Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature: _____

Omar Quiñonez Date

Metaphysics Without Ontology:

Hegel, Schelling, and Marx on Reason's Accountability Gap

By

Omar Quiñonez, M.A., Emory University, 2016
Philosophy

_____ Andrew J. Mitchell
Advisor

_____ Dilek Huseyinzadegan
Committee Member

_____John T. Lysaker
Committee Member

_____ Rocío Zambrana
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____
Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____
Date

Metaphysics Without Ontology:

Hegel, Schelling and Marx on Reason's Accountability Gap

By

Omar Quiñonez
M.A., Emory University, 2016

Advisor: Andrew J. Mitchell, Ph.D.

An abstract of
a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in philosophy
2020

Abstract

Metaphysics Without Ontology:

Hegel, Schelling, and Marx on Reason's Accountability Gap

By

Omar Quiñonez

This dissertation argues for an approach to metaphysics called "metaphysics without ontology." Broadly put, that the study of the "world" has no fixed doctrine of what exists or "ontology." It focuses on three philosophers, G. W. F. Hegel, F. W. J. Schelling, and Karl Marx. It argues they advanced an innovative way of doing metaphysics: we do not need to presume the world has a logic in order to talk about what is real and what is not.

For the "idealism" of Hegel and Schelling, reason does not know the world by contemplating its basic structure. Rather, it comes to know what exists by studying the assumptions it itself operates under. For Hegel and Schelling reason is fundamentally creative and always conceives what exists under some condition. The science of metaphysics thus does not simply contemplate what is real but makes statements about some world it helped conceive. Hegel and Schelling understand this approach to be the only way we can say anything meaningful about the world non-dogmatically. Metaphysics needs to accept what I call the "accountability gap:" for some doctrine of existence to count as real or objective it does not need to assume the world has one single logic it is then able to account for.

Marx's "materialism" is also defined by the idea that metaphysics has no ontology. Marx rejects "metaphysics" because it fixates in thought what is really always in flux. For Marx, whether it is his early view that reality is "practical" not theoretical, or his later position that reason has an untold connection to nature, the point is the same: reality is not a fixed "thing" whose boundaries thinking can spell out. Marx explains what reason does by situating it within the natural world as subject to degradation and precarity; what I call "natural decay." Metaphysics has no ontology because the natural world is subject to a process of entropy out of which reason and human labor are able to generate limited order.

Metaphysics Without Ontology:

Hegel, Schelling, and Marx on Reason's Accountability Gap

By

Omar Quiñonez
M.A., Emory University, 2016

Advisor: Andrew J. Mitchell, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in philosophy
2020

Acknowledgements

In writing this dissertation, I was helped along the way by some of the kindest people I know. The Emory Philosophy Department was my academic home for over six years. I had some of the most enriching conversations in seminars, directed readings, The Friday Philosophy Forum, and impromptu conversations outside Bowden. I want to thank my director, Andrew Mitchell, first and foremost, for believing in me years ago, for being an unwavering mentor committed to my project, and last but not least, for an imagination that proved indispensable when I stumbled upon issues difficult to see past. I also want to thank my committee members, Dilek Huseyinzadegan, John Lysaker, and Rocío Zambrana. Dilek's numerous courses on Kant's philosophy were an early inspiration. John's patience, synthetic thinking, and mentorship refined my ideas on Marx and German idealism and proved crucial in moments of personal need. Rocío's book redirected my approach to Hegel's philosophy, and her support has been crucial.

The ultimate source of my dedication and passion are my parents and brothers. To thank my mother, Leticia Muñoz, and my father, Jose Quiñonez, I would need another dissertation. Suffice it to say that my interests on Marx come from the deepest appreciation for their labor and unshakable commitment. I most certainly could not have finished this dissertation without the kindness and loving support of my partner, Alicia Rodriguez-Doyen. Friendship has been the bedrock of this dissertation. I am extremely lucky to have as friends Katie Howard and Jordan Daniels, whose loyalty and generosity I profoundly cherish. I want to thank my brothers Abraham Quiñonez, Israel Quiñonez, and Oliver Quiñonez for their invaluable support. My friends Rodolfo Rojo, Alma Macias, Jaime Macias, and Andrew Culbreth, who from the start supported my professional goals and with whom I shared thought-provoking conversations. Finally, I would like to thank the philosophy faculty at Emory for animating my doctoral project.

Contents

Introduction: Why an Accountability Gap in Metaphysics? 1

Chapter 1: "Metaphysics Without Ontology" in Early Schelling and Hegel 11

I. Introduction 12

II. Schelling's Unconditioned 13

III. Schelling on Reason as Indifference 23

IV. Hegel and Reason's Retroactivity 36

V. Conclusion 47

Chapter 2: Hegel's Theory of the Accountability Gap: Authoritativeness for a Metaphysics Without Ontology 49

I. Introduction 50

II. Thought's Retroactivity 51

III. Thinking Under Unavoidable Presuppositions 60

IV. Authoritativeness and the Accountability Gap 79

V. Conclusion 88

Chapter 3: Schelling on Metaphysics as Storytelling: Inexhaustible Creativity and the Accountability Gap 90

I. Introduction 91

II. Creativity at the Basis of Reason 92

III. Unthinkable Decision and the Accountability Gap 102

IV. Two Kinds of "Metaphysics Without Ontology" 114

V. Conclusion 128

Chapter 4: Marx's "Materialism" as Metaphysics Without Ontology: The Accountability Gap and Natural Decay 130

I. Introduction 131

II. Two Senses of "Existence" 133

III. Marx's Theory of Natural Decay 146

IV. Materialism, the Accountability Gap, and Metaphysics Without Ontology 171

V. Conclusion 181

Conclusion: Transcendental Ontology and Transcendental Materialism 183

Bibliography 195

Introduction: Why an Accountability Gap in Metaphysics?

> "No gaps in being need apply; any more than the possibility of people playing bridge, following the norms of bridge, and exploring strategies for winning need commit us to any unusual gappy ontology."
>
> Robert Pippin, "Back to Hegel?"

