

Speculation and Infinite Life: Hegel and Meister Eckhart on the Critique of Finitude

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Abstract: The paper turns to the thought of G.W. F. Hegel and its convergence with Meister Eckhart's thought in order to explore the possibility of a speculative and affirmative relationship between philosophy and religion. It argues that these thinkers, taken together, offer a possible way of rejecting one of the binary structures prevalent in recent continental philosophy, namely the division between an atheistic defense of philosophy and its (secular) egological subjects on one hand, and the affirmation of the primacy of transcendence and alterity (in a quasitheological vein) on the other hand. Hegel's and Eckhart's works suggest that such binaries foreclose a third possibility of annihilating the subject as a way to affirm a speculative and infinite immanence.

Utilizing different discursive spaces and theoretical vocabularies, Hegel and Eckhart propose to annihilate the subject as the site from which transcendence could be affirmed in the first place. Moreover, here, God no longer functions as a name against which to struggle in the name of atheism, or one to uphold for a theological critique of the secular. Rather, it becomes the name for the possibility of absolute desubjectivation, of self-emptying and annihilating the subject— processes that are no longer open to transcendence, but reveal the ungrounded immanence of life. In tracing these logics, this paper questions the dominant distribution of concepts structuring the recent turn to religion in continental philosophy, and suggests one possibility for the democratization of thought that would dislocate the imperialism of secular and atheistic discourses without elevating theology to a renewed position of power.

I. Rethinking the Polemics around the Religious Turn

THE turn to religion in continental thought is no longer a radically new phenomenon. Over the course of the last several decades the penetration of religious problematics into philosophy, a process that had already become visible in the second half of the twentieth century, has only intensified. Undermining the modern assumptions about the strict separation of philosophy and theology, there has been a powerful rearticulation of the boundary of and the relation between these discourses. The strictures demarcating the proper and legitimate place of philosophy in relation to theology that had guided modern philosophy—at the very minimum from Kant’s critique of speculative theology to Heidegger’s outlining of the ontological function of philosophy in “Phenomenology and Theology”—no longer holds sway with quite the same unquestioned force.¹ What, however, does remain up for debate is the precise significance of the transformation enacted by the religious turn. What exactly is the nature of the interpenetration and to what end is it performed? If religious and philosophical discourses are no longer strictly separated, how exactly do they become reconfigured?

One answer to these questions has been offered by Hent de Vries, who suggests that the religious turn allows for the illumination of “the unthought, unsaid and unseen of a philosophical logos that, not only in the guise of modern reason, but from its earliest deployment, tends to forget, repress or sublimate the very *religio* (*relegere, religare*, or relation without relation, as Levinas, and, following him, Derrida would have

1. One useful attempt to articulate a typology of possible relations between philosophy and theology is found in Daniel Colucciello Barber, *On Diaspora: Christianity, Religion, and Secularity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 1-29.

it) to which these motifs testify.”² The motifs being referred to are all those figures of thought, operations, non-dogmatic theologemes that have recently returned to theoretical significance, which include questions of prayer, apocalypics, messianicity, sacrifice, specters, apophasis, and revelation, among others.³ On this account, the religious turn allows us to return to the religious and theological archives in order to uncover and reactivate the operations disavowed in the self-narration of philosophical reason.

Within this broad theoretical intervention, a more restricted trajectory is traceable. The religious turn took up the critique of the philosophical subject, variously its autonomy and consistency, its self-possession and mastery, its egological self-enclosure and self-identity, and did so in order to re-affirm the primacy of transcendence. The link between the breakdown of the subject, the affirmation of transcendence and the critique of secular philosophical reason is nowhere enacted as starkly as in the corpus of Levinas. His thought at once sought to displace the subject towards an ethical relation to the transcendence and, complementarily, to liberate the name of God. For Levinas, the two tasks were convergent precisely because they challenged the status of philosophy, which rendered the subject and God the two nodes through which the dominance of the Same was enforced at the expense of the relation, both theoretical and ethical, to the Other. The general tendency to recuperate transcendence is succinctly recapitulated by de Vries around the deconstructive figure of the *adieu*. “All this is implied from the outset in the phrase à Dieu or adieu, in all its ambiguity of a movement toward God, toward the word or the name of God, and a no less dramatic farewell to almost all the canonical, dogmatic, or onto-theological interpretations of this very same ‘God.’”⁴ In other words, God becomes the name for a non-dogmatic relationality, naming an exteriority and a transcendence that constitutively cannot be exhausted by operations of knowledge or mastery. But the critique of onto-theology yielded different and even divergent paths. In Derrida, for example, it ultimately entailed a reactivation of negative theology not as an affirmation of a hyperessentiality, but as an enactment of a relentless negativity.⁵ *Apophasis*, or negative theology, was reappraised

2. Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 5-6.

3. *Ibid.*, 23 and *passim*.

4. *Ibid.*, 24.

