apart from particularity. Kant’s pure reason is this same empty thought, and reality is similarly opposed to that empty
identity, and it is precisely the lack of concordance between them that makes faith in the beyond necessary” (Faith 2: 405-6; 164; my emphasis).\textsuperscript{76}

The Platonic interpretation conceives of Hegel’s idea of the unity of thought and being in reason as the divine mind transcending their divided appearance in finitude, yet not as purely transcendent since it cannot actually be separated from finitude it generates or the return of finitude (though the spirit of man) to the infinite. In this way it tries to explain why for Hegel the beyond is not truly beyond. But Hegel doesn’t even step to the beyond in the first place, and this is where the Platonic interpretation fails. Hegel’s aim is to get rid of the whole notion of such a beyond and show that the absolute is within experience itself, or is entirely immanent. This is why he says that the idea or the absolute totality is “given as totality in presentational awareness [Vorstellung]” (Faith 2: 402; 161). This is why he says in connection with his discussion of Kant’s postulating the idea of an intuitive intellect to account for organic nature that nature is not “determined by an idea opposite to it” (Faith 2: 326; 90)—despite the Platonic conclusion Kant is led to as a regulative idea. This is why he everywhere in “Faith and Knowledge,” including its entire introductory section, chastises Protestantism and its philosophical partners (especially Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte) for their “yearning for a beyond and a future” (Faith 2: 389; 148), their longing to “escape out of actuality into an eternal beyond” (Faith 2: 391; 150). And finally, this is what Hegel’s formulas “the identity of identity and non-identity” and “the union of union and non-union” call for: the synthesis of thought and being within their dividedness in experience, not in a beyond or transcendent realm, howsoever one tries

\textsuperscript{76} Cf. (Faith 2: 330; 94).
to connect it with the experiential realm. We have yet of course to try to explain this paradoxical idea.

3). Lastly, there are a number of places in Hegel’s early writings where he is clearly referencing the idea of intellectual intuition, but doesn’t seem to have the orthodox Platonic conception in mind. In the 1797 fragment entitled “Religion, Founding a Religion,” for example, Hegel contrasts love with, on the one hand, theoretical syntheses in which the object remains merely objective, and practical activity, on the other, in which the object is annihilated, consumed, or controlled in some way. He has this to say about love:

Where subject and object—or freedom and nature are thought of as united, so that nature is freedom, subject and object are not to be separated, there is the divine … Divinity is at once subject and object, one cannot say of it that it is subject in opposition to object or that it has an object … only in love alone is one at one with the object, it does not command and is not commanded … That unification can be called unification of subject and object, of freedom and nature, of the actual and the possible … Love can only take place against its equal, against the mirror, against the echo of our existence (Rel. 1: 242-3; 118-19).^77

The love in question here is between human beings, and its essence is each person seeing him or herself in the other: “The beloved is not opposed to us, he is one with our essential being; we see only ourselves in him—and yet also he is still not we—a miracle that we cannot grasp” (LR 1: 244; 120). Love properly achieved between a community of individuals Hegel calls in Christian terms “the Kingdom of God,” the “living harmony of men … [in which] the same living spirit animates the different beings, who therefore are no longer merely similar but one; they make up not a

^77 Cf. (LR 1: 244; 120) and (FSC 1: 308).
collection but a communion, since they are unified not in a universal, a concept (e.g., as believers), but through life and through love” (SC 1: 393-4; 277-8). If Hegel self-consciously describes love between human beings in a community in terms clearly applicable only to intellectual intuition (e.g., the union of “the actual and the possible”)—and moreover where in conjunction with this love Hegel only characterizes God as the common spirit of the communion as grasped by reflective understanding—, how can his conception of an intuitive intellect be the same thing as the divine mind of the Platonic tradition? It would seem that whatever exactly Hegel means, it must be something rather different.

It would be inadequate to respond: Hegel thinks that love between people is merely analogous to, or even somehow revelatory of, the union of man and God in intellectual intuition as understood by the Platonic tradition. For in the love passages where the language of intellectual intuition is used to characterize it, Hegel gives no indication that love between human beings is simply an analogy, metaphor, or sign for something else, much less for the Platonic divine mind and man’s identity with it. This is already evident in the above passage, but it is especially clear in the early Jena Hegel’s statement in “System of Ethical Life” that,

Ethical life must be the absolute identity of intelligence, … and intuition of the individual in the alien individual, and so the supersession of natural determinacy and formation, … Intellectual intuition is alone realized by and in ethical life” (SEL: 461; 143; my emphasis).

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78 “This friendship of soul [in the Kingdom of God], described in the language of reflection as an essence, as spirit, is the divine spirit, is God who rules the communion” (SC 1: 394; 278).
79 Halfwassen does not say much about Hegel’s concept of love, but it seems like these would be two of the more obvious responses he could give.
80 In “System of Ethical life” and “Natural Law,” Hegel also commonly refers to intellectual intuition as “absolute consciousness.” Cf. for example (NL 2: 500, 508; 155, 162)
The Christian language of “love” and the “Kingdom of God” has been dropped and replaced here by “ethical life,” but the concepts are fundamentally the same: a community of individuals who have sublated their absolute separation as individuals and have formed a living, common spirit. “Intellectual intuition” characterizes their consciousness, and their consciousness alone. Again, on a straightforward reading, Hegel is not talking about the divine mind of the Platonic tradition and man’s identity with it.\textsuperscript{81}

The above reasons, I submit, ought to dissuade us from accepting the admittedly initially quite plausible Platonic interpretation of the young Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute. In the next chapter we will consider two alternative interpretations, which, though I think are deficient in their own ways in some key respects, will nonetheless lead us closer towards our goal of understanding the true outline and import of the Hegelian absolute.

\textsuperscript{81} Cf. Hegel’s assertion in “The Difference” that “[h]ighest community is highest freedom, both in terms of power and of its exercise. But it is precisely in this highest community that freedom as an ideal factor and reason as opposed to nature disappear completely” (Diff. 2: 82; 145). In this excerpt, the ethical nature of “highest community” isn’t clearly emphasized, but what is is the fact that in it the opposition of subject and object completely disappears. Moreover, there is no indication that the disappearance of this opposition in highest community is merely indicative of some other, higher such disappearance.
Chapter 3

Romantic Pantheism, Intersubjective Idealism to the Rescue?

In the secondary literature there are two other main interpretations of the young Hegel’s absolute, interpretations that I will refer to as “romantic pantheism” and “intersubjective idealism.” This chapter aims to present a critical analysis of those interpretations. As in the previous chapter, we will choose at least one contemporary figure who best exemplifies each interpretive position in order to present and evaluate them. We begin with the reading closest to the Platonic interpretation, viz., romantic pantheism, as espoused by Frederick C. Beiser. Section 1 expounds and then critiques his reading. Section 2 presents and then assesses the intersubjective idealist readings of Hegel offered by Robert Pippin and Michael Forster.

§ 1. Hegel the Romantic Pantheist?

In a number of recent works—“Hegel and the Problem of Metaphysics,” German Idealism, and The Romantic Imperative—Beiser offers the God of romantic pantheism as a model for understanding Hegel’s early conception of the absolute.\(^1\) It

\(^1\) As with the Platonic reading, this interpretive model has a long tradition, including, for instance, Heinrich Heine’s Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland and Dilthey’s Die Jugendgeschichte Hegels. It also includes, to cite a more contemporary example, Willem A. deVries (“The Dialectic of Teleology” and chapter 1 of Hegel’s Theory of Mental Activity), though in the case of deVries it would appear that the version of the romantic pantheism that he offers does not make any significant use of the Kantian/Platonic notion of an intuitive intellect—an option of that interpretation we discuss below. It is difficult to say anything definitive about deVries’s ultimate interpretative position, as he just does not provide enough detail about the Hegelian absolute.
should be mentioned that for the most part his work does not focus on Hegel, but rather on earlier key figures in Romanticism that stood as the foundation for Hegel’s own philosophical endeavors. Beiser’s emphasis is not accidental or unrelated to Hegel, however; one of his historical aims is to discredit the myth of Hegel’s originality and independence from the romantic movement, thereby deflating all those reputed Hegelian egos in the philosophical world. Two passages clearly indicate Beiser’s general position on this topic:

Hegel’s absolute idealism grew out of the romantic tradition; it was indeed only the most obscure and cumbrous expression of the absolute idealism that had already been worked out by Novalis, Schlegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling. Here again we must imagine Hegel as Schelling and Hölderlin once did: \textit{der alte Mann} [the old man], who ambled along on crutches. It is high time that Hegelians finally realize that their hero was a tortoise among hares, winning the race for posthumous fame only because he was a more sure-footed plodder.\footnote{The Romantic Imperative, p. 66.}

While Hegel has gone down in history as the grand representative of absolute idealism, his main achievement was to systematize ideas already formulated by his contemporaries. To be sure, Hegel broke with the romantic movement around 1804; but that break has little to do with the content of absolute idealism and much to do with how to justify or defend it.\footnote{German Idealism, p. 350.}

To understand Hegel’s absolute, then, we need to focus on the romantic doctrine of absolute idealism from which he directly took it. This will give us everything we need to know about the early Hegel’s thought. Or so says Beiser. Fortunately, Beiser’s presentation is clear and succinct enough, and we now have in place sufficient background information, that our discussion of this model can be relatively brief.
Beiser defines absolute idealism as “the synthesis of monism, vitalism, and rationalism.”

The first part—monism—is pretty straightforward: the universe consists in a single substance, rather than a plurality of substances; in other words, the only self-sufficient and independent thing is the universe as a whole. The second part identifies the single universal substance as an organism, which constantly grows and develops; the various kinds of things in the natural world, including self-conscious beings like ourselves, are accordingly merely different degrees of organization and development of this single living substance, which organizes itself according to the antagonism of forces and the principle of progressive complexity [Steigerung]. The last part affirms that the process of development is purposive, or conforms to some overarching idea or archetype. Synthesizing all three, absolute idealism emerges as the viewpoint that “everything is a part of the single universal organism, or that everything conforms to, or is an appearance of, its purpose, design, or idea.”

Beiser maintains that “Hegel inherited this organic conception of the absolute from Schelling in the early 1800s, the period of their collaboration on the Critical Journal of Philosophy (1802-04).”

The absolute idealism of Hegel and the romantics is therefore essentially vitalistic Spinozism. It reinterprets “Spinoza’s substance [as] nothing less than living force, die Urkraft aller Kräfte [the force of all forces].” Nature as a whole becomes one vast organism, whose parts are themselves organisms, and which is permeated by

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5 Ibid.
7 The Romantic Imperative, p. 142
a “single living force,” so that all the manifold species of minerals, plants, and animals, and all the different kinds of primitive matter, even self-consciousness and the life of spirit, are merely so many different degrees of its organization and development.

All of nature then forms one huge hierarchy, which consists in the various stages of organization and development of living force. Living force first manifests itself in the most simple forms of matter; it then passes through the more complex minerals, vegetables, and animals; and finally it ends with the most sophisticated forms of life, such as the self-consciousness of the transcendental philosopher and the creativity of artistic genius itself. Such self-consciousness is nothing less than the highest organization and development of all the powers of nature. This means that the artist’s or philosopher’s awareness of nature is also nature coming to its self-awareness through them.9

The crucial concept here is clearly the single living force. But, what, more specifically, is this living force, this single Spinozistic substance that manifests itself in various guises in the natural and spiritual world? What more concretely can be said about it?

According to one way of reading Beiser, it is nothing else but the intuitive intellect of the Platonic tradition, but, (supposedly) following Bruno and Schelling, conceived of as immanent in the world, rather than (at least in part) transcending it, as in the Platonic reading.10 This issue concerning the full immanence or at least partial transcendence of the divine mind is thus, on this way of reading Beiser, the chief one separating the Platonic and the romantic pantheistic readings of Hegel. The doctrine of the animation of spirit and nature is not peculiar to the romantic pantheism reading; as we already saw, the Platonic reading regards them as animated by the World-Soul two steps removed from the first God. Conversely, the idea of the circular nature of Hegel’s

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absolute, its status as the truly infinite, is not peculiar to the Platonic interpretation; on
Beiser’s romantic pantheistic one, the divine intellect is immanent and manifests itself
in nature and spirit, works its way up to its own self-understanding at the highest levels
of man’s spiritual activities, and only as such completes the movement that constitutes
the absolute. Beiser puts this point by saying that without man “the divine nature
would still exist, to be sure, yet it would remain imperfect, potential, inchoate, and
indeterminate.”

To reiterate, therefore: the dividing line between the Platonic and
romantic pantheistic interpretations of Hegel’s absolute revolves around whether the
intuitive intellect is (at least partially) transcendent of or completely immanent in the
universe.

There appears to be little difference between the Platonic and the romantic
pantheistic readings of Hegel’s absolute; at least, it seems to me, not enough for any
serious debate to emerge between the two camps. What, after all, is the big difference
between, on the one hand, the view that there is a distinction between a first divine
Nous and a second, the Logos, that simultaneously “looks upward” in eternal vision
toward the first and, fashioning matter, takes the form of the World-Soul immanent in
all things; and, on the other hand, the view that there is only one divinity, whose highest
part constitutes the eternal divine mind and whose lower parts are involved in creation
and correspond to the functions of the Logos and the World-Soul? If we look at the
issue historically, the real difference appears to lie in the implications for each
respective position once the problem of evil is brought into consideration; the Platonic
reading would appear to absolve the first God from any blame for the evils of this

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11 _The Romantic Imperative_, p. 184.
world; whereas, on the romantic pantheistic reading, since it is one and the same being that has an eternal intellect and involves itself in the world of time, it would appear more difficult to absolve God from such blame. But, in the debates between the defenders of the two interpretations, this would appear to be of little importance.

A big distinction between the two readings of Hegel’s absolute does arise, however, insofar as “the single living force” of romantic pantheism is not taken to be equivalent to the traditional, Platonic divine mind. Given the relative infrequency with which Beiser explicitly discusses the idea of an intuitive intellect in the context of articulating the romantic concept of living force, we must keep this open as another possible reading of his position, so as to avoid any potential straw man. Accordingly, this way of reading the romantic pantheistic interpretation amounts to the idea that there is immanent in the universe a single living force, whatever that may be, that realizes itself in nature and spirit, striving towards its own self-comprehension at the highest levels of man’s spiritual activities, and only as such completing the movement that constitutes the absolute. Exactly what the idea of “the force of all forces” is supposed to be, if not an intuitive intellect, is not clear in Beiser’s works; but, it is worth keeping this possibility open as a version of romantic pantheism.

So much for the basic structure of Hegel as romantic pantheist. According to Beiser, Hegel is motivated to develop such a philosophical stance in order to deal with what to him seems like an insurmountable problem in Kant’s critical philosophy, viz.,

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12 Kenny’s *Mystical Monotheism* is informative on this topic. Another option, of course, is Plato’s: recalcitrant matter, not God, is to blame. But, not all religiously minded philosophers or theologians would follow Plato on this point; it concedes the existence of a power outside of God.
the interaction of subject and object.\textsuperscript{13} In order to make sense of such an interaction, Hegel, following Schelling and other romantic thinkers, maintains that we must grant a constitutive status to the ideas of an intuitive intellect\textsuperscript{14} and natural purpose. In this way, using Kant’s own strategy, Hegel propounds a transcendental argument for the existence of the divine mind and immanent teleology.

As far as how proponents of the romantic pantheistic reading would respond to the second and third problems of the Absolute in the young Hegel’s thought outlined in chapter 1, they have pretty much the same resources to reply as do the defenders of the Platonic interpretation. The main difference, of course, is that the single living force, whether understood as the Platonic divine mind or not, is completely immanent in the world; however, I’m not sure how much leverage this gives them over the Platonists: because for the latter, since (a) man is identical in intellectual intuition to the divine and (b) the world of finitude is presumptively reconciled to the infinite through man—in fact is part of the very process of infinity—, the interconnected problems of divine transcendence and religious alienation would seem to be overcome.

What about the persuasiveness of the romantic pantheistic reading? Assuming for now that the single living force of romantic pantheism is the Platonic intuitive intellect, we can rather quickly evaluate the cogency of this reading. It enjoys a lot of the same support that the Platonic reading does, except that it even more so benefits from Hegel’s identification of infinity and finitude, since it regards the divine mind as immanent in the universe.

\textsuperscript{13} The Romantic Imperative, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{14} Or at least a single living force manifesting itself as subject and object.
But, for the most part, it also suffers from the criticisms leveled against the Platonic reading. (1) Assuming that many of the passages taken to support the Platonic reading, e.g., those reputedly evincing the Platonic notion of intellectual intuition, would be taken as evidence in favor of the romantic pantheistic one—which seems like a good strategy—, it is still the case that on a closer inspection, many of them do not in fact do so.¹⁵ (2) Despite simply asserting, as a possible reading of Hegel, that the Platonic intuitive intellect is immanent in the world, and so doesn’t require any beyond or transcendent realm, is this scenario even intelligible? Given the very nature of the Platonic divine mind, how can it be anything other than transcendent of the realm of finite things we ordinarily experience? I agree with Beiser that Hegel wants to jettison transcendence, but I don’t think that it can be done in the way he suggests. (3) The romantic pantheistic interpretation still cannot make adequate sense of those passages in the Frankfurt and Jena Hegel where intellectual intuition clearly refers to love and a certain kind of ethical life among men and not to the Platonic notion.

If we suppose that by “the single living force” the romantic pantheistic interpretation has in mind something other than the intuitive intellect of the Platonic tradition, the problem here is that we need to be told more specifically what that is. As it stands, it is simply too vague, a something=x we know not what. Perhaps Beiser does not mean the phrase to stand for any entity or activity—neither the Platonic divine mind nor a vaguely conceived single living force—, but rather simply to the all-

¹⁵ For example, remember how Halfwassen’s interpretation of Hegel’s exegesis in “The Spirit of Christianity” of Mathew 18.1 ff.—viz., that it refers to the Platonic idea of intellectual intuition—seemed initially quite compelling, but it turned out to refer to a kind of social intellectual intuition between human beings.
inclusive hierarchy of natural and spiritual beings. Something of the sort does indeed capture Hegel’s meaning. But the problem is that we need some way to conceive of that hierarchy as all-inclusive, or as a single entity (hence monism). What unifies all of the members of that hierarchy into a single substance if they are not manifestations of something like the Platonic divinity or a single living force? Beiser does not provide any further suggestions.

§ 2. Hegel the Intersubjective Idealist?

2.1 Pippin’s Hegel

Distinctive of Pippin’s approach to Hegel’s philosophy is his intense desire to develop a coherent reading of Hegel’s absolute “that is not committed to a philosophically problematic theological metaphysics,”\(^1^6\) i.e., to a precritical, or pre-Kantian, metaphysics of God, as is developed in most other versions of Hegel’s philosophy. Pippin’s basic methodological point is that it doesn’t make good sense to read Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute in such a way “as if he had never heard of Kant’s critical epistemology. Just attributing moderate philosophical intelligence to Hegel should at least make one hesitate before construing him as a post-Kantian philosopher with a precritical metaphysics.”\(^1^7\) Pippin aims, therefore, 1) to interpret Hegel’s central notion in a way that does not violate Kant’s epistemological criticisms of traditional philosophical claims to knowledge of things as they are in themselves and

\(^{16}\) Hegel’s Idealism, p. 5.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 7.
2) to thereby open up the possibility of bringing Hegel’s fundamental convictions within the fold of contemporary trends of thought, humbled as they have been by Kant’s determination of our cognitive limitations. His approach, it perhaps goes without saying, guarantees that the notion of the absolute, or God, that his textual analysis uncovers will bear little resemblance to any traditional conception. This does not mean, of course, that Pippin denies the notion a central place in Hegel’s philosophy; only we may want to avoid using the term “God” in elucidating it.

Such an interpretation of Hegel’s absolute is offered by Pippin in his prominent book, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*. That work treats Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, his greater *Logic*, and his lesser *Logic* in more detail than it does his early Jena writings, but it attributes to the latter the same basic doctrine of the absolute as it does to the former.

The key to seeing Hegel as adhering to the spirit of Kant’s critical philosophy, Pippin argues there, is to see him as trying to work out the implications of the Kantian ideas of the spontaneity of thought and the necessarily apperceptive character of all consciousness in the wake of the rejection of any clear distinction between concept and intuition.

Thus the formula for getting to Hegel from Kant would be: Keep the doctrine of pure concepts and the account of apperception that helps justify the necessary presupposition of pure concepts, keep the critical problem of a proof for the objectivity of these concepts, the question that began critical philosophy, but abandon the doctrine of “pure sensible intuition,” and the very possibility of a clear distinction

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18 It is also outlined in his article “Avoiding German Idealism: Kant, Hegel, and the Reflective Judgment Problem.” This article focuses exclusively on the early Jena Hegel, and so is quite useful for anyone studying Hegel’s early writings.

19 Pippin bypasses any serious discussion of Hegel’s Frankfurt writings.
between concept and intuition, and what is left is much of Hegel’s enterprise.\textsuperscript{20}

This makes the starting point of Hegel’s philosophy roughly the same as Fichte’s, as we will see.

As Pippin explains it, Kant’s apperception thesis states that all consciousness of objects is implicitly reflexive, for whenever I am conscious of an object, I can also be said to implicitly “take myself” to be thus conscious. Such a condition cannot be regarded as produced by some other mental state or by any interaction with objects, i.e., it cannot be described as empirically grounded (or, caused). On Kant’s account, this non-natural, spontaneous apperceptive quality of human thought requires a pure categorial synthesis of what’s given to the subject; pure concepts, i.e., non-empirical constraints on what could be a possible experience, are required to combine the manifold of intuition in order to secure the necessarily apperceptive character of pure thought. The way all this works is too complex to discuss here, but it’s important to emphasize that for Kant this whole apparatus of the spontaneity of thought cannot alone secure reference to objects. Kant requires that there also be an intuitive component to consciousness and knowledge: something must be immediately given to the subject on which its non-empirically caused activities are to operate. The immediately given “arrives,” so to speak, already structured according to our \textit{a priori} forms of space and time, but consciousness of objects further requires the elements of spontaneity to “hook up” with and organize the pure sensible intuitions. (It also clearly involves empirical synthesis, but that isn’t our concern here either.)

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Hegel’s Idealism}, p. 9.
“Fichte’s contribution” to this picture “was to point out that all knowledge, including transcendental knowledge—the I’s taking itself to be limited by the not-I— is a self-determined self-limitation, not one simply encountered as given or discovered as fact.”21 In other words, his contribution was to get rid of the idea of a separate intuitive component to our cognition. Hints of such a move, despite the fact that it is inconsistent with Kant’s overall position, can be found in the second edition Transcendental Deduction of the Critique of Pure Reason.22 This is because Kant wants to avoid the idea that the categories are merely the basic ways we must subjectively think about objects, independently of the manner in which they are given. His language, whether or not it is ultimately the proper way to interpret him, suggests to Fichte that the given must already be structured by the categories if the condition of apperception is to be satisfied. This means that there is no possibility that an intuited manifold could not conform to the categories. Conceptual conditions thereby extend into the intuitive manifold itself. And this suggests to Fichte a blurring of the distinction between concept and intuition, so that the spontaneity of the subject—which he radicalizes so that it is not just empirically undetermined, but undetermined by anything other than itself, and so self-caused—is also somehow responsible for the intuitive component of experience. As Fichte conceives it, the spontaneity of thought is complete. The subject, by means of an original “act,” posits itself to be in relation to objects in certain fundamental ways: what for Kant is the given is in fact a limitation on the activity of the self-positing subject that is determined to be such a

21 Ibid, p. 58.
22 Pippin stresses this point because he wants to maintain that the move from Kant to Fichte and eventually to Hegel is not wholly ungrounded. See chapter 2 of both Hegel’s Idealism and Idealism as Modernism.
limitation by the subject itself. It is its unconscious production consciously experienced as a limitation.