Below, I lay out what I call "metaphysics without ontology." I borrow this term from Brady Bowman and Hans Fulda[1] as an umbrella label to describe post-Kantian's metaphysics, in particular that of Schelling, Hegel and Marx. In brief, metaphysics without ontology boils down to the argument that post-Kantian philosophy rejects the world has one single ontology. It denies that there is such a thing as the "world's logic" which reason is supposed to bring out by spelling out its structure. I use the label "thinking of things" to refer to this kind of thinking, which emphasizes "clear and distinct" definitions or well-defined boundaries as the way to metaphysical knowledge. I believe Schelling, Hegel, and Marx shared in this commitment, even as they went on to draw drastically distinct conclusions.

The mechanism by which they laid down the case for a metaphysics that has no single ontology is what I call the "accountability gap." In essence, this view sums up something along the lines of Thomas Nagel's claim that there is no "view from nowhere." It summarizes the idea that every account of what exists is and remains, well, an account. Even though no serious philosophical examination would accept that its conclusions are just opinion, the transcendental turn in philosophy came to believe that we should not rush to picture ourselves heroically flying Plato's chariot past opinion and right into the realm of eternal truths. One major goal of post-Kantian philosophy was thus to say what this ultimately meant. No account of what exists is in principle able to do away with the possibility that things might be otherwise. No amount of empirical data, sophisticated analytic reasoning, or deep personal intuition can bridge the gap between an account of what is real and the world possessing no ontology. But, if we grant this, then in what sense are we still able to talk about bacteria, blackholes, or aesthetics, given that there are no eternal truths? That metaphysics carries an accountability gap thus ultimately means

---

[1] Brady Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7.

that ontological thinking always involves questions about the ways we assume the world to be and how we evaluate those assumptions. In their own ways, Schelling, Hegel and Marx built their philosophies and their mutual disagreements on this point.

In a recent scathing review of Slavoj Žižek's "Lacanian Hegel," Robert Pippin paints a useful picture of internal debates in German philosophy. For those engaged with the continental tradition, post-Kantian philosophy rejects "reason" as the activity seeking "clear and distinct" definitions, or at least, it traces reason's limits. To them, what is most appealing about Schelling, Hegel, and Marx, is their unapologetic criticism of the comfortable image that everything can be defined and put in its place if we think long and hard. But for Pippin this all overlooks what is important about Hegel's philosophy. Traditional metaphysics ends with Hegel because he is the first philosopher to have interpreted reason as normative "all the way down." In thinking about what is real and what is not, or in asking after the nature of the universe, we are not really asking about the world's ontology in the ways Spinoza or Leibniz do. Instead, all such questions are about the governing *norms* through which we draw distinctions that renders those questions sensible to begin with. On this reading, the most redeemable aspect of German philosophy is that it understands this seemingly basic but actually quite important point.

In fact, Pippin believes Žižek's Hegelianism and most continental interpretations are still trapped in traditional metaphysics, even as they criticize it. He writes the following on this point:

> I do not fully understand the claims about holes in the fabric of being, and at any rate, we do not need the claim if we go in the direction I am suggesting. For if that formulation of apperception is correct, it means we are able to account for the inappropriateness of psychological or naturalist accounts of such states, all without a gappy ontology…If believing is to be conscious of believing, then it is impossible just to "be" believing.[2]

---

[2] Robert Pippin, "Back to Hegel?" in *Meditations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 26, no. 1-2 (2012-2013): 12.

On Pippin's interpretation, the need for a so-called "new ontology" emerges from reading Hegel still through a modern metaphysical lens that sees "being" or "negation" as "things." Meaning, as objects with traceable boundaries and definitions. But for him this altogether overlooks that idealism was a radical if quiet revolution in a different way. In asking questions about the *ways* we ask questions, namely what *kinds* of things metaphysical commitments are, we no longer assume that "being" translates to eternal "stuff" or substance. Pippin then comments that "[n]o gaps in being need apply; any more than the possibility of people playing bridge, following the norms of bridge, and exploring strategies for winning…"[3] If we conceive rules as norms and not as the logic of the universe, then in Pippin's eyes we accurately explain why we believe in what we do, and sometimes contest it, without heavy-handed metaphysical ideas like "negativity in being."

I do believe we need "gaps," I am afraid. To be exact, a gap inherent to account-giving as such. It is important to spell out that accounts are put forth as objective or real and yet cannot in principle ever be something like the world's logic. A major goal of this dissertation is thus to say that Pippin and others from the same tradition are right to emphasize the important shift in post-Kantian philosophy from modern metaphysics to a normative-centered framework. But they look right past the main insight from continental readings of post-Kantian philosophy: *that at some theoretical depth questions have no "clear and distinct" answers in a way that is quite uncomfortable to our rationalist impulses.* Ultimately, I believe it is one of the most compelling outcomes of nineteenth-century German philosophy that to accept such conclusion need not lead us to subjectivism or nihilism but to think another way in which reason might still be authoritative. In emphasizing the normative turn so as to leave traditional metaphysics behind, Pippin leaves unanswered the deeper theoretical question of reason's authority vis-à-vis the world lacking an inherent logic.

---

[3] Robert Pippin, "Back to Hegel?," 12.

In point of fact, Pippin's favorite example, the game bridge, illustrates well what I have in mind. It is true that during the game I do not "instantiate" rules like a plant instantiates its species but rather *know* them and use them to my advantage. Hence, rules as norms explain the way the game is played, even my actions, without having to use ideas like metaphysical causation. But bridge does not touch on ontology. At all times I know not just that there are rules and that I could use them but also that they are the rules *of* a made-up game. During the game, at no point do we confuse such made up rules for the objectivity of the rules of logic, for example. But is it the same when, for example, neuroscience says the mind is just the brain? Or when I believe that everything happens for a reason? The problem is not with the apperceptive insight that to follow rules is also to know *we* know them. It is with the fact that such still does not tell us all about those rules. Specifically, it does not say why we follow them or let them be "rules" in the first place. I might believe the rules of bridge come directly from God. Or I could think their source is the most sophisticated psychological research on games. Pippin's bridge example works because we follow made-up rules for the sake of fun. But it is more complicated to spell out that our commitments to bacterial diseases or human equality are real in the way bridge is. Both seem "objective" in quite a forceful way that does not seem explained by knowing they are norms we follow and not eternal truths.