5. Derrida's appraisal of negative theology changed over the course of his life, from its rejection to a positive reappraisal in later writings. For an example of the latter, see: “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and*

in part because of the ways it put into question the pretensions of philosophical discourse: it suggested that determination is never as powerful as it claims, revealing it as the projection of a masterful subject attempting to possess and exhaust what is transcendent to it.⁶ At the same time, the critique of modern philosophy in its onto-theological dimensions has yielded more explicitly religious-oriented paths. One can think of the Catholic phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, who followed Heidegger in dislodging onto-theology, but did so in order to affirm a God beyond being.⁷

Recently, however, questions have been raised as to whether the result of the religious turn has not simply been a failure for philosophy itself. Through his diagnosis of the ‘correlationism’ in modern philosophy, Quentin Meillassoux has argued that the finitization of thought has led to a reemergence of fideism in various forms: once thought is restricted to the domain of the human, it generates an undetermined beyond that can be filled with God knows what. An even more explicit push back against the religious turn and its appropriation of deconstruction has recently been offered by Martin Hägglund, who has proposed an interpretation of Derrida as a “radical atheist.” The general contours of this position—the assertion of a stark divide between an atheist discourse (however much it might borrow from theological and religious archives) and a properly (dogmatically, orthodox) religious discourse—is one that has had more general purchase. For example, Christopher Watkin has recently offered a reading of Meillassoux, Alain Badiou and Jean-Luc Nancy as proposing a “difficult atheism” in polemical contrast to any so-called religious turn.⁸ Attempts to reassert the proper domains of philosophy in opposition to its contamination by the theological are not exactly new: more than two decades ago, Dominique Janicaud diagnosed and sought to restore the proper limits and scientific merit of phenomenology in contrast to its cooption by the theological, which he saw as dominant in post-Levinasian phe-

Negative Theology, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982)). On the transformation see: John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

6. For a classic account along these lines see: Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
7. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
8. Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

nomenology. Each of these retorts can be said to exhibit a certain kind of secularism of thought insofar as they seek to reassert the purity of a philosophical or atheist position in polemical opposition to religious discourse, which is relegated to being the hostile enemy of philosophy.

Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, editors of the recent volume *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern*, appraise this situation in a particularly perspicacious way: “The deconstruction of the philosophy/theology binary has resulted, not in a true democracy of thought between philosophy and theology, but in the humiliation and debasement of philosophy before the Queen of the sciences, theology.”⁹ In other words, the religious turn did not yield a democratization of thought, one that would dislocate the imperialism of secular and atheistic practices to allow religious discourse to be treated seriously. Rather, what has happened is a reversal, a “theologisation of philosophy.” In contrast, Smith and Whistler call for a “liberation of philosophy of religion,” which would mean undertaking “the task of experimenting on and with theological and religious material.”¹⁰ Significantly, they don’t call for a mere re-inversion, for a militant atheism standing again in opposition to religion. Instead, they ask whether there is a way of making speculation and experimentalism lie at the heart of religion and philosophy alike.

Perhaps, one can avoid choosing sides in this false polemic: between a militant atheistic defense of philosophy, which becomes, intentionally or not, another weapon in the intellectual arsenal of secularism, and a religious turn as it has been understood in the Levinasian and Derridian register. Perhaps, there is a way to think outside of these relentlessly persistent binaries that seem to reappear as soon as we undo them: *either* a masterful subject of ontology in contrast to a finitude aporetically relating to an (ethical or divine) alterity, *or* (from the other side) a supposedly religious orthodoxy as opposed to a nuanced atheism. As though, we never learn from old polemics, but can only restage them anew in ever more complex theoretical ways.

Perhaps, there is another possibility, one that becomes visible when we read Hegel and Meister Eckhart together, one that that imbricates the philosophical and the theological in a different, immanent, and speculative way. Something of such a third option is provocatively suggested by the editors of *After the Postsecular* when they rearticulate the nature of philosophy of religion as a speculative rather than a

9. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (eds.), *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 3.

10. *Ibid.*, 4

critical enterprise. Rather than a critical genealogy that took philosophy of religion as a battleground for political interests that sought to deflate religious orthodoxy (a tradition they see spanning from Locke and Hume to Nietzsche and Derrida), they propose “an alternative genealogy of speculative or affirmatory philosophy of religion leading from Spinoza through Schelling to Bergson and Deleuze.”¹¹ These resulting speculative productions are not simply apolitical or private exercises in cosmographia. Rather, they are affirmative precisely because they avoid being primarily structured by a polemical antagonism, but are driven instead by a speculative and experimental impulse: they indeed have political ramifications, but ones no longer fundamentally structured by a divide between secular atheism and religious orthodoxy.

By looking at Hegel and his convergence with Eckhart, I want to insist on such a speculative and affirmative relation of philosophy and religion, but I want to do so along a particular axis. I want to suggest that the two thinkers engage with theological materials without enforcing the primacy of subjective finitude. They indeed follow speculative line by “ignoring the pathos of finitude so central to phenomenology, hermeneutics and deconstruction and, instead, prioritising the infinite.”¹² What I find in them are two interrelated thinkers who propose to reject the very binary between a masterful egological subject that undergirds onto-theology and the affirmation of alterity. For them, this binary forecloses a third possibility, the possibility of annihilating the subject as a way to affirm a speculative and infinite immanence. Utilizing different discursive spaces and theoretical vocabularies, Hegel and Eckhart both propose to annihilate the subject as the site from which any kind of transcendence could be affirmed. Moreover, for them, God is not a name against which to struggle in the name of atheism, nor one to uphold within a theological critique of secularism. Rather it becomes the name for the possibility of absolute desubjectivation, of self-emptying and annihilating the subject, processes that no longer affirm transcendence, but open onto an infinite, immanent life.

