

German Idealism after Finitude

IN the landscape of contemporary thought, German Idealism has again become a central—and contested—territory. As borders are being re-drawn, new alliances formed, and large-scale theoretical battles fought, major lines of conflict and division pass again through Kant, Hegel and Schelling. This has to do not only with the fact that German Idealism was a foundational epoch of thought whose influences resonate across the past two centuries and into today—although that is, of course, a prominent factor in its contemporary uses, employed, for instance, polemically by Quentin Meillassoux in his influential (and divisive) diagnosis of the “correlationism” inhering in the dominant idealist-phenomenological tradition. The new prominence enjoyed today by German Idealism is also informed by the realization that, far from being ‘merely’ historically or genealogically important, it re-emerges today as an important resource for *working through* the current theoretical predicament, given not least the striking similarity of the philosophical situation. After all, just as German Idealism itself constituted a reaction against skepticism, irrationalism or linguistic metacritique—so, too, the new philosophical interest, critical or constructive, in German Idealism is defined in no small part by contemporary thinking’s attempt to move beyond postmodernism, philosophy of language or phenomenology and towards a post-deconstructive “speculative” stage, revisiting and revising such concepts as the absolute, infinity, nature, divinity or speculation and re-defining what it means to talk about or practice materialism, realism, speculative ontology or even *Naturphilosophie*.

Those are just two factors that may help explain the current interest in new interpretations of German Idealism, attuned to novel theoretical frameworks; the reader will surely be able to adduce more. In this short introduction, my aim is not to go into detail, and I will not dwell here on the myriad of books, published or forthcoming, academic or more speculative, that take it upon themselves to rethink many pivotal aspects of the German idealist project(s). I will just note that, generally, the fact that we again find ourselves in a battle for the speculative, the infinite and even the transcendental does not equal going back to the philosophical map of Europe in the 1790s or 1800s. The current speculative and ontological turn is essentially constructive in character: the task today is not to deconstruct but, after the deconstruction has already taken place, to construct something new by experimenting on and with philosophical (as well as theological and other) material. When it comes to German Idealism in particular, what is at stake is reconstructing the speculative gesture itself

and its conditions of possibility in a new phase of thinking—the stakes that coincide crucially with those of the entire turn beyond the postmodern. The question of why German Idealism has gained new relevance today or why it is genealogically important implies thus also a *working with* German Idealism—as both an allegiance and an experimentation.

That kind of working-with is precisely the goal of this collection of papers under the heading “New Life of German Idealism,” written by some of the best established and upcoming scholars belonging to what may be broadly called the new generation in continental German Idealism studies—the generation through which German Idealism acquires new life. What these papers share is the contemporary speculative context from which they approach German Idealism, and the sense of its philosophical relevance for the present and future. The main intention behind them as I see it is not so much to provide an analysis of existing approaches to and debates around German Idealism as to offer new interpretations and open up new conceptual pathways. The papers are arranged so as to move broadly from the more “abstract” topics and conceptualities (contingency, totality, utopia, immanence, or the concept of abstraction itself) to the more “human” or “concrete” (anthropology, history or subjectivity). My hope is that the reader will notice not just the shared theoretical backgrounds, but also all the ways, big and small, in which these texts conceptually echo each other. There is, for example, a certain configuration of immanence, groundlessness and impersonality to be found in all of them: an immanent objective generation of possibilities (Johnson); an immanent, impersonal and non-subjective inheritance of spirit (Ruda); an inhuman community (Timofeeva); impersonal immanence as such (Dubilet); the inhuman totality of utopian space (Whistler); a groundless and immanently expanding utopian origin (Chepurin); or an impersonal ontological reading of the Kierkegaardian subject (Burns). Another point of resonance is e.g. the conceptualization of *ohne Warum*, “without a why,” in Johnson’s and Dubilet’s papers. Furthermore, in all the papers, even when it comes to concepts such as the human, subjectivity or, say, methodology, these are always ontologically grounded or inflected—be it as an ontology of subjectivity (Burns), anthropological inheritance (Ruda), immanent life (Dubilet) or contingency (Johnson), an abyss between reality and freedom (Timofeeva), or ontologies of the utopian origin (Chepurin) and utopian space (Whistler). Ultimately, no matter the specific aspects of German Idealism they focus on, what these papers show is what can be done with German Idealism today and how it can be re-worked in contemporary, systematic and constructive, and not just de(con)structive ways.

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