In other words, we need to account for why atoms are real but ghosts are not, even though both emerge from normative distinctions. Such is exactly what the accountability gap does. It renders explicit the fact that no account, regardless of sophistication, could in principle bridge the gap between being an account and becoming the world's ontology. Once we accept this conclusion, it then lets us pose the question as to the ways accounts become authoritative or objective so that we believe anti-matter is real but astrology is not. In my opinion, the accountability gap captures quite well what continental interpretations mean by expressions such

as "holes in being:" that some accounts and their objects, such as brain states, seems real in the strongest possible sense even though at bottom they are rooted in assumed distinctions, not on the world's logic. Indeed, it was Schelling who best expressed this in suggesting that rational systems are set up by rules assumed and not proven with such systems, though Pippin seems not to take him seriously.[4]

Below, I detail this philosophical approach in four chapters. I use "metaphysics" and "ontology" in ways I believe captures best what Schelling, Hegel, and Marx are doing. I thus mean by metaphysics a philosophical approach's most fundamental commitments to what the world is like, as in monism, dualism, pluralism, or naturalism. As Markus Gabriel puts it, metaphysics is thinking about the world in general.[5] On the other hand, by ontology I understand thinking about the kinds of objects that populate the world, such as souls and neutrons. Generally, I distinguish between what an ontology says, for instance that only atoms and the void exist, and its deepest metaphysics commitments, such that the world is physical. It seems to me that this is not an unimportant distinction since it contributes substantially to the similarities and differences between Hegel, Schelling, and Marx. For Hegel, metaphysical commitments are about thought's unavoidable presuppositions which need to be thematized. For Schelling, they describe "decisions" we make to conceptualize the world as such and such and which are at odds with philosophical systems. And for Marx, metaphysical commitments are what has to contribute towards keeping the decay of objects and entropy at bay and from which the authority of ontology emerges.

---

[4] Pippin mentions "groundless Acts" as the kind of philosophical ideas he does not know what they mean. I take this to be a reference to Schelling and Žižek's own use of Schelling's ideas. See Robert Pippin, "Back to Hegel?," 12.
[5] See introduction and chapter one of Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist*, trans. Gregory S. Moss (Malden: Polity Press, 2015).

The first chapter touches on Jena Schelling and Hegel. It situates metaphysics without ontology by describing how their Jena philosophies rethink reason away from the "thinking of things." Although their approaches diverge, especially after Jena, they were and remained united on this point. Recasting reason away from "clear and distinctness" leads them also to interpret it as fundamentally *creative*. They understand reason as a creative capacity to draw distinctions, which then go on to support conceptions of what objects exist. Although reason is the creative source of any and all conceptions of existence, as a capacity to draw distinction it is limited to none. Metaphysics has no single ontology of what exists. Further, Schelling is the first to notice the problem that would occupy idealism for the foreseeable future and which Hegel then helps clarify: if reason is the creative source of conceptions of existence, how are we to judge between them? In other words, what is objectivity for metaphysics without ontology?

Chapter two focuses on Hegel's *Science of Logic*. Hegel answers the question over what objectivity means by suggesting that reason brings along an accountability gap. Thinking does not operate by reaching and grasping the world's eternal logic. Rather, reason thinks always under metaphysical presuppositions it learns about only in hindsight. Hegel rejects modern metaphysics' belief that to find what is real entails spelling out clear definitions about the world's ontological categories. He then rethinks objectivity not as something found or discovered but *achieved*. In other words, objectivity is a matter of reason's *authority*. On this reading, an account of existence is authoritative if it is inventive and creative enough to grapple with its metaphysical assumptions which it came to know in hindsight. Metaphysics carries an accountability gap because no account of existence cannot in principle become the world's logic. As Hegel sees things, because objectivity as authority leaves behind the idea that the world has one single ontology, it is open to contestation and revision. To be objective is compatible with historicity and revision and does not require we accept that the world has one single ontology.

Chapter three treats Schelling's middle and late periods. It considers them as laying out in so many words Schelling's approach to the accountability gap. To a degree Hegel does not envision, Schelling conceives reason as radically creative and at odds with rational philosophical systems. The basis of ontological reflection is not "clear and distinct" principles with which we spell out the world's logic. They are the outmost fundamentally free decisions to conceptualize the world in this or that way. The manner we step into the world, conceiving it as a large physical object or as the purposive realization of God's love, come from no rational principle but from arbitrary starting points. It is such acts of conceptualization that then furnish the concepts we use to speak about what exists. In Schelling's reading, the accountability gap speaks to reason's creative basis and says that in principle it cannot be treated as one more object within some account. Because metaphysics could not turn creativity into an ontological category of the world, metaphysics operates fundamentally along lines of "creative storytelling:" it assembles narratives that render the world sensible but are at no point meant to express its logic. Hegel does not fully thematize this creative edge and thus he still operates within the "thinking of things."

Chapter four is an interpretation of Marx's materialism. It makes the case that it is a *realignment* and not replacement of idealism's metaphysics without ontology. As with Hegel and Schelling, Marx repeatedly argues against reason as the "thinking of things," which he calls "philosophy." For materialism, existence has two simultaneous meanings. It pertains to questions over determinacy, the central theme of idealism, or question over extinction, which is where Marx's unique contributions lie. Essentially, materialism does not say what kinds of objects exist but cedes this question to traditional philosophy. Materialism would thus not embrace something like physicalism, for that is another account that comments on what sort of objects exist. Rather, it is fundamentally concerned with what I call "natural decay." Broadly put, that what we do so as to keep what exists from fading away is philosophically important. Marx comes to the

accountability gap through the idea that accounting is unable to explain what makes one conception of existence authoritative and not another. In light of this, materialism is the metaphysical position within which warding off the decay of objects and the entropy it generates is a benchmark any account must pass to be considered real at all. Such position, in not being committed to any description of what exists, turns materialism away from "laws of nature" and towards metaphysics without ontology.