II. Annihilating Finitude and Subverting Transcendence

Near the end of the introduction to the 1802 essay *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel writes the following lines: “Truth, however, cannot be deceived by this sort of hallowing of a finitude that remains what it was. A true

11. Ibid., 7-8.

12. Ibid., 19.

hallowing should annihilate [*vernichten*] the finite.”¹³ In this statement, Hegel articulates a position on the status of finitude, which persists in various forms continuously from his works in Jena through to his Berlin lectures. Within the context of *Faith and Knowledge*, the affirmation of the necessity of annihilating finitude delineates the specifically Hegelian perspective in contrast to the reigning post-Kantian philosophy of his time. The insistence on not absolutizing finitude as such, of not making it primary in our theoretical and ethical thought, is not a marginal component, but rather presents one of the definitive axes of Hegelian thought. The specificity of the position is located in the particularly unremitting formulation that finitude must be annihilated, absolutely taken as *nihil*. It is not to be exalted as such, or merely be given a proper place within an ordered totality, or even partially negated in order to exalt something above it.

This insistence on annihilation—and the conceptual logic that undergirds it—forms a categorical divide between Hegelian thought and the dominant contours of the philosophy of his contemporaries.¹⁴ Ultimately, for Hegel, theoretically there are two mutually-exclusive possibilities: either naturalizing finitude as self-standing, as the unsurpassable limit out of which one thinks and lives, or, alternatively, annihilating finitude as the primary theoretical nexus, and instead situating it as a moment in a movement that precedes and exceeds it. He diagnoses the situation as follows: “The fundamental principle common to the philosophies of Kant, Jacobi and Fichte is, then, the absoluteness of finitude and resulting from it, the absolute antithesis of finitude and infinity, reality and ideality, the sensuous and the supersensuous, and the beyondness of what is truly real and absolute.”¹⁵ What is valorized is a dual and bifurcated reality, a finite subjectivity, separate, singular and enclosed, and a transcendence to which it remains related, and which, in turn, in being rendered constitutively unreachable, maintains the subjectivity in its finitude. Hegel analyzes the variations and permutations that this principle takes, including the ideality of the moral law as the ultimate objective reality (in Kant), the prioritization and elevation

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York, 1977), 65, *translation modified* and G.W.F. Hegel, “Glauben und Wissen” in G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 4: Jenaer Kritische Schriften*, eds. Hartmut Buchner and Otto Pöggeler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968), 323.

14. For a powerful interpretation of the significance of *Faith and Knowledge* in Hegel’s overall project, see: Gillian Rose, *Hegel contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1995), esp. 92-102.

15. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 62.

of the singular subject in its feeling and longing (in Jacobi), and the attempted enactment of this opposition in a synthesis and the drive for mastery and suffering thus produced (in Fichte). But what is notable is precisely the way that for Hegel these differences matter much less than the common conceptual matrix that underlies these variations. Each of these philosophical systems legitimates an injunction: “never to forget the absoluteness of the subject.”¹⁶

What *Faith and Knowledge* seeks is to reconfigure theoretical conceptuality so that one could precisely forget that absoluteness, and it does so through the insistence on the process of its *Vernichtung*. Annihilation is not a violent process of immolation or sacrifice, nor a simple absorption of particularity into a totality or individuality into the absolute. Annihilation appears as a violent operation only to the position that takes empirical subjectivity as the *sine qua non*, the baseline beginning and unsurpassable site, for thought and life. It is a loss only if one begins with life and thought as already possessed and appropriated, as *my* life and *my* thought—as possessions or quasi-faculties, rather than from a position that affirms that I partake in thought and life that precedes and exceeds me. By contrast, for Hegel, annihilation is first and foremost an operation that rearticulates the very status of finitude. Hegel offers the following image to describe this dynamic:

It is as if someone who sees only the feet of a work of art were to complain, when the whole work is revealed to his sight, that he was being deprived of his deprivation and that the incomplete had been incompleting.... In the Idea, however, finite and infinite are one, and hence finitude as such, i.e., as something that was supposed to have truth and reality in and for itself, has vanished. Yet what was negated was only the negative in finitude; and thus the true affirmation was posited.¹⁷

What is at stake in this conception of annihilation is the annihilation of finitude *as* finitude, as something self-standing and severed from the infinite it posits and holds as a transcendent truth. For Hegel, finitude as such must not be affirmed as primary, but taken as only an abstracted form, the result of a secondary operation, which breaks apart the impersonal, immanent process that exceeds any given finite appropriation. To begin with an empirical perspective, as Hegel repeatedly diagnoses in his immanent critiques of dominant philosophical and theological paradigms, is to improperly essentialize and naturalize finitude, allow-

16. Ibid., 64.

17. Ibid., 66.

ing life and thought to at most strive to elevate themselves towards a transcendence that can definitionally never be reached; but it is always to fail to inhabit speculative infinity immanently, which precisely requires annihilation of finitude “in and for itself,” that is, as something self-standing and independent.