The central problem within Fichte’s system, according to Pippin and Pippin’s Hegel, is accounting for the objectivity of the I’s posits. Since the subject does not rely on anything that transcends consciousness (in either a metaphysical or an empirical sense) in effecting a discrimination of objects, the issue of “by what right certain concepts are relied on and in what sense they can be considered objective, more than merely subjective, requirements” arises. The problem is twofold. First, because the categorial structure of a subject’s experience cannot be grounded on a given or a beyond, i.e., its representing activity is wholly undetermined (or entirely self-determined), it seems virtually impossible to account for its self-restriction to any particular conceptual scheme. The subject must constrain itself, or posit itself as constrained, to a certain framework, but how does that work? How can that activity be anything more than purely arbitrary and chaotic? And what could possibly explain conceptual change, i.e., why a subject would come to doubt that the way it takes things to be is actually the way that they are? Second, it always seems possible that any conceptual scheme the subject relies on in positing its world is merely a reflection of the way it is (internally) determined to think about things, rather than the way that things really are. Might not “things in themselves” be different from the way in which the I posits them as being? Might we not be dealing with mere categories rather than with being?

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24 This is the thought that underlies the so-called non-metaphysical interpretations of the mature Hegel’s philosophy, e.g., those of Klaus Hartmann (e.g., in “Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View,” “Do
Pippin argues that Hegel, in building on Fichte’s contribution of the rejection of intuition as a second independent source of cognition, aims to resolve just these difficulties, which Fichte supposedly left unresolved. Hegel’s philosophical project is “to demonstrate how an empirically and metaphysically ‘ungrounded’ subject can be said to be ‘self-grounded,’ in what way specific conditions of experience can be accounted for,” and to show that any conceptual scheme relied on in fixing such a determinate relation to objects is “‘identical’ with ‘what there is, in truth,’” i.e., is all that reality could ever be.

Hegel’s solution involves several key claims. He argues first of all that the apperception necessary for there to be a determinate and cognitive relation to an object “is an empty or wholly indeterminate self-relation if considered apart from intersubjective mutual determination or outside such a historically self-determining community.” Hegel argues, that is, that the conceptual scheme that explains our

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26 Ibid., p. 93.
27 Again, this is the chief point that distinguishes Pippin’s interpretation from those non-metaphysical readings that interpret Hegel as a mere category theorist.
apperceptive character of experience is only possible in the context of a community of subjects. Apperception and conceptual scheme are rooted, in particular, in the mutual recognition of the community’s members; those features of cognition are therefore not possible for an isolated, transcendental subjectivity. Second, he maintains that conceptual change within such collective subjectivities is rooted within each conceptual scheme itself; its conceptual movement is due to its own self-dissatisfaction or self-overcoming:

… the ‘origin’ of the notions fundamentally necessary for [spontaneous thought] to think a world reflectively can only be somehow internal to the autonomous development of thought itself, understood as a dialectically interrelated, historically progressive, socially mediated activity.29

Thought thus moves itself, and it is this development of thought’s self-consciousness that accounts for the categorial structure at any given time. A categorial structure determines objects, but it in turn is only determinate through its dialectical relations to other conceptual schemes. This is supposed to overcome Fichte’s problem of an epistemic “absence,” whereby “we start off in some sort of Fichtean void, projecting an indeterminate number of possible identifying [categorial] systems.”30 Each projection of a conceptual scheme does not come from its own nihil, but rather follows in the wake of thought’s dissatisfaction with its prior projected scheme, and it is this progressive self-correction that fixes thought’s determinacy and objectivity at any given “moment.” The result is “the ‘moving,’ internally interdependent nature of categorial thought,”31 which is in perpetual “opposition” to itself. Third, Hegel thinks

31 Ibid, p. 220.
that he has shown that the self-movement of conceptual schemes determines “reality as it is in itself”—the only sense in which something can be is to be determined by or exist within the self-development of conceptual schemes. Really, all there is this one self-moving conceptual scheme, for there is no real distinction between subject, scheme of concepts, and objectivity.

We have now reached the point in Pippin’s reconstruction of Hegel’s philosophy that the notion of the absolute comes into play explicitly. The only thing that distinguishes Hegel’s “position from a ‘conceptual scheme-incommensurable paradigm’ relativism is his account of the interdeveloping nature of the conceptual scheme … [and] the ‘completion,’ in some sense, of that structure in the Absolute Idea.”

The absolute idea is thus the culmination of the self-developing conceptual scheme, or, that towards which thought is moving itself.

What Hegel is saying is that the question of the adequacy of a conceptual scheme can only be a matter of its determinate relation to some other possible conceptual scheme (actually, another variant of the one conceptual scheme), that such a Notion of a determinate relation is to be understood in terms of a developmental connection, and that the basic story of such development involves the consequences of a developing self-consciousness within the scheme about itself, about its being a scheme or a Notion.

The absolute telos of thought’s self-opposition thus “involves a growing self-consciousness about itself, about thought itself and the nature of its development.” It consists in the understanding that the issue of the adequacy of a conceptual scheme can only be a function of its determinate relation to another possible conceptual scheme, that this determinate relation must be understood in terms of a developmental

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33 Ibid, p. 240.
34 Ibid, pp. 222-3.
connection that makes the scheme determinate in the first place, and that this single self-correcting conceptual scheme is all there really is. This telos is “Absolute Knowledge,” i.e., “an absolute or final account of what it is to know, and not a knowledge of a divine Absolute.” The absolute is, accordingly, just the self-correcting process of thought that moves itself in the direction of the absolute knowledge of itself: it is the dialectical movement of conceptual schemes—really of the single, self-evolving conceptual scheme—that culminates in the cognition of the nature of thought and its relation to being. It is not, and Pippin is adamant about this, some monistic substance or Platonic divine mind, as advocated by many of the metaphysical interpretations of Hegel’s concept of the absolute:

… by Absolute Knowledge Hegel is not referring to a knowledge of an absolute substance-Subject, a Divine Mind, or a Spirit-Monad … he is referring to the conditions of human knowledge “absolutized,” no longer threatened by Kant’s thing-in-itself skepticism.

The conditions of human knowledge, i.e., the non-empirical conceptual schemes, are “absolutized,” and so are the absolute itself, because they constitute all that reality could be. Absolute knowledge is the knowledge of this fact and the “completion” of the movement of thought. It is the meta-reflection on the self-production of a conceptual framework for the determination of objects. Importantly, the dialectical movement of the one conceptual scheme does not halt with this knowledge—it is after all absolute—; rather, it proceeds as before, but now with self-awareness.

Such is the basic structure of Pippin’s account of Hegel’s idealism and his concept of the absolute. It constitutes a particular vision of Hegel’s concept of true

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36 Ibid, p. 168. In “Avoiding German Idealism,” Pippin explicitly uses Düsing’s Platonic account of Hegel’s absolute as a foil for his own interpretation. For example, see pp. 139-40.
infinity: for, the one-sided infinite is the necessarily apperceptive character of human subjectivity; the one-sided finite is composed of both finite objects and particular concepts/conceptual schemes; and their union, the oneness of the infinite and the finite, is just the inseparability of these components.

Particularly important for our purposes is Pippin’s argument that Hegel begins to develop the general outlines of this position even in his early Jena writings, despite there being certain elements of those writings that are not fully mature.\(^{37}\) In making this claim, Pippin argues against what he calls “the standard picture”\(^{38}\) of the young Hegel, which he associates especially with Klaus Düsing’s view that Hegel’s Absolute=Schelling’s Absolute=Kant’s intuitive intellect: “…what Hegel wants to affirm with respect to intellectual intuition,” Pippin maintains in his discussion of the early Hegel’s use of Kant’s idea of an intuitive intellect, “is not what Kant is denying.”\(^{39}\) That is to say, Hegel’s idea of the absolute is not simply Kant’s notion of an intuitive intellect minus Kant’s admonition of its strictly subjective, regulative character. In support of his claim, Pippin warns us not to be misled by the young Hegel’s Schellingian language:

The apparently metaphysical terminology used in Hegel’s early works cannot be straightforwardly, without further ado, taken as evidence that Hegel has rejected critical idealism in favor of an indefensible metaphysics of an Absolute Subject or a God within which all finite beings are pantheistically related.\(^{40}\)

\(^{37}\) Chapter 4 of *Hegel’s Idealism* and “Avoiding German Idealism” make this case.

\(^{38}\) *Idealism as Modernism*, p. 132.

\(^{39}\) *Hegel’s Idealism*, p. 76. The statement that the standard picture of Hegel’s absolute is that it is equivalent to Kant’s intuitive intellect is not quite accurate; even though it might create finitude, Kant’s intuitive intellect is opposed to finite reality (in Kant’s language “appearances”) and reflection (“understanding”), while Hegel’s concept of the absolute aims to overcome even this opposition. It is true, however, that “the standard picture” of Hegel’s absolute views it as synthesizing Kant’s intuitive intellect and the sphere of finitude in general.

\(^{40}\) *Ibid*, p. 66.
So while the young Hegel’s use of terminology such as “intellectual intuition” might suggest his commitment to a kind of spirit-monism or Platonic metaphysics, he only means by it “the spontaneous self-relating involved in all experience … [or,] necessarily spontaneous apperceiving.”

Pippin recognizes that the early Jena Hegel’s statements of what this involves are merely programmatic, but he thinks it is clear that Hegel has already picked up Fichte’s contribution, and moved beyond Fichte’s standpoint to the point of view that “the subject’s self-relation in experience can be said to involve already a ‘production’ of specific forms of such relations.” He has in his early Jena period already reached, that is to say, the idea of “a developing self-relation” of self-consciousness and its necessary categorial framework, as well as (in his “identity theory”) the idea that this is all that empirical truth could be.

Of course, it does not help matters much to note that Hegel, by rejecting Kant’s denial of the possibility of a human intuitive intellect, could not have been proposing some version of a creative, divine intellect; that he was instead introducing his own idea of a progressively developing, collectively self-conscious subject, purposively active, in some epistemological sense “identical” with Nature, and one whose own activity is not regarded as merely subjective or regulative. It does not help much because we know so little about what the latter descriptions amount to. But at least, I would hope, the possibility of the kind of idealism I am attributing to Hegel has not only been held open by this consideration of the Jena writings but in many ways suggested by them. The task will be to understand in what sense Hegel thinks reason’s self-determination is organic, that is, purposeful and integrative, and how to understand the objectivity of the results of such self-posing.

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41 Ibid, p. 77.
42 Ibid, p. 87.
43 Ibid, pp. 83 and 212.
44 Ibid, p. 78.
The rest of Pippin’s work goes on to discuss how the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* work out this early Jena idea of reason’s self-determination in more detail. But, it is worth mentioning that even here his interpretation of Hegel’s early Jena writings proves important, for Pippin uses it as support for his reading of the later works.\(^\text{45}\) His procedure is to that extent organic.

In Pippin’s reconstruction we have a challenge to the more standard readings of the early Hegel’s concept of the absolute that we have already seen. It does not violate Kant’s critical epistemology, Pippin asserts, because it does not see Hegel as appealing to anything higher than apperceptive human collective subjectivity and its conceptual schemes in order to account for the objectivity of our knowledge. All that we really need to explain our knowledge of what is, in fact all that there really is period, is the self-movement of historical subjectivity. This is true infinity. Pippin’s work thus represents a distinctive model of the young Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute, and one that brings to center stage Hegel’s abiding interest in social relations. Its emphasis on intersubjectivity and its attempt to render the core of Hegel’s system palatable to contemporary philosophical interests has made it welcome and cogent to many.

How would Pippin’s intersubjective idealistic interpretation of Hegel respond to problems 2 and 3 concerning Hegel’s absolute that we identified in chapter 1? First, recall that according to Pippin Hegel develops a philosophy of the absolute in order to resolve the difficulties left unresolved by Fichte’s project of developing a philosophy completely free of any given, intuitive component of cognition. Hegel’s solution is to

\(^{45}\text{Ibid, p. 224.}\)
be found in his idea of intersubjective mutual determination within the context of a historical community and the way in which those communal conceptual schemes evolve from one another towards the combined system’s own self-awareness of its nature.

For Pippin, the immediate occasion for Hegel’s development of an absolute-philosophy would thus appear rather narrow; yet, we can imagine, though Pippin himself does not spend much time developing these possibilities, how such a conception of the absolute might be of service to Hegel in his thinking about his social and political ideal, discussed in the previous chapters, and perhaps even in his effort to engender a common spirit for the German people. If the absolute is able to become conscious of its own conceptual structure, then that would presumably be of service in resolving certain tensions within the social and political realms; moreover, it might help overcome the individual’s alienation from his own people, insofar as it would emphasize, and perhaps engender an appreciation of the fact, that mutual recognition is requisite for the apperceptive character of his own experience in the first place. Additionally, on the issue of Hegel’s development of a philosophy of the absolute at all, given his seeming undermining of that very notion on the basis of his conception of religious alienation, Pippin’s interpretation would seem to fare rather well; on his reading, God is not an objective being alienated from man’s essence or from what man himself can achieve in this world, and God cannot properly be defined independently of man’s historical, communal life.

2.2 Forster’s Hegel
More than anyone else Forster has focused on the tasks, including the practical ones, that Hegel’s doctrine of the absolute is designed to fulfill. In the process he has produced an eminently readable and cogent account of them—Hegel’s *Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*—, which though ultimately treating Hegel’s more mature philosophical formulations, is full of detailed analysis of the very early Hegel, including the Hegel of the 1790s, and regards Hegel’s work beginning in the mid-1790s as entirely consistent with his later philosophical productions. Moreover, since his interpretation of the nature of Hegel’s absolute closely resembles Pippin’s, and he makes explicit answers to the second and third problems that are only inchoate in Pippin, this makes his account all the more valuable to us.

Foundational for Forster’s reading of Hegel is his following assertion:

For Hegel, the purpose of doing philosophy is not only the *theoretical* purpose of determining the truth. It is also, and perhaps even more fundamentally, the *practical* purpose of enabling modern men to achieve genuine happiness. (In this respect, Hegel’s position is reminiscent of the Hellenistic schools of philosophy, which also aimed at the attainment of happiness as their primary objective).

For Hegel, happiness involves the satisfaction of our desires, in particular our deepest desires for (1) solidarity with the community, (2) knowledge of truth, and (3) radical freedom to determine what is the case, to overcome the mind-independence of reality. Importantly, Hegel also thinks that our conception of reality affects our happiness and that the prevailing unhappiness in the modern world is due to the dualisms intrinsic to modernity’s worldview, the most relevant (for our purposes) of

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46 His earlier *Hegel and Skepticism* is also valuable.
which is the dualism between the individual and the community. As a solution to these dualisms, and in an effort to promote modern man’s happiness, therefore, Hegel develops his doctrine of the absolute:

In accordance with this diagnosis of the sources of modern man’s unhappiness, Hegel, beginning in the early theological writings [of the 1790s], developed the position that the required cure for this unhappiness was to overcome the offending dualisms. His primary means for accomplishing this was to be the establishment in modern culture of a fundamentally monistic conception of reality.

Because one’s happiness is so intimately related to one’s view of reality, and since a dualistic view of reality, realized in part in a dualistic social scheme, is the root of modern man’s unhappiness, Hegel early on conceives of his monistic doctrine of the absolute as the cure for that unhappiness.

That fundamentally monistic conception of reality turns out to be roughly equivalent to the one recognized in Pippin’s interpretation, though admittedly, unlike Pippin’s discussion, Forster’s is not framed in terms of the apperception theme that begins in Kant and is continued by Fichte. Forster argues that by the later parts of his “Positivity” essay Hegel rejects the correspondence theory of truth and advocates what Forster calls “an enduring communal consensus theory of truth,” a theory according to which a necessary and sufficient condition for a proposition’s truth is “that it be agreed upon and continue to be agreed upon by a community or a communal tradition;” truth as such is created by the mutual recognition of the community

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49 Forster identifies eight dualisms that Hegel sees as inherent in the modern conception of reality: (1) God vs. man and nature, (2) man vs. nature, (3) individual vs. community, (4) self/thought vs. the rest of reality, (5) fact vs. volition, (6) duty vs. desire, (7) virtue vs. happiness, and (8) mind vs. body. Cf. ibid, pp. 23-61.
50 Ibid, pp. 78-79.
members’ beliefs. This is close to Pippin’s view in that both conceive of Hegel as maintaining that reality itself is determined by human communities and their evolving conceptual frameworks. An important qualification of Hegel’s position is that “there is, and in some sense necessarily is, only one national community which has historical relevance in any given age.”52 This precludes the possibility of conflicting enduring consensuses, and so undermines the charge against Hegel that he endorses contradictions.

The other important aspect of Hegel’s theory of the absolute is the claim that the absolute’s self-knowledge, which is essential to its nature as a self, is “identical with the historical process of human subjects progressing toward knowledge of the nature of the Absolute expressed in Hegelian Science”:53 Hegelian science (his system of philosophy) is the culmination of the self-consciousness of God. This means, just as on Pippin’s reading, that there is a final goal of the sequence of historical conceptual schemes, viz., man’s awareness that truth resides within his own collective subjectivity, and thereby the establishment of absolute truth. It also means that, like Pippin, Forster is able to offer an account of the nature of Hegel’s absolute that can smoothly accommodate the theme of religious alienation in Hegel’s works, even Hegel’s identification of the absolute with the communal life of a people.54

With the dispensation and acceptance of this conception of reality, Hegel, beginning in the mid-1790s, aims to overcome the dualisms in modern life and thought and provide for the conditions for happiness to flourish in modernity.

54 Recall that the Platonic reading and the romantic pantheistic reading could only link, not identify, the Hegelian absolute with a form of human collectivity.
Referring now in particular to bridging the dualism between the individual and the community, Hegel thinks that once modern man recognizes, on the basis of his theory of the truth of the absolute, that the individual’s very existence and identity, and the fulfillment of his deepest desires, depend essentially on his community and conformity with it,\(^\text{55}\)

he will be restored to the two attitudes of close identification with his community which were characteristic of the Greeks, and whose rupture constituted the individual-community division: First, he will be restored to a commitment to his community as his highest end. … Second, the modern Hegelian individual will be restored to that automatic identification with his community’s judgments, especially on ethical matters, which was the other aspect of the Greek’s sense of closeness to his community.\(^\text{56}\)

However, unlike the Greeks, and to his advantage, because the modern individual wants to conform to his community in this way, without countervailing individualistic desires and for compelling reasons, his conformism to communal judgments is not merely positive, but rather something freely enacted.

According to Forster, until the mid-1790s Hegel has “a faith in the pure activism of true and right ideas.”\(^\text{57}\) That is to say, he has high hopes that his philosophy of the absolute will be disseminated in an undistorted fashion and overcome the sociopolitical impediments to happiness, thereby creating the appropriate social matrix for the practical benefits of his philosophy, now accepted by

\(^\text{55}\) This is because (1) conceptual thought, an essential feature of any human individual, requires a corresponding language, which in turn depends on participation in a corresponding linguistic community, and (2), since the truth of one’s judgment depends on an enduring communal consensus, the individual’s realization of his deepest desires not only for his communal solidarity, but also for his knowledge of truth and his radical freedom, hinges on, and is guaranteed by, his community and his conformity with it. \textit{Ibid}, pp. 83-5.

\(^\text{56}\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 85.

\(^\text{57}\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 487.
the community, to flourish. Then comes, in the late 1790s, a loss of faith in this pure activism.\textsuperscript{58} He comes to recognize a need for a sociopolitical basis so that his own philosophy can take root, as well as a need for a critique of the old sociopolitical basis as giving rise to the old, alienated thought systems. “The German Constitution” satisfies these needs: it critiques the political and religious fragmentation of contemporaneous Germany, and it argues that the sociopolitical underpinning needed for the widespread acceptance of Hegelian philosophy and the consequent practical benefits derived from it is a German monarchy with a representative legislature, coupled with religious toleration and the separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{59}

But now, what is to change the world so as to make possible the acceptance of Hegelian philosophy and the practical benefits attendant to it? What is supposed to create the requisite German monarchy? Forster argues that during his early Jena period Hegel advocates a “qualified activism:”

philosophy can \textit{itself} bring about the changes in the sociopolitical sphere which will remove the sociopolitical causes of harmful dualistic illusions and provide the sociopolitical basis necessary for the undistorted dissemination of its own true and practically beneficial monistic ideas, \textit{but only through being targeted at a particularly potent instrument of sociopolitical change, a “great man.”}\textsuperscript{60}

The great changes in cultural formations are the result of the combination of a philosophy and a sublime, conquering individual, such as an Alexander the Great or, to look beyond Hegel’s early Jena writings, a Napoleon, to disseminate that philosophy to the people and establish an enduring communal consensus. Such would

\textsuperscript{58} Even true and right ideas are often distorted or, to borrow a phrase from Hume, “fall stillborn from the press.” Cf. \textit{Ibid}, pp. 487-8.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Ibid}, p. 489.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ibid}.
also be the case of the sociopolitical arrangement sought by the young Hegel. Its manifestation would require his philosophy plus some conquering individual to initiate the process that would lead to its ultimate free embrace by the people, and so to the absolute’s assuming of a new form. This is, roughly, the import of the early Hegel’s endeavors to construct a philosophy of the absolute. By exposing the ideologies of alienated absolutes, by revealing the true absolute inseparable from the collective life of man, and, finally, by passing the torch of philosophy on to one of the world-historical individuals, Hegel seeks to render his philosophy of the absolute of service to his practical agenda in a way that does not violate his doctrine of religious alienation.61

So much for the outline of Forster’s interpretation of the Hegelian absolute. Minus an emphasis on the apperception theme in Hegel’s thought, it is essentially the same as Pippin’s account, because it regards Hegel as bringing reality itself within the fold of human socio-historical consciousness. And, as we have seen, it goes a remarkable distance in trying to resolve the second and third problems of the absolute in the young Hegel’s thought. With respect to problem 2 it responds: realizing that modern man’s unhappiness is ultimately due to his acceptance of a worldview riddled with dualisms and his embodiment of that worldview in a fragmented sociopolitical order, and at the same time desiring to promote happiness and social cohesion and

61 Incidentally, Forster sees no real conflict with the later Hegel’s reputed conservatism (say, in the Philosophy of Right, where philosophy represents the end of an age, captured in thought) about the capacity of thought to change the course of reality (where philosophical thought gives birth to a new age). He argues that, according to Hegel’s intentions, the Phenomenology, in conjunction with a “great man” was “to play a role in causally effecting both the process of sociopolitical transformation which is its own sociopolitical underpinning and the resulting sociopolitical world which will be the sociopolitical underpinning of Science proper” (ibid., p. 495). Only perfected Hegelian science, the “System,” comes at the end of the requisite sociopolitical transformation; but in order for that alteration of reality to occur, an inchoate speculative system—enter the Phenomenology—must pave the way.
recognizing that this would require the dissemination of a monistic vision of reality, Hegel develops a corresponding philosophy of the absolute; Hegel thinks, and this is the key point, that philosophical thought is causally efficacious of sociopolitical reality. Regarding problem 3 Forster replies: the nature of the absolute is such that it is humanity’s collective historical subjectivity, and as such it is not alienated from the essence of man.

2.3. Evidence for Hegel as Intersubjective Idealist

Better than the Platonic or the romantic pantheistic interpretation of Hegel’s absolute, the thesis that Hegel is an intersubjective idealist most straightforwardly captures Hegel’s puzzling claim that God is somehow identical to the common spirit of a people. Remember Beiser’s words: without man “the divine nature would still exist, to be sure, yet it would remain imperfect, potential, inchoate, and indeterminate.” 62 The same thought could equally be co-opted by the Platonic reading. For both the socio-historical life of humanity is necessary for the absolute to know itself, and in this sense for the absolute to complete the circuit of its being; however, neither can comfortably accommodate the notion that this life is truly the divinity, as can intersubjective idealism. All other things being equal, this fact would thus seem to constitute some evidence in favor of the latter interpretation of Hegel.

What other evidence is there? Let’s begin by taking a look at Pippin’s pair of arguments for his own position. 63 The first argument surrounds his claim that Hegel would have to have been a philosophical idiot to propound the doctrine of an intuitive

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62 The Romantic Imperative, p. 184.
63 To the extent that they are persuasive, his arguments speak equally in favor of Forster’s variant of the intersubjective idealist reading of Hegel’s absolute.
intellect as the divine mind of the Platonic tradition in the wake of Kant’s critical philosophy. Recall Pippin’s statement: “Just attributing moderate philosophic intelligence to Hegel should at least make one hesitate before construing him as a post-Kantian philosopher with a precritical metaphysics.”