I believe I should say something about the more general reasons behind this project. Said otherwise, why spelling out German idealism's as well as Marx's metaphysics should be of much interest to anyone. I hold this philosophical period to be unique. German idealists were neither modern metaphysicians nor were they postmodern philosophers. Marx was not solely a political and economic theorist or a traditional philosopher. All occupy some intermediate region "neither here nor there" which often makes their writings seem somewhat outlandish. Does Hegel really mean to say that art has ended? What does Schelling mean by the "unprethinkable"? What is communism really, that "the riddle of history solved," all about? In their grandiose philosophical claims, nineteenth-century philosophers are a site for incredible creativity, imaginative courage, and, yes, grotesque lapses in judgement. It would be true to say that other philosophical periods and schools were or are situated at juncture points. But above all what to me seems so unique about this period is that it is the intermediate region that gave us *our current* world. The fascination with the depths of the inner self, historical consciousness, capitalism and its end, and radical doubts about enlightenment reason. It is our world at its most imaginative moment.

To my mind, there is much we can learn from such an intermediate region today. We live in times increasing close to a crisis of authority in the life and physical sciences. From anti-vaccination discourse, climate change denial, to philosophical unease about neuroscience's physicalism. Similarly, there is broad distrust in the political and economic "rule of experts." Our

times are of "metaphysical exhaustion" and struggle to distinguishing what is real from what is not. If nothing else, I believe we can learn from Schelling, Hegel, and Marx that our exhaustion might essentially add up to a "crisis of imagination." We need to return to the drawing board and think again about what we mean when we say, "that is real," or what reason is, or what capitalism does. What made German philosophy in the early 1800s especially creative is the way it took what were by then established concepts such as "self," "reason," or "value" and twisted their meaning so much that they gave way to completely new ideas.

In a comment published by the Italian magazine *Antinomie*, Jean-Luc Nancy says that Giorgio Agamben essentially believes the covid-19 pandemic has been largely exaggerated by power-hungry governments.[6] He notes as well that Agamben once advised him against a heart-transplant surgery on the grounds that doctors and medical institutions cannot be trusted. I cannot but think this says quite a bit about our current metaphysical exhaustion. It is no longer enough to be critical of the "sameness" of reason, suspicious of its dominating power, or awed by scientific achievements so that ordinary language would need to purify itself into formal logic. We need more than the critique of instrumental reason, reification, or critique in general.

What is rather more crucial for today is to gather together a compelling answer to the following question: in what way can we talk about real things and still accept all of those critiques? In other words, what does it mean for reason to be authoritative in a world where traditional borders between science and myth, same and other, capital and its outside, are all but blurred? I believe German philosophy as metaphysics without ontology can orientate us towards an answer once again.

---

[6] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Eccezione Virale" in *Antinomie: Scritture e Immagini*, February 27, 2020, https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/02/27/eccezione-virale/

Chapter 1: "Metaphysics Without Ontology" in Early Schelling and Hegel

> "The question cannot be solved except in the way in which Alexander solved the Gordian knot, that is, by doing away with the question."
>
> -F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*

> "No philosophical beginning could look worse than to begin with a definition as Spinoza does."
>
> -G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*

I. Introduction

For over ten years now, the scholarship on early German idealism has extensively documented why during the turn of the nineteenth century "metaphysics" returned from exile. Criticisms of Kant's "transcendental idealism," such as Jacobi who revived skepticism, put considerable strain on the still-young "critical philosophy."[1] In the eyes of those who grew up in the wake of Kant's "Copernican revolution," there was no doubt that philosophy had to respond and defend its single most important innovation: that thinking is a spontaneous free activity, not a thing, deeply involved in making up what we call "reality."

This is the world of early "German idealism." For Schelling and for Hegel, who read Goethe, Fichte, Reinhold, among others, it was clear that post-Kantian philosophy had to do a better job than Kant did at expressing that reason cannot be understood as one more "conditional" or "finite" object within the world. Such object-like view of reason turns thinking into a faculty that generates fixed "thought-objects," which ultimately form a never ending and ungrounded chain of concepts that says nothing definitive about the world. This need to defend "critical philosophy" was especially true since Kant's "transcendental idealism," whose "pure" forms of intuition and thinking guaranteed some sense of objectivity, was being seriously questioned. For these and other reasons, there was an urgency in the first writings of Schelling and Hegel to revive precisely what Kant tried to put to death in the very "spirit" of Kant's philosophy: metaphysics. Both Schelling and Hegel used in these early years the term "absolute" to indicate that, when considered in itself, reason was not a conditional object so that it would

[1] Paul Franks frames the problem of skepticism as follows: "skepticism—now transformed into nihilism thanks to Jacobi—threatens every putatively justificatory practice, extending beyond the philosopher's chamber to the natural scientist's laboratory and, beyond the academy, to everyday life." Paul Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

give rise only to conditional knowledge and trigger an infinite regress. We thus do not need to rush back to dogmatism's "God" for certainty nor to radical empiricism's simplified subjective world of sensations. By itself, reason is unconditioned and appears as a mere chain of conditions, one supporting another to no end, only if we assume from the start fixed distinctions such as subject and object or mind and nature; only if we reduce everything to things.

Thus, if there was a common goal in the early writings of Schelling and Hegel it was this: to show that such finite view of reason is a *subset* of reason and not reason itself. Their goal was to demonstrate, in the words of Hans Fulda,[2] that metaphysical reflection, meaning thinking about the world, was not synonymous with ontology, namely thinking about the objects that populate the world. Whatever ontology we happen to hold, we can be sure that it is never simply the world's "logic" but rather the world *understood in "such and such way."* This is the thesis I will defend in this chapter. From their early writings, though painfully without yet the right frameworks, Schelling and Hegel tried to make a case for a new understanding of metaphysics. This was to be a metaphysics that did not immediately reduce everything to things but was still robust enough to say something about the world *as such*.

II. Schelling's Unconditioned

From the start of his philosophical career, around 1793, Schelling showed a continuous interest in explaining how reason "grounds itself" or is "unconditioned." In "On the Possibility of a Form of Philosophy in General," he remarks that his worries and ideas about reason self-grounding are

[2] Quoted in Brady Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 7.