The convergent point that Hegel never ceases to impart is that infinity cannot be posited merely as the other of finitude without being thereby rendered finite itself. Infinity articulated in opposition to finitude remains itself merely finite because it is defined and limited by this opposition. Precisely insofar as it is *other* to the finite, it is determined as *its* other, and thus reveals itself not to be genuine infinity, but merely an abstract projection of finitude itself. “They understood the sphere of this antithesis, a finite and an infinite, to be absolute; but if infinity is thus set up against finitude, each is as finite as the other.”¹⁸ Though the explicit target of Hegel’s critique is the philosophy of his contemporaries, it also contains the kernel of a proleptic critique of Levinasian and post-Levinasian thought. This becomes visible when we realize that Hegel’s decisive theoretical move is to insist that transcendence, the positing of a beyond for which one strives or by which one is affected (whatever the form one gives it, whether the moral law, eternal life, the intelligible world, or the Other) is an abstraction, an effect of self-negation or self-limitation that does nothing but enact a gesture of prostration towards alterity—and, moreover, that this formation can be formalized within religious discourses no less than philosophical ones. The assertion of transcendence, then, no longer functions, as it frequently does even in contemporary discourse, as an act of valorization, one that upholds the purity of what is posited as radically other—but rather as a ruse of abstraction whose central effects are the delimitation and enforcement of finitude.

For Hegel, to critique the subject in order to exalt some form of transcendence surreptitiously reinforces the very perspective of finitude that it means to be subvert. What is at stake is not the opening up of finitude to transcendence, however conceived, but the diagnosis of the correlation between finitude and transcendence, and in turn the subversion of that entire correlation. To annihilate finitude for Hegel is to remove the very negative constraint of transcendence that structures its entire theoretical and affective matrix, and in this way to hallow life, to release it from the determination as essentially finite. In other words, one must resist merely choosing between the affirmation of a self-possessed subject and its self-negation as a way of valorizing transcendence; instead, the task of the speculative enterprise becomes the collapse of the entire

18. Ibid., 63.

conceptual field governed by finitude, in order to articulate finitude itself as a moment of infinite generation of immanence.

This is why Hegel can write: “Infinity is the pure annihilation [*Ver-nichtung*] of antithesis or of finitude; but it is at the same time also the spring of eternal movement, the spring of that finitude which is infinite, because it eternally annihilates itself.”¹⁹ For Hegel, in contrast to Levinas, the infinite names not a transcendence that ruptures the self-sufficiency of the subject, but an immanent and impersonal process that precedes and exceeds the very difference between self and other. This is why Hegel insists that annihilation is an “eternal” process, one that continuously subverts the primacy of the subject and affirms its absolute (rather than partial or analogical) participation in processual infinity. And yet, what is thus annihilated is only the negative determination, only the theoretical and existential decision on the primacy of finitude itself. According to this reading, Hegel’s thought is less one of closure and totality than one of externalization and productivity, one that speculatively affirms an immanence that is not merely a possession or a property of the subject, but is an impersonal process in excess of all subjectivity.

III. Divine Speculation: Immanence against Negative Theology

At the outset of *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel points out one of the central problems with all philosophy that commences from the perspective of finitude: “In this situation philosophy cannot aim at the cognition of God, but only at what is called the cognition of man.”²⁰ For Hegel, such restriction of thought to the human subject presents as the successful realization what used to—and, for Hegel, still must—mark the very “death of philosophy.”²¹ Hegel’s articulation of thought as divine must not, however, be mistaken for its attribution to a transcendence entity, to a God *beyond* the human. At stake is not the displacement of thought to a different subject—a divine instead of a human one—rather it is the reconfiguration of the very parameters of thought. For Hegel, speculative reason can be said to be the cognition of the divine only if one takes divine as something absolutely immanent to itself, and not simply that which is external and transcendent to the human. To say immanent only to itself is to say that it has nothing outside of it. Hegel is adamant that nothing has standing outside of God: “Philoso-

19. Ibid, 190 (trans. mod.).

20. Ibid., 65.

21. Ibid., 56.

phy recognizes that there is no *outside* of God, and hence that God is not an entity that subsists apart, one that is determined by something outside of it, or in other words, not something apart from which other have standing. Outside of God nothing has standing at all, there is nothing.”²² In other words, for Hegel, the divine ceases to name transcendence and becomes speculative precisely once finitude is annihilated as the site from which thought and life takes place. Taken speculatively, God names the possibility of immanence itself, the articulation of a thought and plane of immanence no longer bound to the strictures of the perspective of the finite subject and its correlation to transcendence. What this crucially means is that, for Hegel, there is no longer any essential connection between God and transcendence, on the one hand, or immanence and humanism or secularism, on the other. In fact, not only is there no *essential* connection, there is no connection at all: God speculatively names immanence that challenges traditional theologies oriented around transcendence, no less than the humanisms and secularisms that appropriate immanence and restrict it to a wordily condition.