Therefore, so the argument goes, independently of any textual evidence in favor of an alternative reading of Hegel’s absolute than the Platonic or the romantic pantheistic readings, there is some presumptive evidence against the latter readings. This argument would appear to lend some support to Pippin’s and Forster’s metaphysically post-critical interpretations of Hegel.

Pippin’s second and more fundamental argument against any interpretation of Hegel that views him as resurrecting the Platonic divine mind goes like this: admittedly, Hegel’s discussion of an archetypal intuitive intellect, in his early Jena writings in particular, does suggest his adherence to the view that nature (including man as a part of it) is a product of a divine intuitive intellect, an original ground or supersensible substrate transcending the great Kantian divide between nature and spirit. Moreover, Hegel certainly does seem, strangely, to link that intellect with the deepest layer of the human mind, in such a way as to suggest its relevance to the fundamental mind-world relation at issue in Kant’s Critical philosophy. But, and here is Pippin’s central interpretive claim against the proponents of any precritical metaphysical reading of Hegel, there is at most only a “vague echo” in Hegel’s early writings of “a

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64 Hegel’s Idealism, p. 7.
65 It is presented most clearly and succinctly in “Avoiding German Idealism.” Pippin’s exposition there focuses on Hegel’s essay “Faith and Knowledge.”
divinely productive nature,” or even more obscurely, of “our divinely productive intellect.”

Pippin continues: if we pay attention to the way in which Hegel frames his discussion of intellectual intuition, we will notice that it is not “in any way informed by the specific problem of mechanism and teleology or even the philosophy of nature in general.” Hegel’s interest in Kant’s doctrine of the intuitive intellect does not revolve around, that is, “the problem of organic wholes or functional explanation.”

And this is important in interpreting the meaning of Hegel’s doctrine of an intuitive intellect, Pippin thinks, for this is the problem that led Kant in the first place, in the third Critique, to concede our subjective need to postulate a divine intellect creative of nature. This is the problem that, in combination with the issue of the so-called impossibility of explaining the mind-world relation on the basis of orthodox Kantianism, led the early romantics to somewhat contemptuously sweep aside Kant’s

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66 “Avoiding German Idealism,” p. 139.
67 Ibid, p. 140.
68 Ibid.
69 According to Kant (CPJ, 5:408; 278) organisms are defined by two key features, both of which are rooted in our experience of them: (1) both the existence and form of the parts of any natural end are possible only by means of their relation to the whole, i.e., the whole is the ground of the parts. And (2) the parts of any natural end must be combined into a whole by virtue of being reciprocally cause and effect of each other. This makes organisms self-organizing. Because our intellects are discursive, however, and must proceed from parts to whole, and never vice versa, we can never comprehend organisms. They are inexplicable, so far as appearances are concerned, by our most precise mechanical explanations. Therefore, in order to make the existence of organisms intelligible to ourselves, we must assume the existence of a (Platonic) intuitive intellect or divine mind whose thoughts are productive of organisms (and the rest of the world), and so ground all of their parts in ideas of them as wholes. In other words, we must conceive them as possible with the help of an analogy: our own intentional causation. From the standpoint of the divinity’s intellect, mechanism and teleology are reconciled in a form of knowledge of which we cannot conceive. Of course, as Kant notes, it is always possible that even though mechanical explanations cannot make sense of organisms qua appearances, the supersensible cause of an organism (as a thing in itself) is just a bunch of substances (as things in themselves) interacting mechanically. Thus, the explanation of organisms in terms of a supersensible divine mind is merely regulative, the way in which our minds must regard them. For the kernel of this Kantian argument, see CPJ, §§ 76 and 77.
regulative strictures on the idea of the intuitive intellect, and maintain its reality and mysterious union with the human mind.

Hegel is not interested in such things, Pippin assures us. That is to say, he is not interested in natural ends, functional explanations, and the divine mind postulated on their behalf. Rather, he is interested in our capacity to estimate and appreciate nature as beautiful and living. It is this that suggests to him the need to rethink the notion of human thought as limited to the mere organization and systematization of given data, and to expand it to encompass the idea of a kind of understanding of nature or a grasping of meaning whose normative validity isn’t a function of the application of a rule to some given, non-conceptual content, yet is nonetheless requisite for rule-application in the first place.\(^{70}\) Such a fundamental orientation to life would be “like a self-orienting in relation to nature and others, or a kind of ‘intellectual intuition.’”\(^{71}\) It would be intellectual, because actively established, but intuiting, because an orienting within an experience, rather than the application of a rule. It would therefore be free from and unchecked by any given content, though it would constitute an activity already engaged in in the reception of any content and its conceptualization.

For Pippin, these suggestions of the early Hegel remain mere promissory notes and do not go far in explaining how the idea of “rational ‘self-determinations’ in relation to the contents of experience”\(^{72}\) can involve any determinate content. Nevertheless, even in these early Jena writings, Hegel already suggests where we are headed toward: “an extreme coherentism, a network of categories and principles

\(^{70}\) “Avoiding German Idealism,” p. 143.

\(^{71}\) Ibid, p. 150.

\(^{72}\) Ibid, p. 153.
‘unchecked’ by anything outside of itself, in which the reflexive network (i.e., historical conceptual scheme) only enjoys the particular content it has insofar as it is dialectically related to other such networks in a chain of progressive self-correction, ultimately leading toward a network whose content is fundamentally equivalent to the self-awareness of this whole process of thought and its interconnectedness. The notion of intellectual intuition proffered here is clearly altogether different than the ancient Platonic one. But, according to Pippin, the fact remains that this is the concept of the identity of thought and being that Hegel propounds, not that of the Platonic tradition.

Moving now to Forster’s argument for his own intersubjective idealist version of Hegel’s absolute, we should note first that he thinks Hegel developed this philosophical position beginning with the continuation and revision of “The Positivity” essay in 1796. Forster lists several statements from Hegel that suggest the latter, already in the mid-1790s, endorses the enduring communal consensus theory of truth. For example, regarding the ancient Greek’s grounds for believing their religion’s principles, Hegel says:

if it had been possible for the question to occur to one of them by what means he proposed to prove the divinity of a command or prohibition, he could have cited no historical fact, but only the feeling of his heart and the agreement of all good men (Pos. 1: 213; 164).

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73 Ibid.
74 Forster’s related conception of Hegel’s doctrine of intellectual intuition is of an enduring communal consensus as the locus of truth, unchecked by anything external to itself, other than its prior historically dominant consensus.
75 Forster’s argument regarding the Bern, Frankfurt, and early Jena Hegel is concentrated on pp. 226-31 of Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit.
76 Cited Ibid. p. 227.
To Forster this suggests the idea that for Hegel truth is the “*de facto* intersubjective agreement *within a communal tradition*.” So too does the following passage from the later “System of Ethical Life,” to which Forster has added his own interpretation in brackets:

The particular, the individual, is as a particular consciousness simply equal to the universal [i.e., there is a complete agreement between individual and community]; and this universality, which has simply unified particularity with itself, is the divinity of the people [implying, among other things, its power to determine what is true quite generally]” (SEL: 463; 144).

But besides these statements suggesting that Hegel does in fact accept the theory of truth that underpins the intersubjective idealist interpretation of Hegel’s absolute, Forster maintains that even the very young Hegel argues for this theory. That is, Hegel does not dogmatically assume its veracity. He reaches this theory of truth by criticizing the Kantian one he earlier accepted. In the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant argues that the concept of truth or objective validity is analyzable in terms of the idea of necessary and universal intersubjective agreement. But, according to Forster, Hegel’s intensive historical studies indicated to him that were this a defining necessary and sufficient condition of truth, truth would be more or less an empty concept: i.e., the number of necessary and universally intersubjectively valid judgments would be virtually empty, since as Hegel puts it in the new introduction to the “Positivity” from 1800: “The general concept of human nature admits of infinite modifications … [and] living nature is always something other than

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78 Cited *Ibid*, p. 227 n.64.
79 See §§ 18-19 of that work.
its concept” (Pos. 1: 218; 169). Instead of entirely jettisoning Kant’s original analysis and criterion of truth, Hegel keeps the key role assigned to intersubjective agreement, while abandoning Kant’s strictures on the necessary and universal nature of that agreement. The upshot is the de facto intersubjective agreement within a communal tradition, or the enduring communal consensus theory of truth.

I want to conclude this section by going beyond the evidence and arguments cited by Pippin and Forster in order to try to bolster at least the initial plausibility of the intersubjective idealist reading of Hegel. There are a number of places in Hegel’s early writings in which he speaks of truth in a culturally relativistic way. For example, he claims in “The Spirit of Christianity:”

In the Jewish writings we see past events, individual situations, and a human spirit that has passed away; in their acts of worship we see the doing of what has been commanded, and the spirit, purpose, and thought of what is done exist for us no longer and have any truth. For the Jews all this still had truth and spirit, but only their truth and their spirit (SC 1: 415; 298).

What holds good or is true for one people may not be true for another. Thus, what held good for the ancient Israelites would be for us something untrue, unfree, and commanded. Certainly, this seems to provide decent support for Forster’s reading of Hegel.

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81 Cf. from “The Positivity:”

Any doctrine, any precept, is capable of becoming positive, since anything can be proclaimed in a forcible way with a suppression of freedom; and there is no doctrine which might not be true in certain circumstances, no precept which might not impose a duty in certain circumstances, since what may hold good universally as truth unalloyed requires some qualification, because of its universality, in the particular circumstances of its application; i.e., it is not unconditionally true in all circumstances (Pos. 1: 221; 171-2).
The idea of truth as culturally relative or as dependent on the spirit of a people often emerges when Hegel is discussing his perennial concern of the rise and fall of cultural formations. In his early writings his mind always returns to what he at one point characterizes as the “process of fermentation through which the spirit strains upwards toward a new life out of the putrefaction of the deceased culture, and springs forth again in a rejuvenated shape from under the ashes of the old” (Intro. 2: 184; 284). And just as we would expect if the intersubjective idealist interpretation of his thought is correct, the notion of truth is clearly and inextricably linked to the life, spirit, or culture of a people. Here’s one more example, this time focusing on a people’s legislation:

Whatever has no true living ground in the present has its ground in the past—that is, we must look for a time when that determinacy which is fixed in the law but is now defunct was a living custom which harmonized with the rest of the legislation. But the effect of a purely historical explanation of laws and institutions does not extend beyond this specific end of [attaining] knowledge; it will go beyond its function and truth if it is supposed to justify in the present a law which had truth only in a life that is past. On the contrary, this historical knowledge of the law, which can discover the basis of the law only in bygone customs and in a now departed life, proves precisely that, in the living present, the law lacks any sense and significance (even if it still has power and authority because of its legal form (NL 2: 526; 177; my emphasis).

As this passage suggests, the laws of a people are true to the extent that they are “alive” for the people and correspond to its living customs. But if a people has sloughed off its old form of life and developed new customs and a fresh outlook and set of habits, then those laws are no longer true, even if, as Hegel says, they still retain their “legal form;” even if, that is, they continue to wield authority and are recognized by the mind as law. In order for its new truth to emerge into the daylight, it must
convert its current customs into the form of universality and law. Once again we see here something akin to the enduring communal consensus theory of truth.

We should mention at this point a final piece of evidence in favor of the intersubjective idealist reading of Hegel, which is to be found in his argument in the “Difference” essay against Karl Reinhold’s conception of what the latter calls the “arch-true,” or that which is true and certain in itself. For Reinhold, and I suppose for most people, what is true is the case independently of our thinking about it. But Hegel explicitly rejects this assumption:

We can see that where the absolute has the form of the arch-true, as it does here, philosophy is not concerned with producing knowledge and truth through reason. We can see that [Reinhold’s] absolute in the form of truth is not the work of reason, because it is already in and for itself something true and certain…. Reason cannot assume an active relation to the absolute. … One cannot deny that this sort of approach has its conveniences. But … the absolute becomes something true and certain solely through the spontaneous activity of reason (Diff. 2: 127; 184).\(^{82}\)

For Hegel we, or more precisely our rational activity, produces the absolute, and so the absolute “becomes something true” through reason. This touches upon one of the main ideas of the intersubjective idealist interpretation; viz., that the absolute does not exist at all apart from the life of man. Now admittedly, nowhere in the above passage does Hegel mention intersubjective agreement, an enduring communal consensus, or a communal tradition, which also is integral to the intersubjective idealist interpretation. But elsewhere in the “Difference” Hegel asserts that “reason is bound to find itself most explicitly in its self-shaping as a people [Volk], which is the most perfect

\(^{82}\) Cf. Hegel’s objection to the idea that the absolute must be kept outside of man in “Philosophy of Nature,” section I in particular.
organization that it can give itself” (Diff. 2: 87; 148). Thus, it is perhaps not too much of a leap to suppose that it is the intersubjective agreement among a people that is responsible for producing the absolute.

2.4 Evaluation of Hegel as Intersubjective Idealist

Let’s start our evaluation with Pippin’s point that Hegel would have to have been a philosophical idiot to adhere to the Platonic doctrine of intellectual intuition in the wake of Kant’s critical philosophy. This statement is far too strong and unconvincing, regardless of whether or not the doctrine is even ultimately imputable to Hegel. Beiser convincingly argues why this is the case, even if in the end we reject his own interpretation, as I think we should.

The Platonic notion of intellectual intuition was, Beiser tells us, prevalent among the early Romantics, among thinkers such as Novalis, Schlegel, Hölderlin, Schleiermacher, and Schelling. Indeed, if we recall, it formed one of the central components of their doctrine of absolute idealism, of which, in Beiser’s opinion, Hegel’s own philosophy was “only the most obscure and cumbrous expression.” The early romantics all felt justified in endorsing the idea, despite Kant’s strictures on our knowledge, because they maintained that without it we cannot explain the interaction between subject and object in our actual experience. In other words, borrowing a strategy from Kant, they argued that our union with the divine intellect is a condition of the possibility of the very activity of understanding in our experience. Thus, in effect, they maintained that Kant’s philosophy wasn’t critical enough and was

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83 *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 66.
unable to make sense of the connection of our thinking to the world. Assuming that
Beiser has accurately interpreted the period of early Romanticism and that Hegel was
privy to its content—both plausible assumptions, it seems to me—, it would make
good historical sense, and certainly would betray no philosophical idiocy, for Hegel to
espouse the Platonic doctrine of the intuitive intellect, regardless of whether that
intellect is partially transcendent or completely immanent, and independent of whether
the argument in its favor is ultimately decisive.

There is, besides, some fairly compelling textual evidence, at least on the
surface of things, in support of Hegel’s identification of reason, or the identity of
subject and object, with the Platonic notion on an intuitive intellect. We already saw
this evidence in chapter 2, section 2; so I will not repeat it here.

Pippin’s second argument again overstates his case and focuses too exclusively
on certain passages. He is right that Hegel’s discussion of the notion of intellectual
intuition, particularly in the Kant section of “Faith and Knowledge,” involves an
estimation and appreciation of beauty and life in nature. But, it is just false to say, as
he does, that Hegel’s interest in and discussion of the notion of an intuitive intellect
there and elsewhere in these early writings is not “in any way informed” by the issues
of mechanism and teleology, organic wholes, and functional explanation.

This can be seen even by sticking just to Pippin’s favorite early Hegel
document, “Faith and Knowledge.” Right in the middle of Hegel’s analysis there of
Kant’s doctrine of an intuitive intellect in the third Critique, Hegel expresses
frustration at the fact that Kant admits the possibility “that the mechanism of nature,
the relation of causality, is at one with nature’s teleological technique … within an
original primordial identity” (Faith 2: 326; 90), but then fails to recognize its reality. He then chastises “Kant’s misinterpretation” of Spinoza’s unity in terms of an absence of all final causes: ⁸⁶

In understanding Spinoza’s unity, Kant should have kept his eye on his own idea of the unity of an intuitive intellect in which concept and intuition, possibility and actuality are one…. He would then have had to take Spinoza’s unity, not as an abstract one lacking purposiveness, that is, lacking an absolute teleological coherence, but as the absolutely intelligible and in itself organic unity. In this way he would have rationally and directly cognized this organic unity which is by nature purposive [Naturzweck] and which he conceives as the determination of the parts by the whole, or as identity of cause and effect (Faith 2: 327; 91).

This passage concerning an intuitive intellect, contrary to Pippin’s assurances, is entirely concerned with issues of organic wholes, functional explanation, and the relation of that kind of explanation to the mechanism of nature. Hegel’s claim here is that Kant’s interpretation of Spinoza’s single substance is a falsification of Spinoza’s true view, which ironically corresponds to Kant’s own idea of intellectual intuition.

Pippin concedes that Kant introduces the idea of the divine mind as a regulative principle to explain the apparent teleology of nature, and he admits that the early romantics accorded that principle a constitutive status and identified it as the link between mechanical nature and the human spirit. To the extent that Hegel follows a similar pattern of reasoning, and to the extent that the context of his discussion of an intuitive intellect exhibits a concern for organic nature and its intelligible foundations, it seems that Pippin may have some reason to grant that Hegel’s idea of intellectual

⁸⁶ According to Kant’s interpretation of Spinoza, Spinoza’s monism allows him to grasp the idea of the unity of the parts of an organism; however, since the single substance of which all things are mere modes lacks understanding, Spinoza can’t make sense of final causation, i.e., of organisms being produced by objective concepts in the divine mind, which is the way we must conceive of organisms. See, for example, The Critique of the Power of Judgment, 5:392-4; 263-5.
intuition is the traditional Platonic one. And given that there does at least appear to be some evidence of such a pattern of reasoning and certainly of such a context—only Pippin fails to present it—, it seems Pippin has some reason to concede that one of the traditional readings of Hegel is correct.\(^87\)

The evidence that Forster brings forth, and the additional passages we’ve cited in order to bolster Forster’s case, is admittedly more persuasive. The young Hegel does seem at times to embrace something like what Forster calls “an enduring communal consensus theory of truth,” or truth as a “\textit{de facto} intersubjective agreement within a communal tradition.” And since Forster’s interpretation of Hegel is so close to Pippin’s, that evidence is useful to both of them. However, it is worth noting that careful attention to the passages Forster adduces for his own reading of Hegel refer to either religious, ethical, or legal concepts and beliefs; nowhere in them does Hegel espouse a \textit{universal} communal consensus theory of truth, if he even does with regard to those more limited concepts and beliefs: can not Hegel consistently maintain, for example, that the living ethical customs (codified in laws) of a people are valid for them so long as they are truly living, while at the same time maintaining that there is an absolute ethical life that ought to be living for a people, and that ought to come into existence, even though it can only do so through a series of stages of ethical life?\(^88\) In the next chapter, we will see that such indeed seems to be Hegel’s view.

\(^87\) Cf. Hegel’s discussion of Kant’s notion of an intuitive intellect in the context of teleology in the “Difference” essay: (Diff. 2: 103-4; 163).
\(^88\) Cf. the balancing act Hegel attempts to perform in the revised sections of “The Positivity” (Pos. 1: 219-20; 169-70) and in the “Natural Law” essay (NL 2: 522 ff.; 174 ff.): so long as a people’s ethical life and religion, for example, are natural for them, they are not positive and are proper for the time; but that does not mean that they realize the “ideal of human nature” (Pos. 1: 220; 170).
Despite whatever plausibility may still attach to the intersubjective idealist reading of Hegel’s absolute, the problems with accepting it are too great, and at least twofold. First, that reading’s treatment is incompatible with a view that we already have good reason to attribute to the young Hegel, viz., that there is a certain fixed, eternal structure to the universe. Recall the evidence from chapter 2 about Hegel’s embrace of the notion of eternal or rational ideas.

Hegel’s belief in eternal ideas structuring the entities of the universe surfaces, for example, in his philosophy of nature. If truth for Hegel is culturally relative, then it seems as if he would reject an absolute depiction of the truth of nature. But he clearly doesn’t. In his early Jena writings, especially in the “Difference,” he accepts Schelling’s basic outline of a philosophy of nature, the truth of whose elements and structure is not up for grabs, or dependent on one’s cultural and historical perspective.\(^8^9\) How can that be if Hegel is an intersubjective idealist, as Pippin and Forster say that he is?

Furthermore, Hegel’s preoccupation with the philosophy of nature is no mere peripheral issue. In the preface to “The Difference,” he says that one his aims in the work, indeed one of the needs of the age, is to,

recompense nature for the mishandling that it suffered in Kant and Fichte’s systems, and set reason itself in harmony with nature, not by having reason renounce itself or become an insipid imitator of nature, but by reason recasting itself into nature out of its own inner strength (Diff. 2: 13; 83).

\(^8^9\) For some of Hegel’s more detailed expositions of his philosophy of nature, see, for example: (Diff. 2: 109-110; 168-9), (NL 2: 500-3; 156-8), and (IAW 5: 263).
Later in the work he states that “[i]t is only because the object [i.e., nature] itself is a subject-object that I=I is the absolute” (Diff. 2: 97; 157; my emphasis). Pippin correctly identifies the principle of I=I as the Hegelian absolute, but in treating nature so casually for Hegel, and in focusing exclusively on human beings’ conceptual schemes throughout history, he overlooks the intimate connection that Hegel draws between the absolute and nature. Nature must have a certain fixed, eternal structure in order for the absolute to be the absolute. We do not yet know what exactly this is supposed to mean, but whatever it means, it rules out a conception of truth according to which it consists merely in an enduring communal consensus, which for all we know could run counter to any supposed eternal structure of the universe.

The same basic point holds for Hegel’s development (however inchoate) of a philosophy of spirit. Both in “The Difference” (e.g., Diff. 2: 46, 106-7; 113, 166) and elsewhere in Hegel’s early writings (e.g., IAW 5: 263-4), he affirms the existence of a series of stages (e.g., feeling and understanding) in self-conscious spiritual life. These too are not up for grabs, or relative to the de facto enduring communal consensus, or to any intersubjectively agreed upon conceptual scheme.

The second major problem with accepting the intersubjective idealist reading of Hegel’s absolute is that it fails to recognize that Hegel’s absolute is identical to a common spirit, forged by love and highest ethical consciousness, binding a nation together. At the end of chapter 2 we saw some passages from the young Hegel that suggest this, and in the next chapter we will expand upon and attempt to solidify this

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90 However, I disagree with Pippin about the meaning of Hegel’s “I=I.” I think Hegel has in mind by it, not Fichte’s self-positing self, nor an intersubjectively validated self-positing conceptual scheme definitive of reality itself, but rather the common spirit present in love and what Hegel calls “absolute ethical consciousness.” We will discuss this common spirit more fully in the next chapter.
interpretation. What we will come to appreciate, I submit, is that though Hegel’s absolute is, as the intersubjective idealist reading recognizes, identical to a certain human community, the focus is not on the intersubjectively agreed upon conceptual schemes of that community, but on ethical life; not on theoretical issues, but on the practical relations of the citizens of a nation to one another, particularly those that forge a common spirit out of separate individualities. It is true that Pippin and Forster can allow for ethical beliefs to function in a conceptual scheme, but that is an entirely different matter than the reality of love and highest ethical life.
Chapter 4

The Apotheosis of a Human Ideal

Our task in this our final chapter is to assemble what we have learned thus far about Hegel’s conception of the absolute—both what some of its features are, and what it cannot be like—and to fill out this inchoate picture in a way that both accounts for the Frankfurt and early Jena Hegel’s statements about God or the absolute, and that makes sense of why he accords it a divine or absolute status. Before outlining the chapter, let’s briefly summarize the results we’ve achieved thus far in our examination of the secondary literature and our provisional exploration of the Hegelian absolute.

We have seen good evidence for Hegel’s appropriation of the Kantian idea of intellectual intuition, a form of thought in which there is no separate, given component of cognition, i.e., no sensory manifold passively received and upon which the faculty of concepts operates; in intellectual intuition the spontaneity of thought is inseparable from the objects it thinks about. Unlike Kant, Hegel accords the idea a constitutive status; moreover, he maintains that it has application to us, to human beings, rather than to an external divinity (or even, a la Fichte, to an unattainable ideal of our own rational activity). We’ve also seen that he thinks intellectual intuition (the absolute, God, the divine) is embodied in “highest community” (Diff. 2: 82; 145) and “alone realized by and in ethical life” (SEL: 461; 143), especially the highest ethical life: love. To the extent that it is not fully realized by and in ethical life, or within the ethical relations of human community, it is projected or alienated from humanity as some
kind of alien divinity (whether alien to human nature, or alien to what human nature can actually achieve). In addition, we have seen good evidence for Hegel’s acceptance of the notion that the universe has an eternal structure, a certain fixed hierarchy of forms or ideas ranging from the lowest features of the natural world, to more complex natural entities, to the variegated forms of self-conscious spiritual life.