"…strongly confirmed by the newest work of Professor Fichte."[3] Also from early on his career, Schelling was keen on the idea that Fichte's philosophy could offer a viable path to answer this question.[4] By rethinking objects as emerging from our fundamental conceptualizing activity [*Tathandlung*], post-Kantian philosophy could construe metaphysics in a way other than as a "theory of things," physical or otherwise. The young Schelling thus criticized Reinhold and Kant, eventually Fichte himself, for reintroducing tired dualisms such as subject and object into their "transcendental idealism." Though central to modern metaphysics, these oppositions arise out of a frame that wants to see "things" everywhere and weakens the idea that reason is self-grounding in the face of bourgeoning skepticism in Germany.[5]

This is no doubt in the background when Schelling writes about unconditionality that "the inner form of the content and the form of the axiom are each the form of being *conditioned by itself*, and only through this inner form does the external form, the form of being posited unconditionally, become possible."[6] In considerable awkward manner, Schelling shows

---

[3] F. W. J. Schelling, "On the Possibility of A Form of All Philosophy," in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796)*, trans. Fritiz Marti (London: Buckness University Press, 1980), 39. Dalia Nassar argues that this awkward language is an attempt to extrapolate from within the empirical "I" the idea of "self-positing" as a general structure: "The difference between inner and outer form is a difference between self-positing as an absolutely unconditioned act and the formal structure of positing, which results in the principle of identity. By indicating a difference between self-positing, on the one hand, and the form of unconditioned positing, on the other, Schelling distinguished between the I as a self-causing cause, and a self-determining reality, and the I as a member of the formal structure of positing, a self-identical, self-reflective consciousness." Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013) 276.

[4] Hans Baumgartner speaks about the problems of categorizing Schelling as a "transcendental philosopher." He sees Schelling rather as a philosopher who made use of transcendental philosophy for his nascent conception of metaphysics: "we should conceive of this first period of his publications as the opening phase of a philosophical reflection that employs transcendental concepts, arguments, and forms of reflection in order to do justice to the conception of the absolute in the theoretical philosophical realm, be this conception that of Spinoza or that of classical metaphysics." Hans Baumgartner, "The Unconditioned in Knowing: I, Identity, Freedom," in *The Emergence of German Idealism*, eds. Michael Baur and Daniel Dahlstrom (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of Americas Press, 1999), 246.

[5] Paul Franks believes this to be the reason why German idealism became an "all or nothing" philosophical project. There cannot be a partial systematization or grounding of claims to existence because whatever is not systematized is simply non-existent; it is mere ungrounded opinion: "the problem of escaping the Agrippan trilemma becomes the problem of achieving a Spinozist system that meets the holistic and monistic requirements" Paul Franks, 10.

[6] Schelling, "On the Possibility," 42.

awareness that rethinking reason as unconditioned requires dropping any idea that it can be defined as objects are: by describing their boundaries and spelling out a definition. Reason is bound only by itself.[7] This is not to say that reason does not develop internal distinctions such as subject and object or concepts that depended on empirical confirmation. But it *is* to say that all such cases do not define reason as properties define objects. Although there are *regions* of reason that do analytic and empirical work, reason itself is more than these operations. My belief that tomorrow will rain or that triangles have three sides takes place *within* reason, as does my sensation of fire and my theory of freedom, but none of them are reason itself.

Schelling's most sustained commentary on unconditionality is laid out in the 1794 *Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy*.[8] He formulates this idea first on the basis of epistemological questions. In essence, Schelling argues that knowledge of the world as such cannot emerge in the same way as knowledge of objects *within* the world arises. As he starkly puts it,

> Either our knowledge has no reality at all and must be an eternal round of propositions, each dissolving in its opposite, a chaos in which no element can crystallize—or else there must be an ultimate point of reality on which everything depends, from which all firmness and all form of our knowledge springs…[9]

---

[7] Eric Watkins suggests that the dichotomy between conditioned and unconditioned can be traced back to Kant's discussion of the unconditioned end reason demands in the *Critique of Pure Reason.* He thus sees Schelling at this point strongly influenced by Kant's view of reason: "I maintain that what they fail to fully appreciate about the early Schelling is the crucial influence of another of his immediate philosophical predecessors, namely Immanuel Kant," and adds later on, "it is plausible to see Schelling as taking the concepts of conditioned and unconditioned that Kant emphasized and extending their use to the context of first principles, one that would still be in the spirit Kant." Eric Watkins, "The Early Schelling on the Unconditioned," in *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*, ed. Lara Ostaric (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 12,19.

[8] Andrew Bowie believes Schelling's is full blown monism, which first came to the fore in the *Of the I* and is driven in great part by the duality between the mechanistic sciences and the idea of self-autonomy left behind by Kant. Already in this early stage, Bowie suggests, Schelling is gearing his philosophy towards an alternative position, the result of it being the "philosophy of nature." See Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (New York: Rutledge, 1993), 19-20.

[9] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I as the Principle of Philosophy," *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796)*, 71.

In confusing knowledge of the world for knowledge of objects *within* it, we collapse questions of "first principles" into those of physics, to use Aristotle's distinction. What Schelling tries to formulate, then, is a theory for how knowledge is established at all. Or, as he writes, "If there is any genuine knowledge at all, there must be knowledge which I do not reach by way of some other knowledge, but through which alone all other knowledge is knowledge."[10] Schelling's approach, however, is not Aristotelian. It is a blend of Fichte's apperceptive self-knowing "I" and Spinoza's substance monism, or what Paul Franks calls "holistic monism."[11] However we think the world, whether as a great collection of atoms or an organism, we first need to know how it is that we generate conceptions about it within which we find atoms or parts of an organic whole.

In this early work, Schelling vacillates somewhat in how best to depict the unconditioned.[12] He calls it at some point the "absolute self," even though he does not mean the same as Fichte or Kant.[13] In general, though, Schelling's idea is that knowledge is established through reason's capacity to render distinctions intelligible. At its basis, and Schelling's point is fairly basic, reason is not an object but the minimum *capacity for conceptualization* through which we render for ourselves distinctions such as thinking and feeling meaningful. Schelling comments,

---

[10] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 71. Schelling explains the reasoning for emphasizing the German term *unbedingt*, as it is etymologically a negation of being *bedingen*, or being made into a "thing" [*Ding*]: "Bedingen means the action by which anything becomes a *thing* (Ding). *Bedingt* (determined) is what has been turned into a thing. Thus it is clear at once that nothing can posit itself as a thing, and that an unconditional thing is a contradiction in terms." F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 74.