It is the decoupling of God from transcendence that makes Hegel a radical critic of the logic of negative theology, of any position that proclaims the indetermination of God as a beyond. For Hegel, negative theology is, in the end, nothing but the proclamation of the failure of thought, one that underwrites the finitude of the subject. It is nothing but the prostration of finitude pointing in exaltation beyond itself, without declaring anything but its own prostrated frustration. Already present in *Faith and Knowledge*, this position persists into his late *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*:

This is especially the attitude and the way of viewing [religion] in our time; religion is an orientation *toward* God, *a feeling, speaking, and praying directed* toward God above—but [only] toward God ... we know nothing of God, have no acquaintance with the divine content, essence, and nature; [we are oriented] toward a place that for us is empty.²³

By associating the name of God with a pure beyond, with a transcendence in excess of all possible determination, what is in reality accomplished is less the valorization of the divine beyond all conceptual idol-

22. *Ibid.*, 169.

23. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Introduction and The Concept of Religion*, trans. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 191.

atry, than the determination of life as oriented *towards* a transcendent goal, which it, by definition, fails to ever reach.²⁴ It becomes a way of defining life *as* *dirempt*, because it is *essentially* related to transcendence. As Hegel polemically judges this Enlightenment position: “From such a God, in Him, there is nothing to be had for He has already been emptied of all content. He is the unknowable... the void lacks content, is indeterminate and possesses no immanent life and action.”²⁵ Being emptied of all content, but retaining its form as transcendence, God becomes the name for the beyond whose main accomplishment is the enforcement of the human in its finitude. For Hegel, the negative theology, philosophically most explicitly articulated by Kant, bars the relation of the intellect to the divine: it situates intellect not as one of the names of the divine (perhaps *the* name for Hegel) but always as something situated on the outside. Nor should it be overlooked that what is eradicated in such a conception is not only speculative thought, but precisely divine, “immanent life,” that is, a life that is immanent because it has nothing beyond it, a common life not split into *my* life and the life of the other. What the retention of an apophatic beyond accomplishes is less the proper actualization of the beyond than the enshrinement and essentialization of the finitude of the human.

Does the attribution of thought to God render Hegel a megalomaniacal philosopher, the kind of onto-theological metaphysician that Heidegger charged him with being?²⁶ Nothing is less certain, unless one is committed to the theoretical unsurpassibility of the correlation between finitude and transcendence. I would suggest, by contrast, that for Hegel, God becomes a speculative name that allows for the theoretical articulation of immanence, and thus also for thought and life to be seen as exceeding their subjective appropriation.

But what does it mean that thought is not reducible to an appropriation of the human subject? The transition from the perspective of consciousness, of the subjective perspective, is not simply an affirmation of the perspective of the divine. Rather than a view from nowhere, Hegel proposes a non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropocentric artic-

24. For a contemporary concern about conceptual idolatry, see: Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

25. G.W.F. Hegel, “Foreword to Hinrichs’ *Religion in Its Inner Relation to Science*,” trans. A.V. Miller, in *Miscellaneous Writings of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. Jon Stewart (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 341.

26. Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

ulation of immanence, for which any empirical subjectivity becomes a moment rather than a ground. What Hegel reintroduces into philosophy, against its dominant tendencies then and now, is the appreciation that we are not just finite. Hegel's gesture is to denude the pretensions of the subject, and expose its pretense to being self-grounding in order to make it acknowledge the immanence in which it partakes without reserve or mastery. At stake is an immanent movement of infinity, one no longer possessed by the subject, nor simply appropriated by God as a (divine) subject to which creatures and the world then would stand opposed. Hegel's thought is a thought of immanence because it disrupts the conceptual topography that separates and keeps separate the self, the world and God.

Such a reading suggests that Hegelian speculative thought should be inserted back within the genealogy of immanence that Deleuze articulates in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* and *What is Philosophy?* Although Deleuze has often been interpreted, in accordance with his explicit position, as offering a radical anti-Hegelianism, this has led to a failure to note their theoretical convergence on the primacy of generative immanence. Certainly, as is most powerfully visible in his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze places his philosophy against the humanistic Hegel dominant in 20th century post-Kojévian philosophy. Yet this is not the only Hegel that there exists, even for Deleuze himself, since Jean Hyppolite had already articulated Hegelian thought as a non-humanistic ontology of immanence in his *Logic and Existence*.²⁷ Years before his articulation of the genealogy of immanence in relation to Spinoza, Deleuze read and appreciated Hyppolite's intervention.²⁸ The differences between Deleuze and Hegel are certainly great, especially on the status of difference and contradiction and Deleuze's conception of a transcendental empiricism. But these differences have led to the forgetting of the strong theory of immanence in Hegel's thought, which deserves to be reinserted in the genealogy of immanence from medieval mystics to Giordano Bruno through to Spinoza and to Deleuze himself.