Now we must solidify this foundation and build upon it as encompassing and as cogent a reading of Hegel’s absolute as we can. We will argue in what follows (1) that the Hegelian absolute is equivalent to a certain ideal human community, a community (a) that embodies what Hegel calls “absolute ethical life,” with love (absolute ethical consciousness, intellectual intuition) as the guiding principle of the people; (b) that expresses that life in a system of legislation; and (c) that worships its divine nature both in an imaginative religion akin to that of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, as well as in Hegelian philosophy itself. Moreover, we will maintain (2) that this highest form of life is for Hegel the pinnacle of the hierarchy of being, the nature of each stage of which (moving from nature to finite spirit) is to approximate as best it can that highest life; (3) that the ideal human community includes or overreaches the entire hierarchy of finitude beneath it, since though it is absolutely unconditioned, it is only such insofar as it is self-producing out of the context of a hierarchy of nature and finite spirit whose essence it is to approximate it; (4) that Hegel’s dialectical method aims to cash out these metaphors of “approximation” and stands as the ultimate explanation of the absolute-status of ideal human community; and finally (5) that Hegelian philosophy is meant to show what the divine nature truly is, to get human beings to stop alienating the divine from their own
lives, both in the form of an objective God and in the form of an unattainable ideal, to recognize that the potential divinity of humanity can be realized, and to help usher in the ideal of man, which requires that the unconscious striving of Hegel’s contemporaries for the highest life be illuminated by the conceptual system of Hegelian philosophy.

Section 1 of this chapter concentrates on Hegel’s Frankfurt manuscripts and the conception of ideal religion they contain. According to this conception, ideal or absolute religion is the self-conscious worship through a mythological folk religion of the highest ethical community as the divinity itself. To the extent that this kind of religion is not present among a people, Hegel thinks, there inevitably must be some form of religious alienation, and the absolute cannot be fully present. Section 1 also provides evidence of the early Jena Hegel’s continued acceptance of his Frankfurt religious ideal and the overriding importance he places on it in the context of the highest human community. Clearly understanding Hegel’s conception of ideal religion will give us a more accurate and richer view of the Hegelian social ideal, as well as allow us to build a more nuanced and systematic connection between love and religious consciousness in Hegel’s thought. Moreover, further exploring Hegel’s account of religious alienation will bolster the claim we’ve been making about the importance of it in his early writings, as well as to bring that account itself and its scope into sharper focus.

Section 2 treats, first of all, the early Jena Hegel’s preoccupation with philosophy, its history, and the production of an absolute system of philosophy. It will try to show (1) that Hegel’s theory of the essence of philosophy and his own call for a
new system of philosophy harmonizes perfectly with the Frankfurt Hegel’s conception of the absolute and his religious views, and (2) that his philosophical efforts are not designed to supplant the Frankfurt ideal, but rather to adequately conceptualize it and help bring about its existence in the modern world in a way that reconciles it with the increased development of intellect and private life subsequent to the decline of social unity and common spirit present in the ancient world (Greece, pre-Christian Rome). Thus the early Jena Hegel’s absolute is not contained in a philosophical cognition of “the system”; rather, his philosophical system (which he only adumbrates in his early Jena writings) illuminates and helps engender that absolute, which itself is ideal human community, or absolute ethical life and its deification in ideal religion and Hegelian philosophy. Section 2 will also discuss further what we will argue is the proper way of grasping what makes Hegel’s absolute absolute.

§ 1. Ideal Religion and Highest Human Community

Beginning in his Frankfurt writings, Hegel develops a conception of ideal religion that perfectly coheres with his belief that the divine is equivalent to a certain ideal social existence of man. He does not abandon it in Jena, but it is in Frankfurt that it is most clearly articulated. According to that conception, ideal religion is the self-conscious worship through a mythological folk religion of the highest ethical community as the divinity itself, a worship that reinforces the solidarity of the community and achieves the complete actualization of the absolute. If a people’s ethico-religious life falls short of this, then it will imagine and worship its God in the
shape either of a purely objective divinity (e.g., the Judeo-Christian God distinct from man and the world), or in the shape of a purely subjective divinity (e.g., Fichte’s God, which does not and cannot actually exist, but which is ever more closely approximated by reality through the activity of rational agents).

Hegel’s conception of ideal religion first requires that we understand love, since for Hegel “[r]eligion is one with love” (LR 1: 244; 120). But afterwards we must consider how love falls short of ideal religion, since despite the fact that “love is a divine spirit, …it still falls short of religion” (SC 1: 405; 289). “What is religious … is the ‘fulfillment of love; it is reflection and love united, bound together in thought” (SC 1: 370; 253). In beginning to clarify these words, let’s begin by fleshing out Hegel’s notion of love.

At one point in his Frankfurt writings, Hegel describes love as the unification of inclination and duty, of sensibility and reason (cf. SC 1: 322 ff.; 210 ff.), and this may make it seem as though the concept is roughly the same as Schiller’s conception of virtue, which the latter articulates in the context of his critique of Kant’s moral philosophy: virtue, Schiller argues, requires a harmony between inclination and duty, according to which inclination participates equally in moral conduct, instead of, as for Kant, inclination always being subordinate to duty.2 However, though for Hegel love is indeed the harmony of sensibility and duty, the form this takes for him, and the

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1 Sometimes Hegel simply uses the term “religion” when designating the ideal religion he has in mind, presumably because it is the ideal. The context usually makes Hegel’s intent clear.
2 Schiller’s critique can be found in his On Grace and Dignity and On the Aesthetic Education of Man. Anne Margaret Baxley’s dissertation “Kant’s Theory of Virtue: The Importance of Autocracy” contains a good comparison between Kant’s and Schiller’s moral psychology and philosophy, and shows the degree to which Kant can consistently allow for the cultivation of feelings and inclinations in moral life in spite of his insistence on the autocracy of pure practical reason.
significance it has for him, is quite different than for Schiller. The fundamental point Hegel makes using the term “love,” or equivalently “friendship,” is that it is the condition in which a multiplicity of human beings transcend their narrow individualities and form a common identity or spirit. He does not mean this merely figuratively; he means it literally. That is, when a group of people leave behind their exclusive self-interests and consciousnesses, each person, Hegel thinks, is simultaneously an individual and the whole group: “The beloved is not opposed to us, he is one with our essential being; we see only ourselves in him—and yet also he is still not we—a miracle that we cannot grasp” (LR 1: 244; 120). Hegel is decidedly anti-reductionistic about the phenomenon, a phenomenon that indeed involves something like the Schillerian harmony of sensibility and duty, but clearly much more.

One of the most obvious applications of Hegel’s concept of love would be to the marriage bond, and in “The Spirit of Christianity” Hegel does use this example when commenting briefly on Matthew 19.4-6, in which Jesus, asked by some Pharisees whether it is ever lawful for a man to divorce his wife, responds: “These two, man and wife, become one, so that they are no longer two. What therefore God has unified, man should not separate” (SC 1: 387; 271). The way Hegel reads this passage, Jesus is referring to the common spirit of the couple, the fact that each is no longer a mere separate individual, but together they form a single life—each is at the same time the whole—, and moreover each is aware of himself or herself as belonging to that common spirit. This “living unification” of the lovers is “something divine,

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3 See, for example, Hegel’s instructive example at (SC 1: 364; 248) of an Arab and a stranger enjoying together a cup of coffee and forming “a bond of friendship.”
4 This is Hegel’s own summary or rewording of the New Testament passage.
effected by God’s agency” (ibid); it is “the beautiful [das Schöne]” or “a beautiful [ein Schönes]” (ibid). In fact, “the activity and effect [Wirkung] of the divine is only a unification of spirits” (SC 1: 372; 255; my emphasis).5

5 It may be worthwhile to cite some lines from a love poem dated April 13, 1811 (L, # 178) and written to his then fiancée Marie von Tucher, in which Hegel reaffirms his belief in the living unification of persons in marriage. He begins the poem by one morning inviting Marie to the mountain tops with him, the symbol of their united life of love. Then, describing the life of self-interested individuality, the “valley” below, from which they have already begun to ascend to reach that life, he writes:

The valley below of narrow nothingness,
Of vain exertion repaid in an exertion endless,
With dulled senses to desire bound—
There your heart has never been found.

Lifted out of this valley’s night by higher longing,
You beheld Good and Beauty self-revealing,
as from an inner light.
You took your path to the morning height.

Employing the myth of the phoenix arising anew from its ashes as a symbol of their awakening to a common life of love, he concludes the poem:

But the feeling of striving immortal
Forces him [i.e., the phoenix] beyond his self’s narrow portal.
May his earthly nature quake.
In flames this striving comes awake.

Narrow bands dividing us, fall away!
Sacrifice alone is the heart’s true way!
I expand myself to you, as you to me.
May what isolates us go up in fire, cease to be.

For life is life only as reciprocated,
By love in love is it alone created.
To the kindred soul abandoned,
The heart opens up in strength gladdened.

Once the spirit atop free mountains has flown,
It holds back nothing of its own.
Living to see myself in you, and you to see yourself in me,
In the enjoyment of celestial bliss we shall be.

In a letter to Marie later that summer (L. # 186) Hegel writes: “Distinguishing your love for me and mine from you, if I may be so emphatically explicit, would separate our love: this love is solely ours, merely this unity, this bond. Turn away from reflection within this distinction, allow us to hold fast to this One that can alone be my strength as well, my new love of life. Let this trust be the basis for everything, and then all will be truly well.”
Though the marriage bond is one of the most obvious instances of love, Hegel chiefly applies the notion to what we saw in chapter 2 is his interpretation of the Christian language of “the Kingdom of God,” viz., “the divine unification of men” (SC 1: 394; 278), “the beauty of the divine life of a pure human fellowship” (ibid), “a nation of men related to one another by love” (ibid), and thereby constituting “a whole which as a whole, as one, is the spirit of God whose sons the individual members are” (ibid). It is always the nation, the state, the community, the people that is foremost in Hegel’s mind. In a nation of this kind, “man has found himself again in another” (ibid).

That Hegel’s concept of love has application first and foremost to the socio-political sphere of a people or nation also comes out in his account of the relationship between love and the virtues, as well as in his critique of universal philanthropy. The way that Hegel understands the relationship between love and the virtues (e.g., courage), love is the unification of the virtues, which themselves become “modifications of love” (SC 1: 360; 244), or “modifications of one living spirit” (ibid.).

A living bond of the virtues, a living unity, is quite different from the unity of the concept [e.g., the concept of duty]; it does not set up a determinate virtue for determinate circumstances, but appears, even in the most variegated mixture of relations, untorn and unitary. ...Its expression will never be able to afford a rule[.] ...[I]t is the living interrelation of men in their essential being (SC 1: 361-2; 246).

This unity of the virtues in love, “which acts and restricts itself in accordance with the whole of the given situation, in complete absence of external restriction, and without

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I have quoted these passages at length because I think they do at least two things well: (1) they touch upon the main points in Hegel’s philosophy of love, and (2) they suggest that even the mature Hegel, the supposed cold, calculating logician, never abandons that philosophy and its significance; it simmers under the surface of his later work.

6 We will touch upon this “again” below.
at the same time being divided by the manifold character of the situation” (SC 1: 361; 245), avoids, Hegel thinks, the “inevitable conflicts” (ibid.) that arise when virtues are conceived as principles (universals) opposed to particular circumstances. Moreover, it does not refer to “universal love or philanthropy [die Menschenliebe], which extends itself to all, even to those of whom one does not know, whom one has not met, with whom one stands in no relation” (SC 1: 362; 246). That is not what Hegel means by love and virtue, but is rather “a shallow but characteristic discovery of ages which, because their real achievement is so poor, cannot help setting up ideal commands, virtues directed on an ens rationes [a mere ideal or “thought-thing’"] (ibid.). “A thought cannot be loved” (SC 1: 362; 247); but a mere thought is what one inevitably has in mind when one orients one’s ethical life towards all individuals, or towards all rational beings: one engages in such ethical behavior for the sake of a principle, e.g., respect for the dignity of humanity. But “love is a sensing of life similar to one’s own” (SC 1: 363; 247), and thus can only mature among a people or nation with a likeness of life, with a common cultural heritage and life. And because it is a common spirit, it neither needs nor is compatible with a set of moral rules in one’s head that are applied in corresponding particular circumstances, rules which in effect treat others as particulars distinct from oneself, and that can only leave the inner self divided between reason and sensibility.

7 The same message surfaces in Hegel’s critique of the early Christian community. Given that Hegel uses the early Christian phrases “the Kingdom of God” and “love,” one might reasonably expect that the early Christian community would be the exemplar of the divine community he highlights. But according to Hegel that community fails to fully exhibit love and live up to its own conception—its love is “inactive,” “undeveloped,” and “unliving” (SC 1: 397; 281), he says—because it extends its message to every human being across the world, something, Hegel thinks, is incompatible with a common form of life necessary for love’s fullest realization. See (SC 1: 394-7; 278-81).
When Hegel refers to love as a “miracle that we cannot grasp” (LR 1: 244; 120), or says in connection with love that the divine can only be articulated in “enthusiasm” (SC 1: 372; 255) or “mystical phraseology” (SC 1: 375; 259), he means, following Kant’s lead, that our discursive intellects cannot make sense of love, just like they cannot make sense of organic life. How can individual selves be separate and yet the same? Likewise, how can parts of an organism be separate and yet inextricable from the whole? The intellect or understanding can only unify separate things by means of concepts or universals. To use some of Hegel’s own examples, it can unify persons by noting their sameness of “disposition, similarity of principles, etc.” (SC 1: 376; 260), or even their common status as “believers” (SC 1: 393; 278) of the same faith. It can discern the “conceptual unification” (SC 1: 387; 271) of individuals as teammates, wearers of the same clothes, students at the same university, and so forth. But in each case the unity of the concept is essentially different from the things it unifies. It stands outside them, so to speak, so that in reality they stand outside one another and never form either a single common spirit, i.e., an actual unity of I’s, or a single organism, i.e., an actual unity of parts which exist as such only in the whole organism.

It is true that “everything expressed about the divine in the language of reflection is nonsensical [widersinnig]” (SC 1: 373; 256), and that “the passive spiritless assimilation” of verbal expressions of the divine “not only leaves the deeper spirit empty but also distracts the intellect which assimilates it and for which it is a contradiction [Widerspruch]” (ibid). But “[w]hat is a contradiction in the realm of the dead is not one in the realm of life” (SC 1: 376; 261). The divine spirit of love cannot
be grasped by the intellect, but it can be grasped “with the depths of [one’s] own spirit” (SC 1: 373; 256), i.e., through the lived, transformative experience of love in which one recognizes oneself in others in the context of civic life. Surely that is the experience Hegel is seeking, on a large scale, for his fellow Germans.

Love is the realization or actual existence of the mere idea of intellectual intuition. From the Hegelian point of view, in the traditional Kantian/Platonic notion, the unity of subject and object, freedom and nature, the possible and the actual, the universal and the particular, etc. is represented in an abstract, alienated form. That is, it is not yet embodied in man, and between men, which is its true form and actuality. In the experience of love between a people bound together by one life, where each sees himself in the others, there is no purely theoretical cognition in which a universal is applied to an external particular—no, that is, “theoretical syntheses [which are] quite objective, completely opposed to the subject” (Rel. 1: 242; 119); nor is there mere assimilation of the particular to the subject—no, that is, “practical activity that annihilates the object, and is completely subjective [e.g., Fichtean moral agency that seeks to entirely transform the not-I into the I]” (ibid). Instead, transcending the limits of discursivity, there is a unification of subject and object, their harmony, the sublation of theoretical and practical activity, in which individuals experience themselves as individuals—i.e., with “the possibility of separation” (Love 1: 246; 305)—, and yet at the same time as identical with others in an inclusive whole. As we saw, Hegel
expressly characterizes this experience of love in the language of intellectual intuition.  

Despite the shortcomings of his arguments against his opponents, then, Pippin seems to me fundamentally right in claiming that Hegel does not simply take over Kant’s idea of an intuitive intellect and assign it a constitutive status. To be sure, Hegel does take over the notion in its bare requirements—the union of freedom and nature, thought and being, etc.—; but in arguing that Kant and others who have come upon this idea have nearly always alienated it from the life of man, and so erected it as a beyond on the other side of man’s thinking and nature, he gives it an entirely different form or realization. Moreover, he gives it one essentially different from the one Pippin himself recognizes. Pippin is correct that Hegel places intellectual intuition within human community: recall Hegel’s claim that in “highest community … freedom as an ideal factor and reason as opposed to nature disappear completely” (Diff. 2: 82; 145). However, for Hegel the form that intellectual intuition assumes in highest human community is first and foremost a “practical” form, or to avoid the one-sided implications of that term, a form synthesizing “the practical” and “the theoretical;” it is not simply one involving a purely self-restrained, intersubjective projection of theoretical conceptual schemes, an idea, after all, perfectly consistent with the individuals involved failing to constitute a common spiritual life in love as intended by Hegel. Sharing a conceptual scheme with someone does not mean that

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8 Remember from chapter 2 Hegel’s statement that the unity of love “can be called unification of subject and object, of freedom and nature, of the actual and the possible” (Rel. 1: 242; 119). The vocabulary clearly reflects the Kantian language of intellectual intuition.
you’re united with them in the kind of love and friendship Hegel intends. That, as we saw in chapter 3, was a major shortcoming of Pippin’s account of Hegel.⁹

Turning now from love to ideal religion, recall that Hegel says that religion, having in mind its ideal form, is one with love, but that love still falls short of religion. Consider one more passage with the same message:

[L]ove is a divine spirit, but it still falls short of religion. To become religion, it must manifest itself in an objective form. It, a feeling, something subjective, must be fused with the universal, the represented, and thereby acquire the form of a being to whom prayer is both possible and due. The need to unite the subjective and the objective, to unite the feeling and its demand for objects with the understanding, to unite them in something beautiful, in a god, by means of imagination, is the highest need of the human spirit and the drive toward religion (SC 1: 406; 289).¹⁰

Ideal religion, Hegel contends, satisfies the deepest longing of the human spirit and overcomes the limitation of love. What is that limitation? Though a community of lovers is itself something divine, as Hegel repeatedly says, in its purity it stands opposed to its constituents’ reflection or intellect. Reflection inevitably crops up, establishes individuality and particularity in people’s lives, and thereby undermines the common spirit of love. In other words, unadulterated love cannot sustain itself. Ideal religion resolves this difficulty by simultaneously satisfying reflection while not permitting it to destroy love. It does so by welding in the imagination the group feeling of love with images or objects of the intellect. In other words, it deifies the common spirit of the people (their love). This form of consciousness and worship

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⁹ The same criticism applies to Forster’s reading.

¹⁰ Cf.: “Love is less than religion, … for only a unification in love, made objective by the imagination, can be the object of religious veneration” (SC 1: 364; 248); and, “[t]his love, made by the imagination into an entity, is the divinity” (Rel. 1: 242; 119).
ought to be the basis of a people’s life. Notice too that Hegel describes it as the unity of subject and object, just as he does love. In doing so, he is not changing his mind about the nature of intellectual intuition; it is still the common spirit of the group of lovers. However, he does think that the communal life of ideal religion can alone sustain love and make it truly living among a people.

Hegel’s conception of ideal religion is modeled on the “imaginative” or “artistic” religion of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, or to speak somewhat loosely, the religions of the Greco-Roman world. Now, of course, the way that Hegel understands Greco-Roman religions may not be the best (i.e., most historically accurate) way to understand them, but there is a significant amount of overlap between his appreciation of them and what modern historians have to say.

The following list of six central features of Greco-Roman religions may be helpful in appreciating Hegel’s socio-politico-religious ideal and his estimation of the imaginative religion of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans as simply the imaginative deification of the common spirit of the people. After each point I’ve included a passage from Hegel’s Bern or Frankfurt writings indicating its importance to him. Once we finish going through the list, we will bring out more explicitly

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11 Historians typically use the term “Greco-Roman world” to designate the lands surrounding the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great through the first three or four centuries of the Roman Empire. Hegel’s enthusiasm for ancient Greco-Roman religion does not extend so far in time—since he regards its essence as dying out with the death of the Roman Republic and the spread of Christianity in the Empire—; nor is it so encompassing—for Hegel ancient Judaism, for example, is fundamentally different in character. However, for the sake of simplicity, in what follows I sometimes speak of Hegel’s embrace of Greco-Roman religion.

12 In the following sketch of Greco-Roman religious life, I rely on chapter 2 of Bart D. Ehrman’s *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 
Hegel’s reason for according Greco-Roman religion the status of ideal religion and indicate further its importance for his thought.

1). **Almost all Greco-Roman religions were polytheistic:** In the ancient world, it was generally nonsense to think that there was only one divine being. Everyone knew of many gods of various kinds, descriptions, functions, and locations: gods of the household and courtyard, river gods and stream gods, gods of the field and forest, gods of the crops and weather, healing gods, fertility gods, war gods, state gods, gods of love, demigods, other divine beings that bridged the gap between mortals and the gods (e.g., great heroes and powerful athletes like Hercules), and of course the “Great Gods” worshiped throughout the Mediterranean (e.g., Zeus).

—— [In “The Positivity” Hegel speaks approvingly of the idea that “[e]very nation has its own imagery, its gods, angels, devils, or saints who live on in the nation’s traditions” and that “there also live in the memory of most nations, especially free nations, the ancient heroes of their country’s history” (Pos. 1: 197; 145). He only laments the fact that “Christianity has emptied Valhalla, felled the sacred groves, extirpated the national imagery as a shameful superstition, as a devilish poison, and given us instead the imagery of a nation whose climate, laws, culture, and interests are strange to us and whose history has no connection whatever with our own” (Pos. 1: 197; 146).]

2). **Most religious persons in the Greco-Roman world maintained that the gods dwelt in certain localities, structures, and natural objects, rather than in a purely otherworldly realm:** This belief that a god might actually be present in a holy place was widespread throughout the ancient world. In most ancient temples, the god was present in the cult image, or “idol,” located in a sacred room. Worshipers could

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13 Cf. Hegel’s support of polytheism in his outline of “The Spirit of Christianity;” “If love, God, dwells among men, then there can be gods; where not, so that it can only be spoken of, no gods are possible; the gods are only ideals of individual separations; if everything is separated, then there is only one ideal [i.e., a single, alienated God]” (FSC 1: 304-5).
come to perform cultic acts (principally prayer and animal sacrifice according to prescribed rituals) in honor of the god. Moreover numerous temples, spread around the earth, could be devoted to any of the gods.

—— [In “Religion, Founding a Religion” Hegel nostalgically comments that “[i]n the olden times the gods walked among men” (Rel. 1: 242; 119), and in “The Spirit of Christianity” he criticizes the ancient Israelites’ religion because “[a]n idol of God [Götterbild] was just stone or wood to them; ‘it sees not, it hears not,’ etc.—with this litany they fancy themselves wonderfully wise; they despise the image because it does not manage them, and they have no inkling of its deification in the intuition of love and the enjoyment of beauty” (SC 1: 284; 192)].

3). Religion in the Roman Empire and the Greco-Roman world was for the most part exceedingly tolerant of other religions: Despite the impression one might get from the persecutions of the early Christians by the Roman authorities, most people, including the authorities, were religiously nonexclusivistic, i.e., most did not hold that their religious beliefs and practices were right and that all others were wrong. In general, it was felt that there was no reason that everyone should worship the same gods anymore than have the same companions. Every god was worthy of worship, and in a way appropriate to him or her. Moreover, worship of new gods was acquired through travel and conquest. There was no idea that my gods are real, whereas yours are false or unworthy of worship, or that you must convert to my gods or suffer punishment.