[11] See Paul Franks, *All or Nothing*, 10.

[12] See Richard Fincham who points out that the disappearance of the "I am I" as the formula for the absolute in the *Philosophical Letters On Dogmatism and Criticism* signals the slow process of estrangement from Fichte as well as a node of acceptance to Hölderlin and other critics. Richard Fincham, "Schelling's Subversion of Fichtean Monism," in *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism: Fichte-Studien-Supplementa*, eds. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (New York: Rodopi, 2010).

[13] Dalia Nassar, for example, comments on the relation to the Fichtean self in the following passage: "Although in the third part of the *Grundlage,* Fichte states that 'the concern here is not with the self given in actual consciousness,' Schelling nevertheless sees Fichte's conception of the self—as a self that is opposed to a not-self—as a conditioned, objectifiable, and hence empirical self." Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 284.

> the unconditional…can lie only in that which cannot become a thing at all; that is, if there is an *absolute I*, it can lie only in the absolute *I*. Thus, for the time being, the absolute I is ascertained as *that which can never become an object at all*."[14]

Schelling strikingly calls this "I" "absolute causality" [15] wanting to say that *thinking fundamentally gives itself distinctions*, such as between mental or physical, to then go on and do the things thinking does in the natural sciences or the humanities. Schelling has neither Fichte's "I" nor the substance of modern metaphysics in mind because both are conditioned in being opposed to either the not-self or substance's attributes.[16] In order to speak of organisms or atoms, or before we can say that "everything happens for a reason," we need the capacity to conceptualize for ourselves distinctions to then see the world as having atoms or being purposive.[17] Similar to the Kantian apperceptive "I" to which representations belong, unconditionality renders intelligible all such conditional objects as belonging to some conceptualization of the world.[18]

When we think reason in this way, as conceptualizing, we think about what it means to be a "world." We do not, that is, use reason to retrieve the world's logic, its basic structure, through our analytic powers. We conceptualize, and in conceptualizing the world in some way, whether

---

[14] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 74-75

[15] F. W. J. Schelling, "On the Possibility," 45.

[16] Terry Pinkard criticizes the early Schelling use of the term "I" to describe the unconditioned: "the youthful Schelling thought that the unity of the subjective and the objective had nonetheless to be an absolute I, which he nevertheless interpreted in Spinozistic, non-Fichtean terms as the expression of some underling 'absolute' reality common to both the originary ('empirical') sense of the 'I' and the natural world (the 'Not-I')" Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 175.

[17] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 75. Dale Snow views the early Schelling as appropriating Spinozistic concepts whenever he perceives that Fichtean or Kantian formulations fail to resolve key theoretical issues. She writes, "the possibility that Schelling borrowed them [Fichte's arguments on the absolute self] virtually unaltered from Fichte is not to be dismissed out of hand. Still, it is my contention that Schelling's ideas of the absolute self sprang first and foremost from the deficiencies he thought he perceived in Kant's system, and that he sought to remedy these deficiencies with a concept of the absolute self strongly resembling Spinoza's substance." Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 49.

[18] This is all Schelling means at the end of the day with the idea that reason's unconditionality is not regulative principle for practical purposes as Fichte's absolute "I" or Kant's regulative idea of God. As Schelling puts it in the *Letters*, "For what you think when *you* think when you speak of a merely practical principle, frankly I cannot see. Your phrase cannot mean more than the acceptance of something as true. And that, like any other acceptance of a truth, is theoretical in form" F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism," in *The Unconditional in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796)*, 159.

as mechanistic or organistic, we also understand in some specific way those objects populating the world. Schelling writes, still in Fichtean fashion, that "The I posits itself absolutely and posits all reality within itself."[19] The unconditioned is neither an essence nor an ineffable transcendental entity, for those are still conditioned objects. Because it is not an object, the unconditioned does not spell out once and for all the world's logic. This is not what Schelling has in mind when he says that the unconditioned guarantees knowledge. He means to say that we do not generate knowledge as such, truths about the world, in the same way we say that water is H2O. One is a matter of conceptualization, the other a conditional statement emerging from chemistry. Reason's unconditionality thus helps us generate distinctions, and those distinctions give us "ontologies" about the objects that exist in the world *given such distinctions*. The world is "posited," as Schelling says, because no world exists that is not first conceptualized, whether as a large meaningless container or an expression of God's love. It is such operation that let us then go on and say that the world is replete of atoms or populated by souls.

There is a somewhat subtle but greatly important point behind all of this. If reason is about rendering distinctions intelligible, whatever those distinctions might be, then reason cannot exhaust itself no matter what distinctions we talk about. From the standpoint of such capacity, the standpoint of the unconditioned, we can think and rethink the world, generate distinctions and support better ones. Schelling does not mean to advocate for an empiricist frame, as though reason is at best able to muster hypotheses for what exists. Schelling's point is more striking. Reason's unconditionality does not spend itself entirely regardless of the set of distinctions we hold to explain, for instance, religion, viruses, or happiness. In a convoluted passage, he writes,

> in order to determine the relationship of the two [subject and object], an ulterior reason for the determination must be presupposed, owing to which both are determined. For one

[19] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 110.

> cannot say that the subject alone determines the object because the subject is conceivable only in relationship to the object, and vice versa.[20]

In whatever way we conceptualize or "determine" the subject and object, this operation is never retrieved from within this particular conception but comes from elsewhere, namely from reason as a capacity to conceptualize distinctions. In quite a radical sense, then, something about reason is *inexhaustible*. There is always something "more" than whatever network of distinctions and conceptions we hold.

All of this to say that in Schelling's rethinking of reason the world is not connected to any one single ontology we simply bring out. To commit to this would lead us back to the debates between rationalism and empiricism. It leads to a false dichotomy between *a* rationality *inherent* to the world and rationality *imposed* upon the world. As Schelling sees it, an ontology is just one way reason renders distinctions intelligible, one way it interprets determinacy or "*Bestimmtheit*." There is nothing that compels us to say that there is such a thing as *the* ontology. The connection here between metaphysical and practical Kantian "determinacy" does not escape Schelling. He writes, for example, that the "*The essence* (Wesen) *of the I is freedom,* that is, it is not thinkable except inasmuch as it posits itself by its own absolute power (selbstmacht)."[21] We can also picture this in the sense Markus Gabriel does. Saying that reason is unconditional helps us decouple metaphysical thinking as such from any ontology, reason from a *conception* of reason. It offers us what Gabriel calls a view of the "whole" as insight into how drawing some distinctions leads to certain metaphysical commitments:

> Without the anticipation of a whole, that is, without a concept of the world, it could not be expected that our representation relate to a representable world, which always

---

[20] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 74.