Moreover, when Hegel describes thought as divine, such an ascription should be read within the tradition of philosophy that takes God as a site for speculation in excess of the fields of representation established between subjects and objects. In other words, as part of the tradition that takes the name of God as liberating thought's speculative ca-

27. Jean Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Amit Sen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

28. Deleuze's appreciative review is published as an appendix of the English translation: Hyppolite, *Logic and Existence*, 191-196.

pacities. With God, everything is permitted, because through thinking God, concepts become disarticulated from the bounds of representation, and a new kind of freedom of thought is made possible. God does not name the origin of moral restrictions or condemnations, but names instead the site for the liberation of thought. As Deleuze explained in his late lectures on Spinoza:

With God, everything is permitted... God and the theme of God offered the irreplaceable opportunity for philosophy to free the object of creation in philosophy—that is to say concepts—from the constraints that had been imposed on them... the simple representation of things.... The concept is freed at the level of God because it no longer has the task of representing something.²⁹

For Deleuze, such an approach is emblematic of early modern philosophy. I have argued elsewhere that medieval mystical theologians like Eckhart likewise used God as the name for immanence in excess of subjectivity, decoupling it from any remnants of transcendence or operations of creation—a fact that Deleuze failed to see due to his overly rigid distinction between the tasks and domains of theology and philosophy.³⁰ For Deleuze, philosophy consists of constructing concepts, articulating immanence, and upholding univocal relations while theology is relegated to the conservative defense of an ineffable God, cosmological hierarchies and analogical predication.³¹ Here I would like to insist complementarily that Hegel reactivated precisely a philosophical use of God in the wake the Kantian moment in which God again became the name for a pious and moral restriction on thought. Hegel rediscovers this impulse insofar as for him God no longer names the limit of the human—as though being something *beyond* the human—but the name for the force of processual immanence, which leaves nothing external to itself. God becomes the name for the process of speculation that renders thought and life as absolutely immanent, no longer essentially severed into a finite subject and a transcendent beyond. It names the site not of the ultimate (self-)possession, but of all subjective dispos-

29. Gilles Deleuze, *Lectures on Spinoza*, <<http://deleuzelectures.blogspot.com/2007/02/on-spinoza.html>> (accessed June 04, 2013).

30. Alex Dubilet, “Freeing Immanence from the Grip of Philosophy: On Univocity and Experimentalism in Meister Eckhart” in *Speculation, Heresy, and Gnosis in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion: The Enigmatic Absolute*, eds. Joshua Ramey and Matthew Haar Farris (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

31. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 169-199 and *passim*; and Dubilet, “Freeing Immanence.”

session, precisely because immanence is no longer a possession or property either of the subject or the secular world. Hegelian speculative immanence allows one to abrogate choosing between a secular subject and a theological transcendence, and instead upholds the task of thinking and living out of that processual infinite that can be called divine precisely and only insofar as it is nothing but immanence itself.

IV. Immanence, or a Life without a Why: Hegel as an Inheritor of Eckhart

At the very moment in the *Lectures* when Hegel articulates the nature of the speculative perspective that stands in contrast to the perspective of the finite subjectivity, he evokes “earlier theologians who saw to the very bottom of this depth, especially Catholic theologians.”³² And yet, despite conjuring a plurality of predecessors, he names only one:

Meister Eckhart, a Dominican monk of the fourteenth century, says in the course of one of his sermons on this innermost [*dies Innerste*], “The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see him; my eye and his are one and the same. In justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] I am weighed in God and he in me. If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would he...”³³

What Hegel finds in Eckhart is a predecessor in the rejection of the theoretical primacy of external relations between the human and the divine, in order to affirm their identity and immanence.³⁴ Hegel finds, within the terrain of medieval theology, the assertion of the dependence not merely of the subject on God, but much more radically, of God on the subject: “If I did not exist nor would he.” What makes Eckhart a Hegelian precursor is the fact that he diagnosed and sought to subvert the prima-

32. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 347.

33. *Ibid.*, 347-348, trans. mod. As the editors of the *Lectures* point out, the quotation is an amalgamation of several of Eckhart’s sermons.

34. The connection between Eckhart and Hegel (and between German Medieval Mysticism and German Idealism more generally) is helpfully explored by Ernst Benz, *Les Sources Mystiques de la Philosophie Romantique Allemande* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1981). Hegel’s response to reading Eckhart is canonically captured in the comment he is purported to have made to Franz von Baader in 1824: “Da haben wir es ja, was wir wollen.” (*Les Sources Mystiques*, 12). On this also see the brief discussion in Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 224-227. H.S. Harris makes the claim that Hegel encounters the medieval mystics much earlier, in 1795, while working on his essay on the positivity of Christianity, cf. H.S. Harris, *Hegel’s Development: Towards the Sunlight 1770-1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 230-231.

cy of asymmetrical relations of externality, and moreover, one that did so by insisting that thought is not something external to its object: taken speculatively, my eye is the divine eye, and not merely a human eye looking at the divine as something external or transcendent. For Hegel, as for Eckhart, there is not a severed duality between the (human) self and the (divine) other, but only the immanence of the One as process.