—— [In “Love and Religion” Hegel notes that “as they [i.e., the so called “natural peoples,” especially the early Greeks] become

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14 Incidentally, the persecution of the early Christians was probably due to their perceived disloyalty to the Empire: in refusing to sacrifice to the gods for the sake of the emperor or to put some incense on the altar to his genius (i.e., to the divine spirit that watched out for his family), they seemed blatantly defiant of the state’s power and the gods who made it powerful.
acquainted with more tribes, who are not hostile to them, they accept more gods into their Pantheon. —Your god shall be our god too, or in other words, let us not any longer regard ourselves as sundered but as united. —A people that despises all alien gods must bear hatred for the whole human race in its breast’ (LR 1: 243; 119).15

4). Greco-Roman religions were typically concerned with the present life rather than the afterlife: Most people in the ancient world would make little sense of the idea that one turns toward religion because of a general belief in the afterlife, or more particularly in order to avoid eternal torment and secure eternal happiness. Most people did not even believe in an afterlife. Those who did, setting aside those initiated in the mystery cults, believed that it entailed some sort of vague, shadowy, and undesirable existence, an underworld to which all people, rich or poor, moral or immoral, faithful or faithless, were destined. They thus had no motivation to try to secure a good spot there. For most in the ancient world, religion was a way to secure a good life in this world, in the here and now, by winning the favor of the gods.

—— [Remember from chapter 1 Hegel’s claim from “The Positivity” that “Cato turned to Plato’s Phaedo only when his world, his republic, hitherto the highest order of things in his eyes, had been destroyed; at that point only did he take flight to a higher order still” (Pos. 1: 205; 155)].

5). Almost all Greco-Roman religions focused on cultic acts of worship rather than doctrines (what to believe) or ethics (how to behave): Belief scarcely

15 Cf. a passage from “The Spirit of Christianity,” which contrasts ancient Judaism with Greek and Roman imaginative religion: “Hence Abraham’s God is essentially different from the Lares and the national gods. A family which reverences its Lares, and a nation which reverences its national god, has admittedly also isolated itself, partitioned what is unitary, and shut others out of its god’s share. But, while doing so, it has conceded the existence of other shares; instead of reserving the immeasurable to itself and banishing others therefrom, it grants to others equal rights with itself; it recognizes the Lares and gods of others as Lares and gods. On the other hand, in the jealous God of Abraham and his posterity there lay the horrible claim that He alone was God and that this nation was the only one to have a god” (SC 1: 279-80; 188).
mattered in Greco-Roman religion. What mattered was that people attend to or care (the English term “cult” derives from the Latin term for “care”) for the gods through prayer and sacrifice, so as to secure their favor.

There were established cults for local and family deities, whose prescribed acts might involve honoring a family god by pouring out some wine before a meal, or perhaps saying a prayer for favor. Animals would be sacrificed and prayers would be spoken at periodic festivals for local gods. The worshippers or priest would burn the inedible part of the animal to the god; the participants would eat the rest.

Special festival days would be dedicated to the worship of the state gods. These were for worshipping the gods who made the state so great and for securing their continued favor and patronage. Typically, these festivals would begin with priests following standard rituals: the prescribed sacrifices and prayers would be performed and recited in the same way year after year. This would be followed by great celebrations in the capital city.

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[In “The Positivity” Hegel upholds “[t]he Greeks [who] had their religious sagas almost exclusively for the purpose of having gods to whom they could devote their gratitude, build altars, and offer sacrifices” (Pos. 1: 202; 151), in contrast to his own people’s intellectualistic, moralistic, literal, and therefore positivistic way of reading the Bible’s sacred history.]

6). **Almost all religions in the Greco-Roman world were closely tied to the political state:** Unlike the modern Western division between church and state, in the Greco-Roman world the function of the state and the performance of religion were inseparable. Both ideally served the same purpose: to make life prosperous, meaningful, and felicitous. The state sponsored and encouraged the worship of the
gods, and the gods reciprocated by making the state great and by bringing peace and prosperity to its members.

—— [Again from “The Positivity,” Hegel praises “the gods to whom cities and empires ascribed their origin, to whom the people made daily offerings, whose blessings were invoked on every enterprise, under whose banners alone the armies had conquered, who had been thanked for victories, who received joyful songs and earnest prayers, whose temples and altars, wealth and statues, were the pride of the people and glory of the arts, and whose worship and festivals were but occasions for universal joy” (Pos. 1: 203; 152)].

16 Hegel’s early and constant preoccupation with religion, and his admiration for the religion of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans in particular, is guided by his deep longing for a rich and connected communal life and his reflections on the kind of religion both compatible with and supportive of it. To his mind it is the ancient Greco-Roman religious consciousness, which has nothing to do with intellectually positing supra-human personalities, or divinities as particulars, behind the objects we typically see, think about, and engage with—so that there is, for example, “up in heaven a troop of gods [who] walk about, eat, drink, indulge in horseplay” (Pos. 1: 204; 153). Instead, it was essentially the free play and harmony of the mental faculties—“that enjoyment of beauty which arises from the free play of our mental powers” (Pos. 1: 199; 148). And for him that means that it is the form of religion in which love is no longer alienated from human beings and clothed in the garb of external divinities, for the divine beings in imaginative polytheism are simply

16 Contrast Hegel’s denigration of Christianity at the end of “The Spirit of Christianity:” “...it is contrary to [the Christian religion’s] essential nature to find peace in a nonpersonal living beauty. And it is its fate that church and state, worship and life, piety and virtue, spiritual and worldly action, can never dissolve into one” (SC 1: 418; 301).

17 It is of course not my purpose to evaluate how accurate Hegel’s interpretive use of ancient pagan religion is, whether it is partial and one-sided, unrealistically romantic, etc.
the realized love of the community given shape in the form, say, of a statue or temple present for intuition. The so-called idols of ancient polytheism are for Hegel “the deification [of stone or wood] in the intuition of love and the enjoyment of beauty” (SC 1: 284; 192), and this they are self-consciously for the worshipper.

The mythological consciousness of the ancient Greeks and Romans overcomes love’s remaining deficiency, viz., its inability to on its own harmonize with the intellect. This deficiency means that without being integrated into ideal religion, a people’s love is bound to be attenuated, sporadic, and, as Hegel likes to say, not genuinely “living.” In order to be genuinely living, their love must be inseparable from their particular form of life, their geography, climate, history, heroes, constitution, modes of production, games and other forms of play, and so forth. It must be integrated with citizens’ enterprises, activities, tasks, self-conceptions, personal engagements, desires, civic endeavors, and other potential points of division between persons and between separate “parts” (e.g., reason and sensibility) of a person, all of which are in one way or another the object of man’s intellectual and practical capacities. An imaginative folk religion (ideal religion) achieves this integration, so that, for example, the founders or liberators of a nation, “their history, the recollection of their deeds, [are] linked with public festivals, national games, with many of the state’s domestic institutions or foreign affairs, with well-known houses and districts.

\[18\] Cf.: “In an Apollo or a Venus,” Hegel says, “we must forget the marble, the breakable stone, and see in its shape the immortal only. In looking at the shape, we are permeated with the sense of love and eternal youth” (SC 1: 369; 252).

\[19\] Remember Hegel’s critique of the early Christian community at (SC 1: 394-7; 278-81), where he targets the unsubstantial nature of their love and the way it was spread out across humanity as a whole. This is because their communal life was divorced from the state and the broader activities of the surrounding cultures. According to Hegel, it was concentrated on proselytizing, an attenuated form of life unfit for a truly living love.
with public memorials and temples” (Pos. 1: 197; 145-6). That is also why in the case of the ancient Greeks’ worship of Hercules, for example, “it was solely to courage configurated, solely to the hero who had become a god and now neither fought nor served any more, that altars were dedicated and prayers offered” (SC 1: 410; 293), where Hercules’s courage is a virtue manifesting the love binding the ancient Greeks into a single common spirit.

In “playing imaginatively” with the gods of Greece and Rome, in worshipping and sacrificing to them at the temples, and in enjoying their images at public festivals, the ancients were “fully unified” (FSC 1: 302), with one another and within themselves. This is because they synthesized their feeling of love, their common spirit, together with an image or object of the intellect in a communal divine play of the imagination. The object in this relationship (e.g., the image of Hercules or a statue of Venus) is no mere thing for the understanding, and it is not experienced as simply a symbol or personification of their love. In the case of ancient Greek religion, “the objective aspect of the god, its shape, is objective only insofar as it is only the representation or manifestation [Darstellung] of the love uniting the community” (SC 1: 409; 292-3). The religious object, the objective aspect of the god or divinity of the group, is only the pure counterpart of their love, which therefore contains nothing individual or purely objective over and above their love given shape. In the case of

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20 Cf. Hegel’s demand: “The community has the need of a God who is the God of the community, in whom there is represented just the exclusive love, their character, their relation to one another; not as a symbol or allegory, not as a personification of something subjective, where one would become conscious of the cleavage of the subjective and its represented shape, but rather as something which is simultaneously the feeling, i.e., in the heart, and object; feeling here means a spirit which pervades all and remains a single essence, even if every individual is conscious of his feeling as his own individual feeling” (SC 1: 406-7; 290). Cf. (SC 1: 366; 249).
Hercules, it was solely to the love and common spirit of the community, demonstrated by courage, that worship was directed. There is, therefore, in ideal religion less

21 In this context, Hegel strongly contrasts the Greek religious experience to both the religions of Jesus and the early Christian community. Readers can easily be mislead into thinking that for the Frankfurt Hegel at least, Jesus and/or his early followers represent the pinnacle of religious consciousness. Richard Kroner, for instance, seems to make just this mistake in the introduction to his translation of Hegel’s Early Theological Writings. For Hegel, though, despite closely approximating ideal religion, neither Jesus nor his immediate followers after his death satisfied the highest need of man, and so they were forced to posit, in their own ways, a divinity entirely outside of themselves and their activity of religious thought.

Regarding Jesus’s religion Hegel maintains that because the world and his people was not ready to embody his notion of the Kingdom of God (SC 1: 399; 284), Jesus was forced either to abandon his ideal of a nation of lovers and join his people, or to hold on to it “as a splendid shadow” (SC 1: 401; 286) of its reality, thereby severing himself from the world and his people. Jesus chose the latter horn of the dilemma. Consequently, his “need for religion [became] satisfied in the God of the whole, since his sight of God was his flight from the world” (SC 1: 406; 290). That is, even though he began with the idea of love, he ended up with a God as the pure opposite of the world, and a single God for every man, rather than a polytheism rooted in the communal life of man. Jesus’s God coincided with his “flight from [the world] into heaven” and the “restoration” there of the life in love that was here “becoming dissipated into the void” (SC 1: 402; 287), i.e., that was constituted by negative relations to the world rather than common aims and activities embodying relationships in this world, animated by imaginative religion. Because he could not satisfy his highest drive in reality, because his love could never be fully real in this world or merge with objectivity in a living folk religion, and because his nature was to rebel against the times and his people, he had to take this recourse to love’s ideal satisfaction in a supernatural realm and posit an otherworldly God who would there help achieve and participate in it. Even for the Frankfurt Hegel, therefore, Jesus is still “a pure enthusiast [ein reiner Schwärmer]” (SC 1: 398; 282). Cf. Hegel’s earlier, likewise negative characterization of Jesus as “a mystical enthusiast” (Rep. 1: 207). Jesus is there expressly contrasted with the republican who finds in his state the idea, the living divinity, which occupies all his powers and for which he is willing to die.

The fate and religion of the early Christian community after the death of Jesus was a bit different. Those individuals had more companionship with each other, had less contact with the world, less collision with it than Jesus did, and so were not compelled to flee to the divinity as the world’s opposite (SC 1: 406; 290), even though their love was to some degree empty and devoid of integration with specific forms of life as it had been when Jesus was alive. Once Jesus had been crucified, therefore, their need for religion was able to take the form of the man Jesus: their “need for religion [found] its satisfaction in the risen Jesus, in this shaped love” (SC 1: 408; 292). In the risen figure of their old friend and leader, “the divinity in the loving community” found “an image and a shape” (ibid); their attenuated “love found the representation of its unity” “as a living being” (ibid) or god. What love they had could now enjoy itself in objective form, and “the worship of this being [was] now the religion of the group” (ibid). However, this God of the community fell short of the pagan gods, e.g., Hercules, because it was also an exclusive individual. Jesus as the divine object of the early Christian community included the human individual that “lived, died on the cross, and was buried” (ibid). Something completely objective and individualized, “an object which is the understanding’s counterpart” (SC 1: 409; 293), is thus appended to the divinity of the community, and accordingly for the early Christians “it is to the individual [i.e., to Jesus of Nazareth] that prayer is to be offered” (SC 1: 410; 293). For the early Christian community, therefore, “the divine, that which unifies it, has the form of something given” (SC 1: 410; 294). By contrast, “[t]o the spirit, to life, nothing is given” (ibid); nothing for its communal worship and life, that is, is pure object. Like their leader, but in their own way, the early Christians failed to satisfy “the highest need of the human spirit” (SC 1: 406; 289).
room for pure individuality to rupture the common spirit of a nation of lovers. It alone can make love fully living. In this kind of life, in which in worshipping the objectification of their love, the group is thereby self-consciously worshipping its common spirit, the citizen’s faculties and inner life are harmonized, and so too is his life with the lives of his fellow citizens. In this kind of life, intellectual intuition, the unity of subject and object, is fully realized. Imaginative religion is for Hegel the ultimate unification of subject and object, even more so than love alone.

The young Hegel wishes to rejuvenate the German spirit and spark the homegrown production of a civic religion that captures the key features of ancient Greek and pre-Christian Roman religion as he understands it. By so doing he hopes to usher in what he sometimes calls “the idea of man” (FSC 1: 300), or “an ideal of humanity” or “human nature” (Pos. 1: 220; 170). This would be the condition in which there be a nation of men related to one another by a love animating their form of life and affirmed in imaginative religion. Highest human community would be fully realized and worshipped for the true divinity that it is, much as it was in ancient times. It would be an interpenetration of religion and politics, spiritual and worldly action, a perfect bond among individuals—“a living unification of individualities” (SC 1: 405; 289)—, one that allows space for individuality and private life, but that cultivates the larger public spirit. It would be God or the absolute as “fully existent” (SC 1: 318; 206).

Of course, Hegel is quite aware that this ideal needn’t and hasn’t been embodied by every nation. Those nations for whom religion does not coincide with the realization of love objectify an alienated form of subject-object identity. The
result is an objective, alienated divinity, one whose essence is regarded as transcending the actual communal life of man. In other words, for those peoples who have not themselves embodied the subject-object unification of ideal religion and highest community, this highest form of life is projected via the imagination into either an existent being purely external to humanity (i.e., God), or into a divine ideal for humanity that can never be achieved, even into eternity, because it requires the complete control of objectivity by subjectivity (e.g., as Fichte does): “We cannot set up the ideal outside of ourselves, or it would then be an object [God]—and not in ourselves alone either, for then it would be no ideal” (LR 1: 244; 120); that is, it must be the unity of subject-object that is love and made living in ideal religion. We saw this dynamic already in the case of Hegel’s claim that “God is love, love is God, there is no other divinity than love—only what isn’t divine, what doesn’t love, must have the divinity in the idea outside oneself” (FSC 1: 304). We should now be able to appreciate Hegel’s addendum: even with love alone not all religious alienation has been overcome; only when it is fully integrated with a people’s form of life through something akin to the ancient mythological consciousness is religious alienation completely overcome.

Whether a given people realizes ideal religion or only some form of religious alienation, it must have some form of religion (imaginative absolute-consciousness). Religion is not merely optional for human beings; it is necessary for human beings, and it constitutes their essence. This is already implicit in the above passage referring to the equivalence of God and love: “God is love, love is God, there is no other divinity than love—only what isn’t divine, what doesn’t love must,” Hegel says,
“have the divinity in the idea outside oneself” (FSC 1: 304; my emphasis). In this passage Hegel conflates love and religion, but his point is still clear: to the extent that a community of individuals cannot realize love among themselves, it must alienate the divine from the community, i.e., its imaginative portrayal of a subject-object unity must be alienated and unfulfilled, and so of a purely objective divinity.\(^{22}\) Thus, if man is caught up in a purely practical or purely theoretical existence, if, for example, he tries to “master” other things or other people, or is in turn mastered by them,\(^{23}\) then he can never achieve genuine subject-object unification (intellectual intuition)—for “[l]ove can only take place against its equal, against the mirror, against the echo of our existence” (Rel. 1: 243; 119), and “[t]rue union, or love proper, exists only between living beings who are alike in power” (Love 1: 245; 304).\(^{24}\) Man is then compelled to unite what cannot truly be united as it is in love, i.e., he must alienate God from his own life and from the world. The result: “[t]his united thing, this ideal [i.e., God], is here an object, and there is something in it which is not subject” (LR 1: 244; 120).\(^{25}\)

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\(^{22}\) On the necessity of religion in the life of man, cf. the following two passages: “human nature itself of necessity needs to recognize a being who transcends our consciousness of human agency, to make the intuition of that being’s perfection the animating spirit of human life, and to devote time, feelings, and organizations directly to this intuition, independently of aims of other kinds” (Pos. 1: 225; 176; my emphasis); and “[r]eligion is any elevation of the finite to the infinite, when the infinite is conceived as a definite form of life. Some such elevation is necessary because the finite depends on the infinite” (Frag. 1: 426; 317; my emphasis).

\(^{23}\) The term “mastery [\textit{Beherrschung}]” (SC 1: 275; 183) is prevalent in “The Spirit of Christianity,” especially its early pages concerning the spirit of ancient Judaism.

\(^{24}\) Love supersedes the mastery of subject by object (the purely theoretical involvement with the world) and vice versa (the purely practical involvement with the world): “[t]ruth is something free which we neither master nor are mastered by; ...Truth is beauty intellectually represented” (SC 1: 288; 196).

\(^{25}\) The other extreme, recognized by Hegel in the “Fragment of a System,” is Fichte’s conception of the divinity: instead of God being an alienated but existent object (and so an absolute or “infinite object” (SC 1: 283; 191)), Fichte conceives of God as a never to be achieved ideal of pure reason (Frag. 1: 426-427; 318). For him, then, the absolute is “a subject, and there is something in it which is not an object,” i.e., it consists in the never to be fully attained domination of objectivity (nature) by subjectivity (reason). Cf. Hegel’s account of Fichte’s God at (FK 2: 331-332; 95-96), which is especially clear on the matter of the merely ideal status of the Fichtean divinity.
But, as we have seen, the highest need of the human spirit is ideal religion, and human beings must always approximate this form of religious consciousness if they cannot achieve it legitimately.

We have seen that the young Hegel wishes to rejuvenate the German spirit and spark the homegrown production of a civic religion that captures the key features of ancient Greek and pre-Christian Roman religion as he understands it. But would there by anything different in the anticipated German ideal human community than there was with the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans? Is the return to the ancient life of the Greeks and Romans simply a repetition without genuine growth or improvement? Is the intervening history merely one long tragedy without a purpose? The answer to the first question is “yes,” and to the second and third questions is “no,’ though admittedly the Frankfurt Hegel is not particularly clear about what the modern resurrection of ancient socio-politico-religious life is supposed to add to it. Let’s explore these matters a bit further.

Consider first Hegel’s reaction to Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. After he read that work, he called it “a masterpiece” (L, # 11) in a letter dated April 16, 1795 to his former roommate and fellow philosopher Schelling. A central idea of Schiller’s work is that there are “three separate moments or stages of development, which not only the individual man but also the whole race must pass through, and in a particular order, if they are to complete the whole circle of their determination.”26 First there is an initial harmony or stage of beauty in human life,

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26 Twenty-fourth letter. Incidentally, the notion of a parallelism between the development of individual man and the human race is not peculiar to Schiller, but is rather fairly common to the time period.
incarnated in the ancient Greeks; then the harmony is rent asunder by the development of the divisive powers of the intellect or the understanding, embodied in the history of the West after the golden age of Greece down to Schiller’s own time period; finally, there is a reestablishment of harmony and beauty, but on a higher level in which intellect has been sublated, or brought into harmony with beauty. From Schiller’s standpoint this perfection of the life of man lies in the future, and Schiller aims for his letters to contribute to its realization.

The young Hegel certainly picks up on at least aspects of this idea. We see this first of all in his Frankfurt doctrine of the life-course of the human being. The course of the individual’s spiritual education commences with the undeveloped unity and harmony of the child—“the child carries the unity, the connection, the concord with the entire harmony, undisturbed though undeveloped, in itself” (SC 1: 389; 273). This is the person’s potential for love and ideal religion, his inner essence, but it needs to be actualized. The human being starts to develop a separate existence, a reflective life of his own, which from the standpoint of religion involves alienation—“It [i.e., the child] begins with faith in gods outside itself, with fear, until through its actions it has [isolated and] separated itself more and more” (ibid). Hegel spends a great deal of time in his Frankfurt writings describing how “bad conscience” (Rel. 1: 242; 119), “guilt” (LR 1: 243; 120), “duty [i.e., Kantian morality]” (SC 1: 323; 211), and other forms of ethical and religious alienation appear as stages on the way to ideal communal existence, which is what we call ourselves to when we, for example, feel the pangs of bad conscience brought on by our separation from our fellow citizens (see,

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27 Cf. (Love 1: 246, 248-9; 305, 307-8) and (SC 1: 385-6; 269-70).
for example, FSC 1: 306) in the highest socio-politico-religious life. Then comes love’s reconciliation, in which a purely personal life and existence is shed in favor of spirit—“then [the child] returns though associations to the original unity which now is developed, self-produced, and sensed as a unity. The child now knows God, i.e., the spirit of God is present in the child” (SC 1: 389; 273). Love actually presupposes alienation, division, and the development of life. It closes the circle of man’s development, and when fully realized and accompanied by ideal religion, man is perfected. This is one way in which Hegel develops the Trinitarian theme in his philosophy of religion. But notice that it applies in particular to human beings’ socialization into a nation that has achieved ideal human community. For those who are not properly socialized into this life, they of course never complete the prescribed course of their development. According to Hegel, they never satisfy their deepest needs.

Notice too that this depiction of the ideal life-course of the individual person does not apply precisely to human history. Hegel’s view of history is that it proceeds from a kind of socio-politico-religious perfection in the world of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, to forms of alienated communal life, to the return to something like the perfection of the ancients. The ancients (at least the adult ancients) are not like the children in the previous paragraph in that their unity is developed, self-produced, and sensed as a unity. What then is modernity supposed to add to the perfection of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans? The young Hegel

28 Some of Hegel’s best writing is preoccupied with these kinds of “existential” descriptions.
29 Cf. (SC 1: 394; 278-9).
30 Recall the similar passage from “Natural Law” cited on p. 91 in chapter 2.
discusses a variety of forms of alienated religious consciousness and non-ideal socio-politico-religious existence, in more or less detail, in the extant manuscripts from his Bern and Frankfurt periods: e.g., the moral and religious authoritarianism of ancient Judaism, the religion and unfulfilled love of the historical Jesus, the religion and unfulfilled love of the early Christians, later forms of Christianity, “oriental” religion, late ancient Greek and Roman paganism, as well as the God and forms of morality of such philosophers as Kant and Fichte. But he does not there explicitly address what the anticipated modern return to what he would happily call the communal “health” of the ancients adds to the ideal of man. He only does so in his early Jena writings, to some key passages of which we will now turn.

Though in Jena Hegel does not use the term “love,” which as we’ve seen is equivalent for him to a deep “friendship” most perfectly exhibited in a nation of individuals bound together by a common spirit, the underlying idea is given definite expression in his notion of “the absolute ethical consciousness” (NL 2: 500; 155), or more simply “absolute consciousness” (SEL: 461; 143) or “absolute ethical life” (SEL: 465; 147).\textsuperscript{31} Hegel states clearly that rigid distinctions between morality, legality, natural law, positive law, etc. are all false abstractions from the idea of absolute ethical life, i.e., the socio-politico-religious ideal whose structure he explicates in “Natural Law,” in “System of Ethical Life,” and to a lesser extent in “The German Constitution.” It is essentially the same social ideal as articulated in his Frankfurt period, though in certain of its elements it is given more detailed order and

\footnote{31 Cf. (NL 2: 509; 163).}
structural exposition in his early Jena writings. Its religious aspects are muted in these Jena writings, but they are present nonetheless.