[21] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 84. Pinkard highlights how important it is for Schelling at this early stage that his reinvention of metaphysics be compatible with human freedom. He writes on Schelling's unconditioned that "the construction of such "firm ground' cannot be *given* to us but must be freely, spontaneously brought forth by us yet, at the same time, such spontaneity must not be unhinged from the natural world." Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 177.

> provides more information than we can grasp in a single moment or mode of knowledge.[22]

If we imagine unconditionality as our ability to grasp how determinacy comes about in this or that way, then no ontology seems at least unreflectively obvious. Schelling writes that "the very concepts of subject and object are guarantors of the absolute, unconditionable I."[23] However we end up understanding the conditioned, we are sure that it is the logical development of *a* world *conceived* as "such and such."

How we come to see this "whole"—and Schelling means almost literally to "see"—is also philosophically relevant. In colloquial speech, we presuppose all those distinctions Schelling wants to say are not fixed. We distinguish between reason and feeling, metaphysics and epistemology, humans and animals, causation and correlation. Serious metaphysical reflection would thus involve stepping out of those distinctions and reaching for the indeterminate basis of reason itself to then see how conceptualizing distinctions leads to some specific ontology about the world. But this is an almost Sisyphean task in that we would either say nothing of this unconditioned, as in the last line of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, or we end up grasping the unconditioned *as* something and thus conditioned.

Since these are unappealing, what we *can* do, Schelling thinks, is generate images, "schemas" as he calls them, that picture reason as inexhaustible in its capacity to render intelligible.[24] In Fichtean form again, he writes, "All synthesis proceeds by taking that which is absolutely posited and by positing it anew but conditionally (with qualification)."[25] We may not

---

[22] Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays on German Idealism*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 9.
[23] F. W. J. Schelling "Of the I," 77.
[24] F. W. J. Schelling "Of the I," 100. Markus Gabriel argues that for Schelling there is an infinity of ways in which the reason's unconditionality can be articulated since unconditionality is not a thing but a rendering intelligible: "Schelling defends a plurality of modes of presentation of this insight in order to illustrate eternal freedom as the constant transcendence over any given position." Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 33..
[25] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 100.

be able to picture conceptualization as such, as some object, but we can come to see that it is already there, *in our very picturing*. As Terry Pinkard puts it, "unless there were already a *pre-reflective* unity of thought and being, reflection could not do its work."[26] This is why Schelling underscores the practical dimension again in the *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*. For example, at one point he writes that the standpoint of unconditionality demands "*Be absolutely identical with yourself.*"[27] Unlike Fichte, although we cannot think the absolute without losing it, we do know it is there, and that without it, *that very failed thought process* would *not* work. And here lies the rejoinder to skepticism's critique: reason grounds itself not because it builds up from an irrefutable axiom, as modern metaphysics tried to argue, but because it is an inexhaustible capacity to conceptualize that renders even "axiomatic thinking" intelligible. Though this does not give us a stable ontological order, it does tell us that reason as such is not on trial when some metaphysical frame is contested so that we would need to rush to dust off our bibles. All such debates, that is, happened *within* and *through* reason.

Nevertheless, Schelling's comments on dogmatism and criticism give us a glimpse into the reasons for his vacillation between Fichte and Spinoza. The awkward combination of transcendental idealism and monism papers over unresolved issues with Schelling's early unconditioned. In the *Letters* he says that we are theoretically unable to say whether dogmatism or criticism are "right" since the unconditioned is neither just thinking nor being. Take for instance the following remark: "If we had had to deal with the absolute alone, the strife of different systems would never have arisen. Only as we come forth from the absolute does opposition to it originate."[28] In Schelling's eyes, we should still choose criticism for practical

---

[26] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 178.
[27] F. W. J. Schelling, "Of the I," 98.
[28] F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Letters," 165.

reasons since with criticism we get a robust sense of freedom.[29] Schelling's answer is not as odd as it sounds. It tells us that reason's analytic powers will not find ready-made answers, certainty, in some ontology or another. But the problem is that it does not articulate well enough how it is that reason does furnish for us the conceptual material for metaphysical systems that seem authoritative to us. That is, why is it that we can say still distinguish between what is real and what is not or say with authority how the world is fundamentally divided.

Schelling wants to say that, *pace* Jacobi, we do not need to appeal to faith since reason grounds itself. But it also does not want to return back to dogmatism and say that reason can unproblematically retrieve from within the world its basic singular structure. As Schelling sees the problem, "What is unintelligible is how we egress from the absolute in order to oppose something to ourselves that is radically different from us."[30] In other words, how should we conceive of a metaphysics without a single ontology that does not pull the rug from under metaphysics? Another way of putting this is to ask how the unconditioned determines the conditioned. We know from Schelling that it determines it by rendering distinctions intelligible, but it is unclear how this happens and what distinctions are the right ones. This crucial question is often put in the secondary literature in the way Schelling seems to pose it: as a loaded metaphysical question.[31] But since Schelling does not believe the unconditioned is a "thing" that "becomes"

---

[29] Indeed, Schelling criticizes an extreme view of rationalist metaphysics that tries to see everything, including human freedom, as things: "If the subject has independent causality of its own insofar as it is subject, then there is a contradiction in the demand to *Lose yourself in the absolute*." F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Letters," 89.

[30] F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Letters," 174-5. Bowie highlights a shift in Schelling's thinking as he progressively wonders less about the grounding of conditionality and more about conditionality vis-à-vis unconditionality: "Schelling concludes form this argument that the fact that there is a world of knowledge depends upon the *loss* of the Absolute…The question is now 'Where the principle of that unity expressed in synthetic judgment lies' (ibid. 295)…This question is, as we have seen, subsequent to the prior fact of 'world-disclosure'." Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 26.