There are several interrelated vectors of convergence between Hegel and Eckhart, which put them at odds with the dominant logics operating both in medieval theology and modern philosophy. The first is the insistence of the necessity to annihilate finitude as the site from which thought and life are articulated. Eckhart's sermons repeatedly thematize questions of self-annihilation, detachment, and self-dispossession; indeed, they generate a veritable *kenotic* lexicon.³⁵ For Eckhart, just as for Hegel, this process of undoing the delimitation of the subject entails precisely not the affirmation of transcendence, but rather the collapse of the entire correlation between finitude of the subject and divine transcendence. In other words, in contrast to what might be expected of medieval mystical and spiritual writings, in Eckhart's discourse, the annihilation of the self does not yield experiences of God or foretastes of beatific afterlife. Eckhart repeatedly makes this point, but perhaps nowhere more acutely than in his famous Sermon 52, where he delineates the position that true poverty requires not only giving up the self, but also to become free of God as God, that is, God as a transcendent externality.

Eckhart and Hegel, in different discursive frames, both problematize the link of God with transcendence, and do so not in order to foist on the beyond a set of concepts that would produce an idolatrous relationship, but because such a link forecloses the possibility of an absolute immanence that would not be *a priori* severed between the (finite) self and the (divine) other. This is performed, at least in part, through the subversion of negative theology, which is understood not as a pious operation that exalts God (as it is in the Christian tradition from Pseudo-Dionysius onwards) as much as an exaltation of a transcendence, which is nothing but the inverse of the affirmation of human finitude. For Hegel and Eckhart both, the true opposite of negative theology is neither simply *kataphatic* or positive theology nor an idolatrous relation (which Christian theologians never cease warning us of), but the infinitizing of thought and life. It is the affirmation of

35. For a useful enumeration of relevant terms, see: Alois M. Haas, "... das Persönliche und Eigene verleugnen": *Mystische vernichtigkeit und verworffenheit sein selbs im Geiste Meister Eckharts*," in *Mystik als Aussage: Erfahrungs-, Denk- und Redeformen christlicher Mystik* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2007), 370 and *passim*.

the possibility of the cognition of God, not from the position of the finite subject, but as the condition for the articulation of the divine as absolute immanence itself. They suggest that the rejection of negative theology in order to affirm speculative immanence is not simple idolatry: it does not give an improper name that exhausts God. Rather it shows how the traditional concerns of negative theology themselves can be said to disavow their enactment of a *negative* idolatry, in which God remains defined as the negative beyond of the perspective of human finitude. Instead of affirming transcendence, the annihilation of finitude is an operation that opens onto a speculative conception of God as absolute self-immanence, one *from* and not *towards* which one thinks and lives.

For Hegel and Eckhart, thought and life are not severed or opposed. On this point, one can recall Deleuze: “Actually there is only one term, Life, that encompasses thought, but conversely this term is encompassed only by thought.”³⁶ They are no longer possessed, they are no longer appropriated, but name what is common, what precedes and exceeds the subject. But they do so not as a *hyper*-excessive transcendence, but an immanence that subverts at once the subject and any transcendence to which it can be attached. Annihilation of finitude enacts not a violence of abstraction or the self-mutilation of subjective life, but quite the opposite—the recognition that subjective life itself is always already a deformation, a life made to suffer by being forced into itself. Annihilation is thus not a simple negation, but a radical affirmation of life and thought in which one partakes in excess of one’s own subjectivity.

If there is an ethics of self-annihilation that affirms the speculative immanence of life, one could say, turning directly to the vocabulary of Eckhart and the medieval mystics, that it is a question of a life “without a why.” This is life out of the absolute univocal identity that precedes the very differentiation between the human and the divine, between creature and creator, between self and other. Life without a why is neither creaturely nor divine (or, when ascribed to the divine, it is thereby rendered absolutely immanent, as lacking all externality and alterity), but is immanent generation that precedes and undoes all operations of appropriation and transcendence, all difference between humans and divinities. Indeed, one can say that for Eckhart life and immanence are precisely what is revealed in the wake of the breakdown of the conceptual grammar structured by the hierarchical relationality of the delimited self, the created world, and the transcendent God. No longer im-

36. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988), 14.

manent to something, in the sense of being a property of something, life is articulated only as immanent to itself.

It is out of *this inner ground* that you should perform all your works without asking, “Why?” I say truly: *So long as you perform your works for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, or for God’s sake, or for the sake of your eternal blessedness*, and you work them from without, *you are going completely astray*.... If anyone went on for a thousand years asking of life: “Why are you living?” life, if it could answer, would only say: “I live so that I may live.” That is because life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source, and so it lives without asking why it is itself living.³⁷

This passage suggests that life cannot follow the instrumental logics of ‘in order to’ or ‘for the sake of’ or ‘so that’ without being maimed and losing its quality as life. It is not that life should not be instrumentalized for things that are somehow unworthy of it, but that life cannot be made to serve *any* ground or reason *whatsoever*—whether it be the kingdom of heaven, God, or eternal blessedness. It would be difficult to find a more exalted religious triad, and yet Eckhart’s insistence on absoluteness of the mistake suggests precisely a qualitative difference, a conceptual rupture between a life lived according to the logic of instrumentality that arises out of the severance of means and ends, between finitude and transcendence, and, on the other hand, the logic of immanent life without a why.