That kind of ethical consciousness, also referred to as “the absolute living spirit” (NL 2: 489; 147), involves “living in and with and for one’s people, leading a universal life wholly dedicated to the public interest, or philosophizing” (ibid.), and this in the specific sense of “the absolute identity of intelligence, … and intuition of the individual in the alien individual, and so the supersession of natural determinacy and formation [i.e., of a purely individual life and separate existence]” (SEL: 461; 143). Absolute ethical consciousness is “the essence of an individual … a universal … the pure spirit of a people” (NL 2: 504-5; 159). And as we saw is the case of the relationship of the virtues and love in Hegel’s Frankfurt writings, the “ethical qualities [i.e., virtues] which pertain to the individual, such as courage or moderation or thrift or generosity, etc. are … possibilities or capabilities of partaking in universal ethical life” (NL 2: 505; 160). Its most encompassing virtue is the willingness to die for one’s people: “the individual proves his oneness with the people … only by [incurring] the danger of death” (NL 2: 481; 140). Here Hegel shows that he still upholds his earlier idea from “The Positivity” that the Greeks and Roman republicans are to be praised.

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32 Hegel refers to this “courage” as “the absolute formal virtue” (ibid.). He explicitly rejects Kant’s doctrine of a “perpetual peace” and argues for “the necessity of war for the shape and individuality of the ethical totality” (NL 2: 481-2; 140), i.e., for the actual existence of absolute ethical consciousness and the people as a living whole. “War,” he says, “preserves the ethical health of peoples in their indifference to determinate things [e.g., private possessions, a self-absorbed life focused on purely personal happiness]; it prevents the latter from hardening, and the people from becoming habituated to them, just as the movement of the winds preserves the seas from that stagnation which a permanent (or indeed ‘perpetual’) peace would produce among peoples” (NL 2: 482; 141). Without the willingness to die for one’s country and the actual demonstration of this willingness in war, peoples as organic wholes are “[mere] creations of thought [Gedankendinge]” (NL 2: 481; 140): they don’t really exist. Cf. Hegel’s claim that the German people, unwilling to fight in a unified fashion for their Empire, don’t truly exist as a people; (GC 1: 461; 6), (NL 2: 523-4, 527-8; 174-5, 177-8).
for sacrificing their lives for the idea of their country, the final aim of their world and of the world. Here also Hegel assigns to the absolute ethical consciousness all the essential qualities of love to it—e.g., seeing oneself in the other—, though he makes more explicit the sacrifice and conflict this involves than he does in Frankfurt, due to the potentially misleading overtones of the Christian term “love.”

Moreover, just as the Frankfurt Hegel constantly qualifies love as divine, the early Jena Hegel often refers to absolute ethical consciousness as divine. For example, after asserting that the military nobility embodying absolute ethical consciousness ought to form the highest class of a society, to which the two lower classes in Hegel’s idea of absolute ethical life, viz., the bourgeoisie class and the class of peasant laborers, ought to be subordinate, he calls the warrior nobility class “the living movement and divine self-enjoyment of this whole [i.e., the spirit of the people] in the totality of the individuals who constitute its organs and members” (NL 2: 489; 147; my emphasis). Regarding members of the lower classes who cannot directly embody the absolute ethical consciousness of a people, he says:

But this real essence [viz., the individual person of one of the lower classes] is nevertheless completely bound up with the absolute indifferent nature and shape of ethical life; and if it must perceive this nature only as something alien [i.e., if he can only project it as an alien divinity], it does nevertheless perceive it and is at one with it in spirit. Even for this real essence, it is of primary importance that the completely pure and indifferent shape and the absolute ethical

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33 See chapter 1, p. 36 ff., (Pos. 1: 204-5; 154-5), and Hegel’s praise of “the death of honor or fatherland or virtue” (Pos. 1: 195).
34 See section III of the “Natural Law” essay and (SEL: 471-6; 152-6).
35 Presumably, given Hegel’s support elsewhere (e.g., in “The German Constitution”) for (besides a representative legislature) a German monarchy with real power, e.g., that has supreme command of all military forces in Germany, the warrior nobility class would be governed by a monarch. Plato’s philosopher-kings and three-classed republic, defended in The Republic, certainly come to mind as a potential source of inspiration.
consciousness should be, and it is a secondary and immaterial consideration that this essence, as the real, should relate to it only as its empirical consciousness (NL 2: 499-500; 155).

Even in the realized idea of absolute ethical life, members of the lower classes must themselves stand outside the divinity, or have some degree or another of religious alienation, while members of the “absolute class” (SEL: 471; 152) together constitute the common spirit and divinity of a people. And because absolute ethical consciousness is itself divine, Hegel explicitly equates it with intellectual intuition (SEL: 461; 143).

Hegel’s Frankfurt philosophy of history also makes an appearance in his early Jena socio-political philosophy, viz., in his idea of the history of communal life from the absolute life of the ancients to that projected for modernity. As has been the case since at least the time of “The Positivity,” the Roman Empire—and the Christian religion that flourished within it—is crucial to Hegel’s philosophy of history, for with “the Roman Empire [comes] the loss of absolute ethical life and the debasement of the nobility” (NL 2: 491; 148). Prior to that falling away stands the ideal life of the Greeks and Roman republicans. Then arises the “universal private life” (NL 2: 492; 149) of the Empire, whereby “the first class [i.e., the warrior nobility] is in fact completely annulled, and the second [i.e., the bourgeoisie] alone becomes the people” (NL 2: 491; 149). Persons become reduced to isolated individualities, “to citizens in the sense of a bourgeois” (NL 2: 494; 151), and slavery, one of the institutions

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36 This is similar to “the child … that is nourished at the breast of universal ethical life, lives at first in the absolute intuition of that life as an alien being [or external divinity],” and if fortunate, i.e., if it is to become a member of the highest class, “increasingly comprehends it, and so becomes part of the universal spirit” (NL 2: 507; 162).

37 His account is concentrated at (NL 2: 491-5; 148-51).
permitting the cultivation of absolute ethical consciousness in the ancient world, is abolished. Moreover, the complex Roman legal system establishing individual liberties and protecting individual property and other rights, enforcing contracts, etc., grows, and the idea of a common spirit of the people becomes just that, an idea or mere thought-entity. On Hegel’s restructuring of Schiller’s views, this corresponds to the lengthy historical period of the development of the intellect subsequent to the period of beauty present in Greek antiquity.

The stage of ethical life that marks the return to the ancient ethical life, after the course of history initiated by the Roman Empire has run its course, is yet to come. Yet Hegel is clear in the “Natural Law” essay that this highest stage of ethical life is not simply a repetition of ancient ethical life. The highest stage of ethical life, that which Hegel himself is calling for, is the harmonization of the absolute ethical consciousness of the ancients and the life of the intellect, including the formal legal relationship, the protection of the individual citizen, the abolition of slavery, and so forth, that took pride of place in ethical life with the advent of the Roman Empire. This culminating stage involves a constitutional and conscious separation of the three classes referenced above and an assignment of the labor of each: the labor of the absolute class or warrior nobility—the spirit of the people—is solely “towards death” (NL 2: 489; 147), or war, and its product is “the being and preservation of the whole of the ethical organization” (ibid.). The second class, subordinate to the first, occupies “the sphere of right” (NL 2: 484; 142) and leads a life of restricted private enterprise, free from the need to risk the danger of death. The third class, likewise subordinate to the first, works with the earth to satisfy the people’s basic needs. It lacks the
developed understanding of the second class and so, according to Hegel, is able to reinforce the first class when necessary.

If according to Hegel ideal religion it is simply the imaginative objectification and reinforcement of a people’s communal love; and if according to Hegel’s philosophy of history the projected absolute ethical consciousness of the ancients returns, though in a way that does harmonize with the sphere of privacy and rights; if such is the case, then we should expect to find Hegel affirming the notion that the religious consciousness concomitant with the projected modern ethical consciousness (the absolute idea of ethical life that Hegel articulates in “Natural Law”) closely resembles the non-alienated religious consciousness of the ancients (at least for the highest, warrior class). And that is indeed what we do find. Consider again an abbreviated version of a passage we saw at the end of chapter 2:

As far as ethical life is concerned, the words of the wisest men of antiquity are alone true: the ethical consists in living in accordance with the customs or ethics [Sitten] of one’s country. ...[Moreover,] in the form of universality and cognition, [the customs ought] also [to] present [themselves] as a system of legislation—so that this system perfectly expresses reality, or the living customs of the present. ...But this ideality of customs and their form of universality in the laws must also ...in turn be perfectly united with the form of particularity, so that the ideality as such may take on a pure and absolute shape, and thus be perceived and worshipped as the god of the people; and this perception itself must in turn have its active expression and joyful movement in a cult (NL 2: 507-8; 162-3).

Hegel pens these lines right after he has finished articulating the idea of absolute ethical life, with absolute ethical consciousness (Hegelian love) realized in the first and highest class and governing the two lower classes (the bourgeoisie and the peasant laborers). Absolute ethical life, he says, “ought to [or better “will”] take on a pure and
absolute shape, and thus be perceived and worshipped as the god of the people.” In other words, it is precisely the communal life of the people, in which at least members of the highest class are fully unified, that is given religious expression in the form of deities who are the subject of joyful worship in a cult. Now, only for the highest class in this society will these divinities take on a completely non-alienated form; only its members will self-consciously worship their own communal consciousness; only they are completely unified in this form of worship, just as the Greeks were in their national divinities (cf. FSC 1: 302). For others, as for the child, who do not directly participate in absolute ethical consciousness and ideal religious consciousness, the established religion must still be to some degree alienated.

We are now in a better position to address the question: what does the projected modern ideal human community add to the communities of ancient Greece and pre-Christian Rome? Modernity has the benefit of abolishing slavery, recognizing property and other rights, valuing the individual, etc., but without undermining the growth of absolute ethical consciousness—the common spirit of love—as it has done for centuries during the rule of Rome and beyond. The only way to accommodate both individualism and absolute ethical consciousness, Hegel thinks, is for the former to be completely subordinate to the latter and to be recognized as such in legislation, and that is precisely the purpose of the progress of history. Of course what’s of overriding importance to Hegel is the ethical consciousness of the highest class, who alone form the common spirit of the broader culture; private enterprise, acquisition of property, and so forth can and should be pursued, but within limits, and in a manner that is ultimately subordinate to the higher sphere of absolute ethical life and spirit.
That is in fact the whole message of Hegel’s philosophy. And the religious life of modernity presumably reflects this fact. It is to be in all fundamentals the same as the religions of the Greco-Roman world (as Hegel understands those), but it will presumably incorporate into its mythology and religious pantheon elements relating to the lower classes, to the sphere of privacy and rights, and to the history of their development and ultimate incorporation into absolute ethical life. The “mythology of reason” (ESP 1: 236; 111) from the 1790s lives on in Hegel’s Jena writings. Just as love cannot be living without ideal religion undergirding it and integrating it with a people’s daily activities, so too absolute ethical consciousness and the more specifically political aspects of Hegel’s ideal cannot be achieved without the harmonizing influence of the mythological consciousness of the ancients.

Thus far in this chapter we have drawn primarily on Hegel’s Frankfurt and (to a lesser degree) Bern writings to explicate his views on ideal religion and religious alienation that he first develops in some depth in Frankfurt. We have just seen, however, that he still appears to propound these views in Jena. Before moving on and discussing the significance of philosophy and its history for the early Jena Hegel, we should present further evidence suggesting that despite Hegel’s turn to philosophy in Jena, he does not abandon his early socio-politico-religious ideal. That evidence is sparse due to the nature of Hegel’s early philosophical writings in Jena;38 however, if we read carefully, we can see its presence, and not just as a peripheral theme, but rather as the final end toward which all his philosophical endeavors strive.

38 We will discuss this topic below.
Hints abound even in Hegel’s first so-called “philosophical” work, viz., “The Difference.” Early on in the work, he refers in passing to the “highest aesthetic perfection, as it forms itself in a determinate religion in which man lifts himself above all dichotomy and sees both the freedom of the subject and the necessity of the object vanish in the kingdom of grace” (Diff. 1: 23; 92). In the midst of his critique of Fichte, he pauses to lament that Fichte’s philosophy cannot accommodate “the true infinity of a beautiful community where laws are made superfluous by customs, the excesses of an unsatisfied life by hallowed joys, and the crimes of oppressed forces by the possibility of activities directed toward great objects” (Diff. 1: 84; 146)—“great objects” here suggesting, among other things, the statues of the gods that are a focal point for the ideal community discussed in Hegel’s Frankfurt writings.

In “Faith and Knowledge” Hegel criticizes Protestantism and the philosophies of Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte for consigning the religious to the heart of the individual and the yearning for a beyond and a future, for by doing so they “[turn] the beautiful into things—the grove into timber, the images into things that have eyes and do not see, ears and do not hear” (Faith 2: 290; 58). Moreover, since for all of them, the ideals [i.e., the gods and what they actualize] cannot be reduced to the block and stones of a wholly intellectual [verständig] reality [i.e., a reality as grasped by the discursive intellect alone], they are made into fictions. Any connection with the ideals will then appear as a play without substance, or as dependence upon objects and as superstition (ibid).

39 Notice that here too imaginative or aesthetic religion, which embodies in imagination the intellectual intuition of love, unifies subject and object.
40 Recall that Hegel employs that very same Biblical imagery about images that see not and hear not in “The Spirit of Christianity,” when he presents, and then repudiates, Judaism’s dismissal of all idols of God. See (SC 1: 284; 192).
Here we have an implicit reaffirmation of the essence of ideal religion as free play, not superstition or positivity, as is commonly thought. Later, in the Jacobi section of this work, Hegel more expressly calls for “a communion [*Umgang*] with God and a consciousness of the divine that consists in the saturating objectivity of a cult and in which *this* nature and *this* universe are enjoyed in an intuiting clear and present in itself” (Faith 2: 389; 148). Hegel rejects any religious form of transcendence and calls for the kind of non-alienated religious consciousness we saw him articulate in more detail in his Frankfurt writings.

Besides these sorts of intimation of the Greco-Roman ideal in his early Jena writings,\(^4^1\) there is another kind: Hegel’s explicit discussion of the idea of intellectual intuition, e.g., in connection with Kant’s analysis of the same notion. I disagree with Pippin’s claim that Hegel nowhere has in mind in that discussion the issues of mechanism and teleology, organic wholes, and functional explanation. According to the reading of Hegelian intellectual intuition that we’ve given, it makes sense that Hegel would in fact discuss those issues in that context; the living spirit of love binding individuals together, and the objectification of love that breaks up the rigidity of pure objectivity and reflection, are themselves organic, though of a higher order than natural ends. Moreover, contra Pippin, I don’t think it would betray philosophical idiocy to resurrect the Platonic conception of an intuitive intellect after Kant’s critical philosophy. However, I do agree with Pippin that Hegel’s early Jena account of intellectual intuition is not the traditional Kantian/Platonic one, but rather the absolute ethical consciousness and ideal religion which he develops in his

\(^{41}\) For others, see for example (Faith 2: 391-3, 422-3; 150-2, 180-1).
Frankfurt period. I have no knock-down, conclusive argument or bit of evidence in support of this contention, mainly because Hegel’s aim in these early Jena essays is not to clearly present his own philosophy. However, there are some considerations that weigh in favor of reading the early Jena Hegel’s doctrine of intellectual intuition in terms of the very doctrine of absolute ethical life and religion that we have already developed in this chapter.

Following Pippin, the first thing to note is that Hegel is interested quite a bit in the connection between beauty and the idea of an intuitive intellect; and not natural beauty per se, but beautiful works of art (fine art), and in particular “aesthetic ideas,” as Kant calls them in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*.\(^{42}\) Kant argues that artistic genius attempts to portray as much as is possible in appearance rational ideas, e.g., moral virtues, freedom, God, and so forth. It does this by hitting upon a central image—an aesthetic idea—that makes sensible the rational idea, and thereby infuses the artwork with “spirit *[Geist]*.” Of course for Kant no intuition or set of intuitions can be adequate to an idea of reason: an idea can never be exhibited or given in a particular of experience, even a work of genius, as can a concept of the understanding. But because it can’t, and yet the artist constructs his work to exhibit it as much as possible, a work of genius engenders an inexhaustible wealth of thoughts and experiences in the process of appreciating it and trying to take in its symbolic infinitude.

Hegel’s response to Kant is tricky because he uses Kantian ideas and terminology, but his philosophy is so different from Kant’s that he in effect alters their

\(^{42}\) For the specifics of Kant’s thoughts about aesthetic ideas, see § 49 of that work.
meaning and tries to get them to fit into his own mental caste. He first transforms the Kantian discussion by focusing not on a plurality of rational ideas, but on “the idea of reason,” “the identity of the concepts of nature and freedom” (Faith 2: 323; 87). In other words, he concentrates on the Kantian notion of intellectual intuition.

Then, he in effect poses this question to Kant: if an aesthetic idea is an imaginative object that cannot be thoroughly expounded and comprehended with concepts, or our discursive intellects, and if the idea of reason is one that cannot be given or presented in experience, why isn’t the idea of reason the comprehension of the aesthetic idea, and the aesthetic idea the presentation of the idea of reason?

For Kant this option isn’t available, for he maintains that the world we experience is constituted by the categories and can never realize an unconditioned idea. Thus the rudiments of his philosophy preclude any object from actually exhibiting any idea of reason, much less the idea of reason, or intellectual intuition. But for Hegel Kant is unreasonably demanding (1) that aesthetic ideas be cognized by the intellect, when Kant has already formulated the idea of reason by which to properly cognize them; and (2) that the idea of reason be given in a bit of reality made fit for the intellect, when Kant has already provided the discursivity-transcending experience of aesthetic ideas adequate to instantiate the idea of reason.

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43 That Hegel indeed is focusing on Kant’s idea of an intuitive intellect is already apparent in his explanation of that idea as the identity of freedom and nature. But it becomes completely explicit when he mentions Kant’s notion of an intuitive intellect in conjunction with the doctrine of teleology immediately after he discusses aesthetic ideas, and says that here “Kant expresses the idea of reason more definitely than in the preceding concept of a harmonious play of cognitive powers. He expresses it now as the idea of an intuitive intellect, for which possibility and actuality are one” (Faith 2: 324; 88).

44 “The aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination for which no [conceptual] exposition can be given; the idea of reason is a concept of reason for which no demonstration can be given—demonstration in the Kantian sense being the presentation of a concept in intuition. As if the aesthetic idea did not have its exposition in the idea of reason, and the idea of reason did not have its demonstration in beauty” (Faith 2: 323; 87).
This is why for Hegel “beauty [i.e., experience of aesthetic ideas] is the idea [reason] as experienced or more correctly as intuited” (Faith 2: 323; 87); in beauty the idea is “given in experience” (Faith 2: 324; 87). And this is why conversely beauty is comprehended in terms of the idea of the identity of freedom and nature. The reason Kant failed to see this, according to Hegel, “is only because the perennial antithesis of the supersensuous and the sensuous is made basic once for all,” i.e., only because Kant will not permit “the supersensuous … to be … knowable [as the idea of an intuitive intellect] [or] intuitable [as beauty]” (Faith 2: 324; 88). According to Hegel Kant (like many other individuals) is bent on allowing room for a beyond and a future, i.e., for transcendence of some kind, in particular for the realization of alienated religious concepts. To use Kant’s own words: Kant is determined “to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.”

To say that the idea of an intuitive intellect is given in experience as beauty, and that in the experience of aesthetic ideas “the form of opposition between intuition and concept falls away” (Faith 2: 323; 87), is not to say that beauty represents or is symbolic of this falling away at some supersensible level of reality, whether thought of in general as a something we know not what=x, or more specifically as the divine mind of the Platonic tradition. The experience of aesthetic ideas is such a falling away; it is the intuitive intellect as fully actual. Though he doesn’t deal so much with Hegel’s focus on aesthetic ideas, Pippin does rightly pick up on this point that for Hegel discursivity is transcended, and intuition and concept are unified, in the experience of beauty itself. There is, however, no evidence to support Pippin’s

45 Critique of Pure Reason, Bxxx.
interpretation of what this means for Hegel. Admittedly, there is no indisputable evidence within “Faith and Knowledge” for my reading of Hegel’s treatment of Kant’s idea of an intuitive intellect either: that for Hegel the abstract concept of an intuitive intellect as the identity of the concepts of freedom and nature is fully realized or exists as the ideal socio-politico-religious consciousness he outlines in his Frankfurt period. But my reading harmonizes Hegel’s Frankfurt and early Jena writings in a natural way, and that seems to speak in its favor. Also, the fact that Hegel chooses to concentrate on aesthetic ideas as realizing intellectual intuition suggests he has in mind the aesthetic religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans, hints of which, as we’ve seen, lie within “Faith and Knowledge” itself, as well as within his other contemporaneous writings.

We will have more to say about Hegel’s philosophical activity in early Jena shortly, but for now we can draw one important conclusion: when Hegel appropriates Kant’s notion of an intuitive intellect, articulates its structure, and regrets that Kant fails to recognize the full significance of this idea, he is not talking about a separate entity that embodies this idea—e.g., a supersensible God—; nor is he claiming that his own philosophical thinking of the idea is equivalent to that very idea—(how abstract and empty that would be). Rather, he is providing a philosophical exposition of what only truly exists as the ideal socio-politico-religious consciousness of a community of individuals. His philosophical endeavors are not meant to replace this

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46 That is why in his analysis of Kant’s use of the idea of an intuitive intellect to resolve the antithesis between mechanism and teleology, for example, Hegel denies that “nature is determined by an idea opposite to it” (Faith 2: 326; 90), which is the viewpoint Kant defends in The Critique of the Power of Judgment.
highest human community, but to point in its direction as the absolute truth. We might rephrase the point by saying that the idea of an intuitive intellect in Hegel’s philosophy is simply the highest thought or category of reality, not that reality itself.

§ 2. Ideal Philosophy and Highest Human Community

Perhaps the main challenge to our interpretation of Hegel’s concept of the absolute comes from the early Jena Hegel’s claims on behalf of speculative philosophy. In the first part of this section, we will present those passages enunciating Hegel’s speculative project that present the greatest presumptive challenge to our interpretation. We will then argue that the early Jena Hegel’s focus on the eventual production of an absolute system of philosophy is designed not to supplant the ideal human community regarded as absolute in the Frankfurt years, when philosophy did not hold pride of place, but rather to adequately conceptualize it, help bring about its existence in the modern world, and demonstrate that it is indeed the absolute.

Though the British Idealists’ appropriation of Hegel’s mature philosophy has been strongly criticized, not only as a defensible position in its own right by the founders of analytic philosophy, but also, more recently, as an accurate account of the mature Hegel’s own meaning, there is something that seems unmistakably Hegelian in their vision of a “block-universe.” They drew largely on later sources, but we can see something of the same insight developed in the “Difference:”

47 In Lecture III (“Hegel and His Method”) of A Pluralistic Universe, William James presents a useful summary of the British Idealist reading of the mature Hegel, supposedly for whom reality is ultimately
Only so far as reflection has connection with the absolute is it reason and its deed a knowing. Through this connection with the absolute, however, reflection’s work passes away; only the connection persists, and it is the sole reality of the cognition. There is therefore no truth in isolated reflection, in pure thinking, save the truth of its nullification. But because in philosophizing the absolute gets produced by reflection for consciousness, it becomes thereby an objective totality, a whole of knowledge, an organization of cognitions. Within this organization, every part is at the same time the whole; for its standing is its connection with the absolute. As a part that has other parts outside of it, it is something limited, and is only through the others. Isolated in its limitation the part is defective; meaning and significance it has solely through its coherence with the whole. Hence single concepts by themselves and singular cognitions [Erkenntnisse] must not be called knowledge. There can be plenty of singular empirical known items [Kenntnisse]. As known from experience they exhibit their justification in experience, that is, in the identity of concept and being, of subject and object. Precisely for this reason, they are not scientific knowledge: they find their justification only in a limited, relative identity. They do not justify themselves as necessary parts of a totality of cognitions organized in consciousness, nor has speculation recognized the absolute identity in them, i.e., their connection with the absolute (Diff. 2: 30; 97-8).

Ordinarily we suppose that we know something when we can justify it on the basis of experience. We bring certain concepts to bear on experience, we approach the world with particular hypotheses, and, if all goes well, their justification is exhibited in experience. But according to Hegel here that is not real knowledge, or what he would call “scientific knowledge” (ibid). In fact Hegel seems loath to recognize any truth whatsoever in this kind of purely reflective knowledge and these kinds of independently known items, whether they be individual objects or particular laws or law-like statements. The only truth accorded to these things is that by virtue of which they are linked together in consciousness with other such items to form a whole of monistic and eternal. That reading is closest to the Platonic interpretation of the young Hegel’s absolute that we have considered, though there are some important differences. Fortunately, as we are not here concerned with the mature Hegel’s views and interpretations of them, we can ignore these differences.
cognition. Only that in something that is internally related to other somethings has reality, truth, and can rightly be said to be known. More precisely, only the one overarching system, whole, or totality that comprises all singular cognitions, cognitions sloughed of their individuality such that they only have being, meaning, and significance through all the others, and thus through the whole, is real, true, and knowable. In a Hegelian phrase perhaps familiar to us, the truth is the whole. On this view there is not a multiplicity of things known, because knowledge requires that individual beings and independent generalities “known” on the basis of experience be fused together so completely that there is only One remaining – not a thing or separate piece of reality, for that would make it finite and empirically justifiable, but rather the reciprocal determination of all singular cognitions stripped of their absolute individuality. This complete system of knowledge is what Hegel calls “the absolute.” This absolute would seem to be totally different from the one we’ve been busy defending, according to which God or the absolute is just the same thing as the realization of an ideal community or nation, embodying absolute ethical life and a ideal folk religion.

Then there is the “dialectical method,” whose aim within the early Jena Hegel’s overall program of philosophy is to help an individual to cognize the absolute.48 The method can be crystallized into the following general structure: (1) reflection or the understanding thinks a distinct concept A; (2) concept A is of course

48 Nowhere in the early writings we discuss in this dissertation does Hegel actually use the term “dialectical method,” or even “dialectic” or any of its cognates. But readers of the later Hegel (especially of The Encyclopedia Logic, §§ 79-82) will recognize its aptness. My discussion of the central points of the early Hegel’s dialectical method benefits from Forster’s work, especially his article “Hegel’s Dialectical Method.” Of course, I disagree with Forster about the conception of the absolute that Hegel’s dialectical method aims to illuminate and convince us of.
concept A, but (what Hegel sometimes prefers to call) “reflection as reason” shows it to be or contain a contrary concept B, and vice versa. A new concept, concept C, unites the preceding concepts A and B, i.e., it contains them both and at the same time abolishes them both, so that A and B are contained in C, only with their original senses modified. Of course, C itself (unless it is the absolute, all-encompassing concept of reason) must now play the role formerly played by concept A. In this way, a system of reason begins to be constructed through an iterated application of the complementary procedures of reason as reflection and the subsequent synthesis of the antinomies so produced, a process that culminates in the concept of reason or the absolute. Hegel identifies this highest concept with “the infinite world-intuition” (Diff. 2: 47; 114), “absolute self-intuition” (Diff. 2: 12; 81), “the self-intuition of the absolute, which is now becoming objective to itself in completed totality” (Diff. 2:

49 E.g.: “[R]eflection as reason … nullifies itself and all being and everything limited, because it connects them with the absolute” (Diff. 2: 26; 94); and “[s]o far as reflection makes itself its own object, its supreme law, given to it by reason and moving it to become reason, is to nullify itself … [] reflection must give itself the law of self-destruction” (Diff. 2: 28; 96). Cf. Hegel’s contention that while any proposition “is subject to the law of the understanding, the law that it must not contradict itself, that it cannot suspend itself [sich aufhebe]” (Diff. 2: 36; 104), it is nonetheless true that “for of any thought expressed by a proposition it can be shown very easily that it is conditioned by an opposite and therefore is not absolute: and one proves for this opposite that it must be posited, hence that the thought expressed by the … proposition is a nullity” (Diff. 2: 36-7; 105). What proves this is reflection as reason.

50 In this context Hegel often writes of reason as uniting or synthesizing the contradictories or antinomies assembled by reflection. For example: “reason, on the other hand, unites these contradictories, posits both together and suspends them both” (Diff. 2: 36; 103); “[t]he rational must be deduced in its determinate content, that is, it must be deduced starting from the contradiction of determinate opposites, the rational being their synthesis” (Diff. 2: 44; 111). However, it is clear that in this context he is not using “reason” in the exact same way that he does in the context of ethico-religious life, where reason is intellectual intuition or the absolute. The connection between the two uses is that reason as synthesizing the antinomies ordered by reflection ultimately leads toward the highest, all-inclusive antinomy of reason as the highest, ideal socio-politico-religious life. See below.

51 E.g.: “Reason, the faculty of totality … complements this relative identity [i.e., concept or cognition of the understanding] with its opposite, producing through their synthesis a new identity which is in turn a defective one in the face of reason, and which completes itself anew in the same way. The method of the system … shows itself at its purest, when it appears as a development of reason itself (Diff. 2: 46; 114; my emphasis).
112; 171), and “the self-shaping or objectively self-finding absolute” (ibid.). It is what Hegel also calls the “transcendental” or “intellectual intuition” (e.g., Diff. 2: 114-5; 173-4). Again, one might reasonably think from this description of the dialectical method that the absolute it supposedly leads towards is altogether different from the one we have argued for thus far in this chapter.

Despite some appearances to the contrary, however, nothing forces us to read any of the above in a way uncongenial to the socio-politico-religious interpretation of Hegel’s absolute that we have developed thus far. We will, of course, need to find room for philosophical activity and explain its importance to Hegel. Yet, as we will see, nothing fundamental about our interpretation needs to change. To understand why not, we need to expound Hegel’s theory of philosophy and its history. Doing so will reveal what’s unique about Hegel’s own philosophical project and how he intends it to function in the promotion of his social ideal and in the recognition of it as the absolute.

Beginning with Hegel’s early Jena writings, philosophy and its history seems to take pride of place. For instance, in the announcement to The Critical Journal of Philosophy, which Hegel and his friend Schelling edited and to which they contributed between the last months of 1801 and the early months of 1803, Hegel states that the aim of this philosophical journal is to demonstrate philosophy’s “great, worldly relation [große, weltbürgerliche Beziehung], its influence on the formation of the universal and particular lives of men” (Ann. 2: 169). Furthermore, much of the general introduction to Hegel’s earlier “Difference” essay preoccupies itself with the significance of the history of philosophy and with repudiating the contemporary


German philosopher Karl Reinhold’s deflationary interpretation of that significance. 52

Why the overriding concern with philosophy? Why invest such stock in its history? With respect to Hegel’s own developing philosophical system, why focus so much on it to the seeming disparagement of other forms of human activity? How does all this sit with our reading of Hegel thus far? And what does Hegel mean by the “great, worldly relation” of philosophy to the rest of culture?

To answer these questions, let’s begin with the content of philosophy. Philosophy has a very special content, in fact the same content as religion: 53 the union of subject and object, of freedom and nature, or simply “absolute unification” (Diff. 2: 120; 177). To put the point conversely, any so-called philosophy that doesn’t have as its task “the necessary attempt to suspend the rigidified opposition between subjectivity and objectivity” (Diff. 2: 22; 91) is not truly a philosophy. 54 It is at most, Hegel says disparagingly, with Reinhold especially in mind, “a kind of handicraft”

52 Reinhold argues that the chief value of the history of philosophy, a history of so many abortive attempts to uncover the basis of human cognition of reality, is merely to spur and direct the attempts of current thinkers to succeed where previous ones have failed. According to Reinhold, though we cannot be guaranteed a priori that we will ultimately succeed in our task, philosophies can improve on one another, and we should aim at an ultimately correct philosophy that can be seen to succeed where others have failed in a variety of ways. Hegel objects to this view because it fails to recognize the necessary appearance of previous philosophical attempts, and it ignores the “great, worldly relation” of philosophy to the rest of culture.

53 This explains why Hegel and Schelling say in “The Philosophy of Nature,” “we do not even recognize as philosophy any view which is not already religion in its principle” (Phil.Nat. 4: 271; 374).

54 Here are some further passages expressing Hegel’s conception of philosophy as the attempt to cognize the unity of subject and object: “philosophy,” he says, “…aims at absolute synthesis” (Diff. 2: 120; 177), so that “satisfaction found in the principle of absolute identity is characteristic of philosophy as such” (Diff. 2: 45; 112). Likewise, “[t]he task of philosophy,” he asserts, “is to construct the absolute for consciousness” (Diff. 2: 25; 94). That in these passages Hegel intends all genuine philosophies, and not simply his own, is clear from the context, viz., his criticism of Reinhold’s view of the nature of philosophical systems and the history of philosophy, and his explicit inclusion of the materialism of D’Holbach’s System of Nature as a genuine philosophy that attempts to cognize the absolute, and so qualifies as “authentic speculation” (Diff. 2: 120; 177). Any other form of inquiry, despite its merits, is not genuinely philosophical; it is “a mere manifold of the concepts and opinions of the understanding, and such a manifold is no philosophy” (Diff. 2: 19; 88).
Accordingly, the source and essence of both philosophy and religion is the drive toward subject-object identity in thought, in life, and in worship, and the desire to raise ourselves towards that identity as much as we can. But whereas religion involves the portrayal of and drive toward subject-object unity in the imagination, philosophy does so in a less imagistic manner and in the form of thought. If our reading of Hegel so far has been correct, then there are also alienated and non-alienated forms of both forms of absolute consciousness: if alienated, the absolute identity is ultimately placed outside of us and we worship it religiously and philosophically in subservience; if non-alienated, we manage to fully embody subject-object identity, being conscious in religion and philosophy that it is ideal human community, and worshipping it in each form of consciousness as such.

What accounts, then, for philosophy’s “great, worldly relation” to the rest of culture? Since at least the early 1790s Hegel has held the belief that the various aspects of a culture (for example, its religion, history, and political structure) form a coherent whole, so that, for instance, the constitution of the German Empire could not have developed among the early Christians. His earliest formulations of the belief do not explicitly include a people’s philosophy, but by the time philosophy becomes

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55 For example, Hegel does not recognize his contemporaries Reinhold, Schulze, Krug, and Bardili as genuine philosophers. By contrast, he considers in varying degrees of depth the genuine philosophical systems of Kant, Fichte, Jacobi, D’Holbach, Descartes, and of course his own in his early Jena writings.

56 That’s why in “The Difference” Hegel includes speculation (philosophy) as a form of “divine service” (Diff. 2: 113; 172).

57 Below, we will have more to say about ideal philosophy and its relationship to ideal religion.

58 We can see the belief expressed, for instance, in the following passage from the “Tübingen Essay” of 1793:
Hegel’s focus during his early Jena years, it gets added to the mix. But if a people’s philosophy and religion harmonize in this way, and moreover, if they have the very same content, viz., that people’s estimation and worship of subject-object identity, then why doesn’t Hegel speak about religion’s “great, worldly relation” to the other aspects of culture? What does the early Jena think is so special about philosophy?

Let’s delve a little deeper into Hegel’s account of the nature of philosophy. Spurious philosophies arise, he thinks, from the individual’s own personal needs and character, but all genuine philosophies arise out of the universal need of the times and serve an eminently practical function. Philosophy, unlike religion or any other aspect of a people and its culture, plays the pivotal role in the historical process of the waxing and waning of human communities, a phenomenon that Hegel conceives of as the growth and decay of new life forms, and which he sometimes calls “ethical world[s]” (LM 5: 269; 587), “ethical form[s]” (ibid.), “ethical li[ves]” (ibid.), or just simply “culture[s]” (Diff. 2: 20; 89; cf. Skep. 2: 252; 340) or “people[s]” (e.g., SC 1: 274 ff.; 182 ff.; FSC 1: 297-8). The following set of passages includes some of Hegel’s most important statements about the role of philosophy in the historical-cultural life of man:

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The spirit of a nation is reflected in its history, its religion, and the degree of its political freedom; and these cannot be taken in isolation when considering either their individual character or their influence on each other. They are bound together as one, like three companions none of whom can do anything without the others even as each benefits from all (TE 1: 42; 56).

59 E.g.: “Moreover, if we wish, we can also regard this present unrest as a process of fermentation though which the spirit strains upward toward a new life out of the putrefaction of the deceased culture, and springs forth again in a rejuvenated shape from under the ashes of the old” (Intro. 2: 184; 284).
When the might of union vanishes from the life of men and the antitheses lose their living connection and reciprocity and gain independence, the need of philosophy arises (Diff. 2: 22; 91).

It is true that a philosophy issues from its time, and if one wants to call the fragmentation of the time its ethical corruption, then philosophy issues from that corruption; but it does so in order to reestablish man from within himself, against the confusion of the time and in order to restore the totality which the time has rent (Diff. 2: 120-1; 178).

Long periods of time may elapse before an old ethical form can be fully conquered by the new one. The epochs of philosophy fall within these periods of transition (LM 5: 269; 587).

We can see in this sequence of passages a number of important ideas. A new philosophy arises in a time of cultural divisiveness and fragmentation, when the ethical life of a nation (i.e., broadly speaking, its cultural institutions and practices), and the principle of subject-object identity at its base, is no longer “living” for its citizens. The task of philosophy is to help usher in a new form of life, based on a new principle of subject-object identity and embodying a new culture and ethical life, a new form of life that is one step closer to life’s highest form, the ideal of man. Of course, philosophy does not create the new form ex nihilo: a philosophy, Hegel tells us, issues from the ethical corruption of its time and “the material of a particular age” (Diff. 2: 19; 88). But it does help bring to fruition the new, budding culture that is fated to appear, and provide what “men are unconsciously seeking” (I.Germ. 1: 457; 145) during those times when the old form of life has collapsed:

When … the new ethical life has once developed to this maturity in the spirit of the nation and the shadowy need for it has permeated all men’s hearts, the mass of men, while certainly feeling ill at heart, knows neither what oppresses it nor what it wants instead. The developing ethical nature [of the nation] has been able to cultivate its new formation under the bark of the old to a such a point that it will only require a gentle push to break through the old bark and win space
and light for the unfolding of the new. It is the great men who understand the ethical nature in this[.] …These more reflective types do nothing more than say the word, and the nations will follow them. …But if it is supposed to have been the deed of a single man, then … he must be educated in the school of philosophy. From within the school of philosophy he can raise the still slumbering form of a new ethical world to consciousness[.] …He can regard the whole presently available mass of humanity as a material which he takes possession of and from which his great individuality fashions his own body [i.e., the new ethical life]—a material which, itself living—constitutes the more sluggish or more lively organs of this great form. In this way—to cite the greatest example of a man who wove his individuality into destiny and gave it a new freedom—did Alexander the Macedonian leave the school of Aristotle to conquer the world (LM 5: 269-70; 587-8).60

It is unclear whether Hegel intends the case of Alexander’s philosophical education and subsequent dominion of the world to stand as a necessary model for all cultural change. Though the new ethical life must be born out of philosophical vision, need the latter be mediated by a conqueror? Does history even support this contention? What is clear, however, is that for Hegel only philosophy can decisively engender the new form of ethical life—the new ethical life is born ultimately out of the “school of philosophy,” he says. A philosophy provides a more or less clear conceptual account of the newly developing ethical life by providing a conception of God or the absolute fit for worship, a conception linked with a particular form of community and socio-politico-religious life, and this proves to be key in fully realizing the newly developing stage of culture in the course of humanity and the production of the ideal human community.

60 I follow Forster in regarding this as a seminal passage in Hegel’s early writings, a passage that indicates the decisive importance of philosophy in human life, culture, and history; only, I disagree with Forster on the nature of the subject-object identity expressed by philosophy.
Two points stand out from the material we’ve just covered on the nature of philosophy. First, a principle of subject-object identity, and so a form of absolute consciousness, stands at the foundation of, and provides unity for, a given people and their culture. This means, among other things, that a people’s religion and philosophy define them as a people. Second, so far as the formation of a people is concerned, philosophy takes precedence over religion: a philosophy provides a blueprint, so to speak, for a people to finish constructing their new communal existence. Ultimately, this will involve such matters as forming an appropriate religion and system of legislation.

Hegel maintains that there is a necessary sequence of philosophies and corresponding cultural formations or forms of ethical life, his being the culmination of that sequence. “The history of philosophy,” he maintains, “… [is] the history of the one, eternal reason, presenting itself in infinitely manifold forms” (Diff. 2: 47; 114). By the necessity involved in the course of the history of philosophy he means (1) that the series of philosophies must appear, and (2) that they must appear in a specific

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61 Cf. (Skep. 2: 252; 341).
62 Ibid.
63 He says to his students, for instance, in a brief, and one of the very few remaining, lecture manuscripts from his early Jena period: “[s]tarting from this highest principle of philosophy we shall be able to construct for ourselves the possible systems of philosophy. We shall perceive in the various systems, if only they are philosophy, the attempt to represent one and the same fundamental principle [viz., the union of subject and object]. One system will simply make one factor of the totality stand out more, and another another” (LM 5: 274-5; 590; my emphasis).
64 The notion of an “infinity” of philosophies and corresponding cultures is, of course, an exaggeration. In the necessary sequence of philosophies that develop throughout history, “a later philosophy [is] directed against the form of the antithesis that [is] dominant in an earlier one, and overcomes it, even though the later philosophy [falls] back again, all unwittingly, into another form of antithesis” (Intro. 2: 182; 282). Only Hegel’s philosophy conceptualizes the absolute in a way that it overcomes all oppositions, including the opposition between the infinite and the finite, between God and the world. And only the ideal human community that corresponds to Hegelian philosophy completely harmonizes subjectivity and objectivity within human life itself.
order. But, he doesn’t think there is any necessity surrounding when these
philosophies are to occur in history, where geographically they are to surface, or even
regarding all their particular details or all the specifics of the cultural whole they help
engender: “When, where and in what form such self-reproductions of reason occur as
philosophies is contingent” (Diff. 2: 22; 91).

The foregoing exposition of Hegel’s theory of the nature of philosophy, and its
history and significance in human affairs, reveals that it is perfectly consistent with,
indeed complementary of, the socio-politico-religious philosophy of the absolute he
develops beginning in the mid-1790s. Each philosophy throughout history has aimed
to cognize the absolute unity of subject and object. Moreover, each, so long as it has
been a genuine philosophy, has grounded a specific cultural formation and people.
Hegel’s philosophy is essentially the same, except with this crucial difference: it
claims to reveal the true nature of subject-object identity as the ideal human
community that it helps engender. It is an integral part of the ideal human community,
and thus, though it alone is not the absolute, is part and parcel of it.

But if the absolute of Hegel’s own non-alienated philosophy is ideal human
community and all that it entails, in what sense is it the absolute? How can that be the
absolute, have no opposite (be truly infinite), and thereby fulfill what Hegel says about
the divine: “anything and everything said about it must be free from any opposition”
(SC 1: 372; 255)? In other words, returning to the language of the opening passages
of this section: (1) if philosophy by its nature aims to cognize the absolute, thereby
linking everything it cognizes with the absolute, then how does Hegel’s philosophy,
coming at the end of a tortuous historical progression, portray ideal human community
as the absolute and as the true divinity? (2) Furthermore, what role does Hegel’s dialectical method play in this portrayal?

Of course it is always possible to give up on these questions and maintain that Hegel’s religious vocabulary is mere subterfuge, concealing an essentially atheistic philosophy. For example, if we insist that God is personal, then Hegel’s philosophy will appear decidedly atheistic. In this case, Hegel would suffer the same fate as Spinoza’s God does in the hands of Jacobi, who despite Spinoza’s assertions to the contrary vehemently proclaims the atheism of Spinozism. Like Spinoza, Hegel has no room whatsoever in his system of thought for any transcendent absolute, including a self-conscious one. But if we use the term “God” for the absolute whole that includes within itself all reality, and therefore is the principle of being and knowledge of all things, then Hegel is a rabid believer.

One of the interpretive challenges of the early Jena writings is that their aim is not so much to present Hegel’s own philosophical system, but rather the idea (subject-object identity) as depicted in previous, deficient philosophies. Beginning with “the eternal and unchangeable model” of “the idea of philosophy” (Intro. 2: 171; 275), which is none other than the absolute, or the identity of thought and being, he wants to show his audience how this idea governs the philosopher’s philosophical system, while at the same time gesturing towards that system’s alienation of the idea in one way or another from man, his knowledge, and the world, and thus that system’s construction of an imperfect form of subject-object unity. The unfortunate fact is that the early Jena Hegel never provides any definitive exposition of his philosophical

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65 See the introductory essay to The Critical Journal, especially (Intro. 2: 171-4; 275-7).
system. Fortunately, though, we possess his earlier writings with which to help decipher his early Jena essays, and, additionally, those essays themselves contain some programmatic statements of his philosophical system of the absolute that allow us to determine in a general way why he thinks it is the absolute.

Consider, for example, the following two closely related passages:

[T]he absolute presents itself in each of the two subject-objects [nature and self-consciousness], and finds itself perfected only in both together as the highest synthesis that suspends both insofar as they are opposed. As their point of absolute indifference, the absolute encloses both, gives birth to both and gives birth to itself out of both [beide gebiert und sich aus beiden gebiert] (Diff. 2: 94; 155).

Reason posits [nature and self-consciousness] as subject-object, because it is reason itself that produces itself as nature and as intelligence, and cognizes itself in them (Diff. 2: 101; 161).

The absolute or reason, we are told, both produces the natural world and self-conscious beings and produces itself by way of such production. In other words, the absolute is the Alpha of the universe only insofar as it is its Omega. Consequently, the most accurate, rational explanation of the nature and existence of all things other than reason is in terms of their being stages on the way to the realization of reason, and in

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66 Consider in this regard Hegel’s conclusion to the Preface of “The Difference:”

This essay begins with general reflections about the need, presupposition, basic principles, etc. of philosophy. It is a fault in them that they are general reflections, but they are occasioned by the fact that presupposition, principles, and such like forms still adorn the entrance to philosophy with their cobwebs. So, up to a point it is still necessary to deal with them until the day comes when from the beginning to end it is philosophy itself whose voice will be heard. Some of the more interesting of these topics will be more extensively treated elsewhere [i.e., in The Critical Journal] (Diff. 2: 13-4; 83; my emphasis).

That day does not come for a while. The Critical Journal fulfills the promise of treating “some of the more interesting of these topics.”
terms of their being for the sake of reason.\textsuperscript{67} Reason alone is self-creating and self-explanatory.\textsuperscript{68} That is how Hegel can simultaneously assert that reason produces nature and finite spirit, yet is in turn produced by or through them (“gives birth to itself out of both”). And that is why he can adopt the outlines of Schelling’s philosophy of nature, which recognizes “the very intention of nature with respect to man” (Diff. 2: 118; 176), an intention manifested in an eternal structure of natural stages of ascent to spiritual existence, as well as embracing an analogous philosophy of spirit that conceives of the inner life of man in terms of a sequence of stages leading toward the communal life embodied in the Hegelian ideal.\textsuperscript{69}

In the preceding explanation, we have left the term “reason” indeterminate. But we already know that reason is intellectual intuition, and “intellectual intuition is alone realized by and in ethical life” (SEL: 461; 143); that is, reason is absolute ethical consciousness (love) together with its distinctive religious and philosophical accompaniments in a single cultural life. And this means that the highest, ideal life of man is the culmination of an all-encompassing teleological system; the former is the

\textsuperscript{67} Of course, nature and finite spirit (and their respective stages) do not consciously intend to lead towards reason. DeVries calls this all-encompassing teleological structure Hegel’s “world teleology” (“The Dialectic of Teleology,” pp. 65 ff.), Beiser Hegel’s “monism,” “vitalism,” and “rationalism” (German Idealism, p. 352). However, whereas DeVries does not further explore the concept, and consequently does not bring it into connection with ideal human community, we should be able to develop a much better, more concrete understanding of what it involves for Hegel. And whereas Beiser equivocates between conceiving the organic structure of the world in terms of either manifestations of the Platonic divine mind or of a vaguely conceived single living force, we reject both options and claim that there is no underlying substance or force that embodies the world-stages and binds them together; rather, we assert that according to Hegel one stage simply has a necessary reference to the others, all in a fixed organic sequence, determined by the dialectic, and culminating in ideal human community.