In recognizing that life is not something possessed or appropriated by the subject, but an immanence revealed through annihilation and self-emptying, both Eckhart and Hegel are harbingers of the connection identified by Deleuze in his last essay: “We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else.”³⁸ If for Eckhart, life without a why is a recurring topos, which insists on life’s irreducible immanence,³⁹ it is perhaps less obviously the case for Hegel. Nevertheless, Hegel repeatedly bemoans the maiming of life under the configurations of concepts, the suffering and longing that is produced under the philosophies of his contemporaries. The problem with absolutizing the subject

37. Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1981), Sermon 5b, 183-4, emphasis added.

38. Gilles Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life,” in *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 27.

39. For this dimension of Eckhart’s thought, see: Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart’s Mystical Philosophy*, trans. David Appelbaum (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001).

and tethering it to transcendence is not only the failure of theoretically articulating a consistent conception of infinity, but also its foreclosure of a shared immanence of life. Moreover, it should be remembered that the effect of philosophies of subjective reflection is not a generation of an actual beyond, but the deformation of the speculative capacities of thought and the existential capacities of life: both reason and life become essentially subjective, appropriated, privatized. This is why Hegel imbricates the two sides so closely: “the task of philosophy consists in uniting these presuppositions... *to posit the finite in the infinite, as life.*”⁴⁰ For Hegel too, then, life is precisely not simply an attribute of the subject, but that which is opened onto, once the finite subject is seen as partaking in the infinite immanence that exceeds it. But what does this entail? As Hegel writes in immediately preceding passage: “It is the goal that is being sought; but it is already present, or how otherwise could it be sought?”⁴¹ Rather than a transcendent goal or a telos, posited as something to be achieved, the speculative perspective ungrounds life and thought, leaving them without transcendent moorings and destinations. Hegel’s thought proposes a movement from the diremption constitutive of a finitude severed from a transcendence to a speculative conception of life which is fundamentally immanent and infinite insofar as it is no longer a property of the subject. The result is an ethics of ungroundedness and an abolition of teleological work. Speculative life is immanent life, generic common life, one no longer appropriated by the subject nor tethered to a transcendent telos.

Such an interpretation is further confirmed by the fact that Hegel differentiates himself from both Kant and Fichte through the way the latter conceive of striving and accomplishment. In the Jena writings, Hegel’s critique of Fichte stems precisely from the teleological framework in which Fichte seeks to unify opposites through subordination and mastery: of nature to self, of necessity to freedom, of drive to reflection. For Hegel, this is the direct result of Fichte’s prioritization of the subjective appropriation of speculation, of articulating the speculative identity as ultimately the possession of the subject. Here identity is merely ideal insofar as it is posited as an ought, something to be achieved, leading to a relation of a violent imposition, a teleological making real of the ideal that cannot but be violent. In contrast, for Hegel, the task cannot be to *overcome* separation and difference into iden-

40. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 94.

41. *Ibid.*, 93.

tity, but one that affirms speculative immanence as preceding the very division between subject and object, self and other, finitude and transcendence. Identity and immanence are not then merely the property of the subject, but must be read speculatively as undermining the status of the subject and any moral mission it might claim. Not coincidentally, right after evoking Eckhart in the *Lectures*, Hegel differentiates the implications of this position from the position most closely associated with Kant and Fichte, one that gives priority to the morality: “as though there were a world, forsaken by God, outside of me, waiting for me to introduce the goal (or goodness) for the first time.”⁴² But for Hegel, as for Eckhart, the task is not to realize a goal, as though the subject is beholden to a necessity (of the norm, of the law, of the free will) to transform the world, which is separate from a transcendent God. Rather, the question is of conceptually subverting the very production of such illusions of necessity, along with the triadic division between the subject, the world and God that underwrites them.

Indeed, to read Hegel in this way is to resist the pieties of scholarship and the powers of historicist common sense that insist on the privileged position of the Kantian framework for interpreting Hegel's thought. But it is also to propose a different mode of organizing traditions, no longer structured by the disjuncture between religious and philosophical domains, but instead by the difference between modes of thought that give voice to immanence and those that enshrine the primacy of transcendence. Such an organization, moreover, compels us to acknowledge that problematizing frameworks that prioritize transcendence and arrest the process of immanence does not necessarily have to be anti-religious, whatever the united voices of theologians, philosophers and common sense might tell us: philosophical and religious discourse each have the capacity to be articulated immanently and speculatively. In such an organization, Hegel must indeed be seen as an inheritor of a medieval theologian like Eckhart, and to stand in opposition to any theoretical articulation that enshrines transcendence, even when it is articulated philosophically, as it is by Kant.⁴³

42. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 350.

43. Though the importance of Kantian categories for Hegel is undeniable (e.g. Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989)), one risks missing something essential if one traces the persistence of Kantianism in Hegel: the very way that Hegel radically traverses and subverts the Kantian framework to open up his speculative perspective, and in so doing recuperates traditions of thought that preceded Kant and which Kant sought to disqualify as illegitimate. So, although it might be true that Hegel is not a metaphysician in a pre-Kantian sense, as Pippin insists,

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it must be noted that the very dichotomy between pre-Critical thinkers like Spinoza and Critical thinkers following Kant is itself a product of the Kantian genealogical self-narration.

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