\textsuperscript{68} At one point in “The Difference” Hegel borrows one of Schelling’s phrases about reason: “reason the self-creator of everything” (Diff. 2: 176). In creating itself, reason creates all things according to an eternal (rational) structure. Fortunately, we can set aside the issue of whether Hegel’s use of the phrase is meant to correspond precisely to Schelling’s.

\textsuperscript{69} For a sketch of the early Jena Hegel’s philosophies of nature and spirit and their sequence of natural and spiritual stages, see (IAW 5: 263-4).
organic principle of the latter. That is precisely, I submit, what Hegel’s dialectical method is designed to show: the procedure of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis etc. shows the way in which nature and self-consciousness comprise this organic structure that constitutes the self-development of reason, and is God or the absolute. This is Hegel’s notion of true infinity, or the synthesis of the infinite and the finite.

God or the absolute includes the process of his or its self-alienation in nature and finite spirit, only to realize himself or itself as the ideal human community: recall that “reason is bound to find itself most explicitly in its self-shaping as a people, which is the most perfect organization that it can give itself” (Diff. 2: 87; 148). The religious, even philosophically religious (“the absolute”), language in which Hegel couches this idea is misleading to this extent: it makes it seem as if there is something underlying (perhaps guiding) the self-bootstrapping process (e.g., God, the absolute, a single living force), but there is no such underlying entity or activity. There is just a world of natural and spiritual beings that reflect an eternal structure of interconnected eternal “ideas”—not in the transcendent, Platonic sense, but in an immanent, Aristotelian one—and that is so to speak “called into being” from nothing70 for the sake of the appearance of the divine (reason). The divine only truly exists at the end of things—it is not actualized at the beginning of things, only to fall away from its actualized perfection and to return to it through humanity, as, say, the Platonic reading would have it--; but it only exists at the end of things because it incorporates into its nature, as its non-actualized life-course, the whole of finitude, and so is self-

70 Cf. Hegel’s statement in “The Earliest System-Program” that nature is created out of “nothing” in the sense that it arises as “a world constituted for a moral entity” (ESP 1: 234; 110).
determining, unconditioned, and absolute by lifting itself up out of finitude and bringing itself into existence. In this way, the infinite, as Halfwassen notes, “overreaches” the finite and includes it within its grasp.

A brief comparison with Aristotle’s God may prove helpful at this point.\(^{71}\) The Aristotelian God, or Prime Mover, is the direct universal cause and mover of all things because it is the final cause of all things. More particularly, it is the driving (drawing) force responsible for the general tendency to actualization present in nature as well as in human life and action. If we isolate its essence from the rest of the universe, it is an entity that is wholly an eternal act of self-thinking thought, in a state of complete and permanent actuality. With this Prime Mover at the summit, a cosmic hierarchy stretches down from it, each stage of which is an approximation (better or worse) to the state of existence (complete and permanent actuality) of the Prime Mover itself. Each kind of thing—determined by its corresponding eternal immanent “idea”—imitates the summit as best it can, sharing in what is best by actualizing its own specific form of potentiality. That is for Aristotle the explanatory value of God as the all-encompassing final cause of the universe and its structure.\(^{72}\) Nowhere in this account is God regarded as a creator or analogous to an artisan (demiurge).

Much the same can be said of Hegel’s divinity: it does not create the world, as, for example, the Platonic and Judeo-Christian divinities do, and it is the explanatory

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\(^{71}\) I rely here on Charles Kahn, “The Place of the Prime Mover in Aristotle’s Teleology.” My summary is a selective account of some important points he makes that may be helpful in better appreciating Hegel’s own view.

\(^{72}\) For Aristotle, there does not appear to be any further explanation of the universe than that each kind of thing in the vast and self-maintaining system of interlocking ends that culminates in God imitates or approximates—by a continuous process of actualization of specific form, e.g., the form of an oak—as best it can to God’s eternal being and unceasing activity.
ground of all things because each, in its own way and to the best of its ability, approximates the life of God. However, unlike the divinity of Aristotle, which is pure intellect, the Hegelian God is not transcendent at all. How could it be if it is as we have identified it? Moreover, because it is equivalent to the actualization of the ideal human community, it in turn requires nature and finite spirit in order to be actualized. Aristotle’s God, purely intellectual and self-absorbed as it is, *could* exist without anything else’s existing in the universe; Hegel’s *couldn’t*, for it can only be realized in the context of nature and finite spirit, and only insofar as it realizes “the highest synthesis of both insofar as they are opposed.” Remember that this “highest synthesis” is identified in the very same work (“The Difference”) as “highest community” (Diff. 2: 82; 145).

If for Aristotle every specific form in the universe approximates or imitates in its own way and to the best that it can the purely actualized, self-referential thought of the Prime Mover, what is it according to Hegel that every specific form in the universe (natural and spiritual) likewise approximates? We know that it is ideal human community, but what is it about *that* to which the natural and spiritual hierarchy approximates in stages? The answer involves returning to the “miracle” of love, which, if we recall, is what ideal religion enhances and integrates with reflective life: “Religion is one with love. The beloved is not opposed to us, he is one with our essential being; we see only ourselves in him—and yet also he is still not we—a miracle that we cannot grasp” (LR 1: 244; 120). In love or highest ethical life, there is
a perfect identity-in-difference\(^73\) of beings, a notion that surpasses the capacities of the intellect but that can be comprehended in direct experience and grasped through (though not itself realized in) dialectical thinking. According to Hegel, the cosmic hierarchy, from the most rudimentary forms of nature to the various stages of self-conscious spiritual beings, consists in closer and closer approximations to the identity-in-difference of love. This contention of his emerges, for instance, in what he says about the sexual relation in plant and animal life as well as about the communication of animals:

Yet through the polarity of the sexes the inner light posits itself as both subjective and objective in the plant; and it does so still more firmly in the animal: the individual seeks and finds itself in another.\(^74\) In the animal the light remains more intensely inward; it posits itself as more or less changeable voice, or in other words, it posits animal individuality as something subjective in universal communication: it posits itself as cognizing and to be recognized. …Nature, so far as it becomes practical through the chemical process has put the third which mediates between the two different organisms back into them as something inward. The third appears as a tone, an inward sounding that produces itself. Like the third body of the inorganic process, this sounding [an animal voice] is without potency and passes away; it extinguishes the absolute substantiality of the different beings and brings them into the indifference of mutual self-recognition, an ideal positing which does not die out again in a real identity, as the sexual relation does (Diff. 2: 109-10; 168-9; my emphasis).\(^75\)

\(^73\) At (FSC 1: 301) Hegel explicitly uses the phrase “relation-in-separation [Beziehung in Trennung]” to describe love.

\(^74\) Cf.: “Each organism produces the [sexual] difference through itself, posits itself ideally on account of the lack [it feels], finds itself objectively in another organism” (Diff. 2: 110; 169; my emphasis).

\(^75\) In a more encompassing statement in the “Natural Law” essay, Hegel states: “Of those individualized formations which lie between simple substance in reality as pure aether, and substance in its marriage with absolute infinity, none can bring form and qualitative unity to absolute indifference with the essence and substance that are found in ethical life…. and at the same time bring about the formal unification of the parts into the whole (through the social bond among the leaves in plants, in sexual union, or in the gregarious life and collective labor of animals” (NL 2: 502; 157); “Only in the absolute indifference of ethical nature does it [the universe] reach its summation, attaining perfect equality of all its parts, and the absolute and real oneness of the individual with the absolute” (NL 2: 501-2; 157).
Setting aside all of the complexities of Hegel’s inchoately presented philosophy of nature (e.g., his theory of light) and the Schellingian language in which it is stated (e.g., “polarity”), we see in the above passage about the sexual relation and animal communication two ways in which “the individual seeks and finds itself in another”: (1) in the sexual relation, where the mediation between the two different entities is something external, a “real identity,” viz., the offspring; and (2) animal communication, where the mediation of the difference is something internal—“the indifference of mutual self-recognition,” or voice and its comprehension. But neither form of mediation or indifference attains to the absolute indifference of love or absolute ethical life, where the individual truly does find itself in another, so that each is identical to the others, because each is part of a common spirit that cancels their exclusive individuality. Here the mediation is no longer separable in any way from the difference, but interpenetrates it in a way that transcends the comprehension of the understanding and a reason shackled to the understanding’s principles (e.g., the principle of non-contradiction).\textsuperscript{76} All of nature and all of self-conscious spiritual life, which together form “one continuous whole” (Diff. 2: 111; 169), constitute a hierarchy of stages that approximate closer and closer to the summit and its distinctive unity-in-difference (absolute indifference). In this way, for instance, Hegel gives a philosophical interpretation according to which the principles of chemistry and

\textsuperscript{76} At most, for example, the sexual relation (in plants and animals) could achieve an infinite series of separate individuals, but this too can only approximate genuine unity between individuals.
psychology, even imperfect forms of morality [e.g., the Kantian variety\textsuperscript{77}], are serially
ordered as stages on the way to a kind of unity they imperfectly manifest.

Ultimately, the dialectical method, and the systems of logic (metaphysics),
nature, and spirit it covers, cashes out the metaphors of approximation and striving and
provides the bedrock explanation and justification of Hegel’s world-teleology. In his
eyearly Jena lecture notes, Hegel clearly identifies the philosophical system he never
fully develops in his early writings as comprising a “logic” or “metaphysics” (IAW 5:
263), a philosophy of nature and a philosophy of spirit, the logic providing the
foundation for the other two. The purpose of the logic is to “destroy the false
metaphysics of the limited philosophical systems” (ibid.) and to reveal as absolute “the
idea that contains in itself the determinations of form” (ibid.), i.e., to show how one
category in particular, the idea of the absolute, contains in itself the other, limited
categories of reality that are manifested in nature and spirit.\textsuperscript{78} The dialectical method
operates principally on these categories, not natural and spiritual formations. It
reveals the categories to be related to one another, in particular to have a necessary
relation to their opposites, which in turn are synthesized with one another by a higher-
order logical category; it provides an all-encompassing system of such categories,
culminating in the principle of subject-object unity and this unity’s own self-
recognition as the absolute (i.e., “the idea”);\textsuperscript{79} and it aims to demonstrate that the
organic system of categories necessarily exists.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{77} See (FSC 1: 300-4) and (SC 1: 370; 253).
\textsuperscript{78} Cf. (LM 5: 272-3; 589), where at one point, in the margin of his notes, Hegel refers to the logic’s
preoccupation with “categories.”
\textsuperscript{79} Since other, non-ideal philosophical systems base their conception of subject-object identity on non-
ideal categories, and the dialectic reveals these to be limited, it “destroys” those other systems.
The logical system of categories has no independent existence. For example, it does not exist in a Platonic “heaven.” But natural and spiritual forms embody it; they have no existence apart from manifesting its eternal structure. Hegel reads the books of nature and human experience in terms of his logic. He contends that natural and spiritual entities and processes must embody its categories, the former the lower stages of the logical dialectical hierarchy, the latter the higher stages. Of course, not everything in nature and spirit is logically determined or a priori. But, there must be identifiable in nature and spirit a hierarchy of beings and formations corresponding to the logical hierarchy, with the all-encompassing category (the absolute) yet to become manifest as ideal human community. So long as experience lends itself to being interpreted in terms of the system of logic, which does indeed seem to be the case, it cannot confute the Hegelian system and its absolute. As with many (perhaps all?) philosophical positions, it stands or falls on independent, logical (categorial) considerations.

The Hegelian logic and its grounding of the structure of nature, spirit, and their stages is Hegel’s ultimate explanation of his world-teleology and its central notion that nature and spirit constitute a single hierarchy of forms approximating or leading towards ideal human community. There is no conscious striving of one form for any other, including the final form. And none approximates toward the highest by any standard external to itself. Rather, each form, manifesting as it does an element of the

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Nonetheless, since all categories are organically related and shown to culminate in the category of the absolute, all of the limited categories are “contained in” the highest category.

80 Sometimes, e.g., (LM 5: 272-4; 588-90), Hegel distinguishes between his logic and metaphysics, where the former assumes the negative, destructive role, and the latter the positive role of depicting the idea and its imperfect manifestations in previous philosophical systems. So far as I can tell, nothing crucial hangs in the balance on this distinction.
logic, has a necessary reference to the others and to the absolute form, just as each category has a necessary reference, demonstrated by the dialectical method, to the other categories and to the idea. At least, this is the philosophical vision and justification of the absolute intimated in Hegel’s early Jena writings. Nowhere in his early Jena writings does he actually develop this systematic conception.

So much for the contours of the young Hegel’s absolute. Whether or not he can ultimately persuade us of his absolute’s explanatory value, much less coherence, it is clear what kind of divinity it involves, what kinds it does not involve, and what he hopes the philosophical recognition of it will do for humanity. First, the Hegelian absolute is, as realized, a particular, ideal form of collective human existence: absolute ethical life, with love (absolute ethical consciousness) assuming the guiding principle of the people, properly expressed in a system of legislation, and solidified and worshipped both in an imaginative religion akin to that of the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, as well as in Hegelian philosophy itself—both Hegelian philosophy and imaginative folk religion being “in their essence divine service” (Diff. 2: 113; 172).81 That form of life, in which (at least for members of the first class of Hegel’s ideal society) the division between subject and object is suspended in communal activity, is the pinnacle of the hierarchy of being, the nature of each stage of which (moving from nature to finite spirit) is to approximate as best it can that highest life. Moreover, that form of life includes or overreaches the entire finite realm beneath it; it

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81 In this passage, it is true, Hegel speaks of philosophy and “art,” not religion, but by “art” he likely has in mind the mythological folk religion at the center of much of his early work, since (1) elsewhere he clearly identifies them (cf. Diff. 2: 23; 92), and (2) only something like this form of art could be divine art, and so divine service.
is absolute, self-determining, and unconditioned, but it is only such insofar as it develops out of the context of the hierarchy of nature and finite spirit. Hegelian philosophy is meant to show what the nature of the divine truly is; to get human beings to stop alienating the divine from their own lives, both in the form of an objective God and in the form of an unattainable ideal; to recognize that the potential divinity of humanity can be realized; and to help engender that beautiful ideal of man, which requires that the unconscious striving of Hegel’s contemporaries to usher in the divine be illuminated by the conceptual system of Hegelian philosophy. Only then can highest cultural life be fully actualized, and only then can the beauty of the ancients resurface, this time incorporating in a subordinate position the principle of independence, which began to develop with the Roman Empire, and continued down to the fragmentation of Hegel’s own Germany. It was Hegel’s hope and belief that it would appear among his German contemporaries in the near future.
Conclusion

[T]he highest goal [is] … to suspend this endless determination and domination in the true infinity of a beautiful community where laws are made superfluous by customs, the excesses of an unsatisfied life by hallowed joys, and the crimes of oppressed forces by the possibility of activities directed toward great objects (Diff. 2: 83-4; 146).

In chapter 1 we posed three questions about the young Hegel’s development of a philosophy of the absolute. First, how does he conceive of the absolute? Second, given the fundamentally practical orientation of his early thought, how can we make any good sense of the apparently radical shift in the direction of his thinking in Frankfurt and Jena towards what seems to be purely speculative theorizing about the absolute? And third, how can Hegel take seriously any conception of the absolute, given his vehement criticism of all religious alienation? These questions guided our inquiry into the center of Hegel’s thought.

I take Hegel’s rejection of all forms of religious alienation and his practical orientation, in particular his desire to revamp the society of his fellow Germans and be a part of a newly developed common spirit akin to the ancient Greeks and pre-Christian Romans, to pose significant constraints on any adequate interpretation of his thought, including his doctrine of the absolute. Ideally, we would like an interpretation that reveals his absolute to be eminently practical and devoid of even a scent of religious alienation; however, prima facie, there do seem to be significant tensions between these features of his thought and his absolute-philosophy. This situation threatens to render the young Hegel’s intellectual development less than perfectly coherent.
Fortunately, as we have learned, those apparent tensions turn out to be merely apparent. We have seen over the course of these pages that he conceives of the absolute as a form of human community in which the divine common spirit of the people is recognized as such. More specifically, we have seen that he regards it as that form of human community where absolute ethical life is embodied in the customs of a people, and where those customs take shape as a system of legislation and an imaginative folk religion that serves to reinforce and enhance communal solidarity. In this scenario, absolute ethical consciousness (love) assumes the helm of the community, and the first-class members that partake of that form of consciousness transcend all religious alienation, directly partake of the divine, and celebrate in it in ideal religion. We have also seen that the early Jena Hegel’s speculative philosophy of the absolute serves the practical functions of both helping engender that ideal human community and holding it together by providing the philosophical underpinnings of its activities, including its forms of communal religious worship. There is therefore no tension between Hegel’s speculative philosophy of the absolute and the main trend of his thought toward the absolute value of human community, the importance for theory to be relevant to communal life, and the need to avoid all forms of religious alienation.

Finally, we have also learned of Hegel’s strategy to explain why he accords the human ideal the status of the absolute, even though he does not systematically develop this strategy in his early writings. One difficulty faced by any interpretation of Hegel according to which his absolute is identical to a kind of ideal collective human existence is that it is hard to see how that could be considered the absolute. This
difficulty has been resolved by noting the import of Hegel’s dialectical method, which expounds a dialectical hierarchy of categories in a system of logic (or metaphysics), and proceeds to systematize natural and spiritual phenomena as manifestations of the same dialectical hierarchy. As the logic reveals an organic hierarchical system of categories culminating in the category of subject-object identity (intellectual intuition) and its own self-recognition as the absolute, nature and spirit embody this system. Thus, on the one hand, the hierarchy of forms (ideas) leading up to the highest development of the universe, or the ideal community, and, on the other hand, that ideal community itself are inseparable from one another, though the latter is the end towards which everything else “strives” or “approximates.” Ultimately, it is Hegel’s dialectical logic that cashes out the metaphors of striving and approximation, and that explains the immanent teleology in the universe. Moreover, that logical system, the ultimate foundation of Hegel’s worldview, does not have an independent, Platonic reality behind the natural and the spiritual worlds; rather, it constitutes the immanent and eternal structure of the only kind of possible world there could be, viz., a world having the structure of our world.

Hegel would not bother to exert so much effort to reconceptualize the nature of the absolute in the manner that he does, did he not think that his efforts to do so and to depict it in his writings would be of service in producing it. But he believes fervently that his own age marks the advent of the ideal human community, and he also believes that strenuous efforts are needed in order to ensure its coming. He says in an early letter to Schelling:
I believe there is no better sign of the times than this, that mankind is being presented as so worthy of respect in itself. It is proof that the aura of prestige surrounding the heads of the oppressors and gods of this earth is disappearing. The philosophers are proving the dignity of man. The peoples will learn to feel it. ...Religion and politics have joined hands in the same underhanded game. The former has taught what despotism willed: contempt for the human race, its incapacity for any good whatsoever, its incapacity to be something on its own. With the spread of ideas as to how things ought to be, the indolence that marks people set in their ways, who always take everything the way it is, will disappear (L, # 11).

By publicly unmasking the false, alienated conceptions of the absolute that have dominated human history since the demise of the ancient world, and by thus displaying the absolute’s authentic nature, Hegel thinks that he is empowering his own people, primed as they are to receive his message, to realize it among themselves, to throw off the shackles of religious and political oppression, and to achieve genuine freedom, where genuine freedom, as we have seen, is for Hegel the same thing as highest community; it is that form of collective existence in which intellectual intuition is actualized.

What is most distinctive about Hegel’s philosophical vision is not so much the ideal community that he depicts—after all, those familiar with, say, Rousseau’s political vision will recognize its pervasive influence on Hegel’s—, but rather the way in which it articulates the meaning of and attempts to ground that community. Setting aside some of Hegel’s contemporaries such as Hölderlin and Schelling, whose own writings contain a philosophical content as difficult to discern as Hegel’s, no philosopher prior to Hegel, of whom I am aware, granted any human ideal such an exalted status. Not only does Hegel maintain its equivalence to the absolute, but he also insists that it is only when humanity recognizes the absolute for what it is, and
stops investing its loftiest energies on something outside of itself and what it can accomplish on its own here on earth, that the human ideal will be realized. In this way, Hegel clearly anticipates some central themes in the writings of Feuerbach and Marx.

Having summarized the insights gained in this dissertation, I would like to conclude it by raising briefly the question of how realistic, from a psychological perspective, the Hegelian absolute is. There are in general two kinds of criticisms one can level at a position: first, one could either point out the falsity of one or more of the premises given in its favor or impugn the grounding of the conclusion in the premises; second, one could point out that the conclusion doesn’t have the significance the author thinks it does, even supposing the author’s argument in its favor to be a good one. Given the enormous ambition of Hegel’s intellectual project, and the intricate, unorthodox, and bold argumentative moves he takes to try to fulfill it, there are bound to be a number of objections of the first kind that one could raise against his defense of his conception of the absolute. However, the tentative criticism I’d like to make against his conception of the absolute, and one moreover that I take to be more interesting, is of the latter variety. My purpose in raising it now, and in such brevity, is not to try to definitively resolve the issue—that cannot be done, if indeed it can at all, in the limited space I devote to it—, but to provoke thought on an issue central to the evaluation of Hegel’s philosophy as a whole.

Consider for a moment the quotation from “The Difference” at the head of this conclusion. It represents the heart of Hegel’s call to action. Envision, he asks us, a community where living customs are captured in laws, but those laws alone (which are
after all merely abstractly universal) are not what hold the people together, since what holds them together is the living unity of love supported by an appropriate folk religion; where an individual citizen’s unhealthy excesses are replaced by sacred joys, i.e., by a unified civic life bound together by this religion, whose focus of worship is the community itself; and where oppressed forces otherwise giving rise to criminal behavior find fulfillment in this communal life and its self-deifying mythology of reason. Once the education of man, received over the course of human history, is complete, and a group of people is ready to stop alienating the divine from its own life and to fulfill the ethical potential of humanity, this ideal community, we are told, can be realized. Human beings (at least ones in this community) will no longer reach out for something beyond their power to self-actualize, or even beyond this world, for the energies once directed outwards will finally find perfect expression within.

After reading enough Hegel, I have been struck by the fact that his religious language and sentiments are indeed vehement and in earnest, only they are directed toward human aims and accomplishments. He clearly knows firsthand the importance to (most) human beings of the deep and momentous impulses that typically find expression in religion and religiously influenced philosophy. His social ideal is predicated on this fact: by re-channeling those impulses so that they are satisfied in that ideal, he not only aims to make visible his belief that human beings can on their own achieve the highest good here on earth, but he also seeks to convince us that the ideal is in fact the highest good, that it can satisfy our deepest needs, and that it can bring the kind of joy and meaning typically sought in religion, but without the false hopes, alienation, and dissatisfaction that accompany it. He is convinced that the
momentousness bound up with the religious life, even after the unmasking of religious alienation, must be felt in connection with the real absolute, viz., the ideal human community. Otherwise, the yearning for the beyond and the one-sidedly infinite is bound to return in a new form, and that brings with it a defective form of socio-political organization. For these reasons his religious language is not mere subterfuge.

But the notion that any human ideal can fully satisfy religious (and philosophically religious) needs is precisely what to my mind is unrealistic from a psychological perspective. In making this claim, I have only my own individual phenomenology, not any empirical studies, to draw upon; however, it seems to me that any impulses significantly akin to religious ones could not find any ultimate satisfaction in human community, however structured and however united by bonds of love. Hegel seems to me to be asking far too much from political life and collective human existence; they cannot deliver the goods he thinks they can.

My suggestion here is independent of whether or not there is any God or transcendent realm, since I am sympathetic, even if not entirely convinced, of skepticism about such matters. My point is that the yearning most human beings feel toward something absolute is unlikely to be capable of being perfectly fulfilled in the human social arena in the way Hegel’s philosophy maintains, for the subjective nature (phenomenology) of that yearning and of religious feelings seem to me to speak to something that at least in part transcends our humanity and the world. Of course, whether or not there is anything to answer that call and drive is an entirely different matter. There is, after all, nothing that precludes life’s having an element of tragedy. If the line of thought developed here is plausible, then it seems that even granting the
cogency of Hegel’s argument for his conception of the absolute, the Hegelian absolute cannot have the sort of significance he thinks it can.
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