[31] Hans Baumgartner refers to this problem as the driving force behind Schelling's invention and reinvention of systems: "The structure we have presented also come to the fore in the central problematic that motivates Schelling's various new beginnings…how it is possible to think of a transition from the absolute to self-consciousness, from the infinite to the finite…" Hans Baumgartner, "The Unconditioned in Knowing," 248

finite, the issue is not about substance and attribute, or cause and effect. It is a matter of how reason as conceptualizing goes on to support a particular set of conceptual distinctions, an ontology, that render the world as "such and such." It is a question of how the unconditioned *authorizes* some ontology, given that the automatic link between reason as conceptualizing and some particular ontology is undone.

To this question Schelling has no good answer in this early period. He struggles considerably in expressing the goal that reason is both inexhaustible and yet does explain the world authoritatively; that it is not just a model or hypothesis about the world. As he succinctly puts it, "The main task of all philosophy consists of solving the problem of the existence of the world."[32] Though he focuses on expressing how there is an "unconditioned in human knowledge," as he subtitles the essay, he gives no theory for how *knowledge*, not opinion or hypothesis, comes about in this or that way. How reason is authoritative, that is, even though not connected to one single ontology that thinking then merely reproduces. Schelling does develop a more sophisticated sense of his theory of the unconditioned in his Jena "philosophy of identity." And though I do not think it is ultimately a persuasive answer, it leads Schelling further down the line to the idea that reason is a thinking under presuppositions, that "every *system* bears the stamp of individuality,"[33] as he already previews in the *Letters*. It brings him closer thus to the idea of an accountability gap in metaphysics.

III. Schelling on Reason as Indifference

Schelling's intellectual period known as the "philosophy of identity" [*Identitätsphilosophie*]

---

[32] F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Letters,"174,
[33] F. W. J. Schelling, "Philosophical Letters," 170.

developed from the pains of thinking a metaphysics without ontology. In the years between 1794 and 1801 he came to the realization that for reason to be unconditioned, meaning to not privilege the thinking "I" over the world of objects, it needs a theory of the natural world to complement Fichte's account of the self. Schelling developed the philosophy of nature in the late 1790s and worked simultaneously on his version of transcendental philosophy, laid out in the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*. But these developed projects drew out an interesting problem. If we now seem committed to the idea of reason is unconditioned, how does it go on justifying, rendering authoritative, *his* particular organic interpretation of nature and *his* intuitionist approach to transcendental philosophy? One can ask questions about how an organic frame explains phenomena such as ideas, aesthetic experiences, or political institutions. What criterion does reason's unconditionality offers to assess frameworks? And even more fundamentally, this is a question as to why reason grants distinctions whatsoever. Put in traditional form, why is there something and not nothing?

The best answer Schelling mustered to these questions during the Jena period is the 1801 *Presentation of My System.* As Michael Vater is quick to point out, this was an essay written as response to criticisms about the chaotic order of his growing philosophy.[34] The "philosophy of identity" is thus intended to summarize the general philosophical ideas about his new metaphysics, first outlined in 1794: that reason is inexhaustible and not committed, in principle, to any ontology whatsoever and yet renders every one of them intelligible. Hence in the

---

[34] Michael Vater, "In and of Itself Nothing is Finite," in *Kant, Fichte, and the Legacy of Transcendental Idealism*," eds. Halla Kim and Steven Hoeltzel (Lanham: Lexinton Books, 2014), 8. Frederick Beiser explains that for *Identitätphilosophie* "nature" is for Schelling synonymous with reason as unconditional or the "absolute." He writes, "When he says that *Naturphilosophie* represents the absolute standpoint itself he is *not* denying that there is another kind of subordinate standpoint within it that can be described as idealism. He is simply making two claims, both of them perfectly compatible: that the absolute is the universe as a whole, nature in itself, and that it appears in two forms, one of which can be described from an idealistic standpoint and another form a realistic one." Frederick Besier, Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 557.

Presentation Schelling writes that "the system that appears here for the first time in its fully characteristic shape is the same one that I always had in view."[35] For these reasons, the overall aim of the *Presentation* is to dispel wrong ideas about unconditionality as a "substrate," an ineffable thing that does not show up. Schelling needs a way of saying that the unconditioned is not an object *within* the world but also not an object *outside* of the world.

Back to the drawing board, Schelling now says that what makes reason "unconditioned," the original thrust of his new metaphysics, is that it remains unspent or "indifferent" as he now puts it, even when it takes on conditioned shapes. Schelling writes, "I call reason absolute reason, or reason insofar as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and objective."[36] It remains to be seen whether this new language is successful, but what Schelling appears to have in mind with "indifference" is something like Aristotle's "being qua being." Reason considered in *itself* is "indifferent" to its own conditionality. But the same reason is conditioned when considered as this or that being, say in terms of physical objects or mental states. This helps Schelling say that reason is unified, not split into two. He avoids what would be a Platonic dualism between conditional objects and the unconditioned region of indeterminacy. Importantly, this also nudges Schelling in the direction of saying that reason renders not only conditional objects intelligible but also *rationality itself*. That is, if we observe organic nature or think about last night's dinner, we come across conditional objects, one physical and one mental.

---

[35] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation of My System of Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Michael Vater and David Wood (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 141. Or, as he also writes, "For many years I sought to present the one Philosophy that I know to be true from two wholly different sides…I now find myself impelled…to publicly bring forward…the system that for me was the foundation of these different presentations…" F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 141.

[36] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 122. Elsewhere, Schelling spells out the differences between his philosophy and transcendental idealism in the following way: "if idealism in the subjective sense said that the I is everything, idealism in the objective sense would be forced to say the reverse: everything is = I." F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 145. For more on their similarities and differences between Schelling and Spinoza see Michael Vater's "Schelling's Philosophy of Identity and Spinoza's *Ethical more geometrico*" in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, eds. Eckart Förster and Yitzhak Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

But we also grasp two modes of rationality, two aspects under which intelligibility articulates itself. We see, said differently, "…in things only that aspect by which they express absolute reason, not insofar as they are objects of reflection..."[37]

By framing things this way, Schelling seems to argue for a qualified monism. His *Presentation* does in fact appear closer in spirit to Spinoza than to Fichte. Take, for instance, his remark that reason is "simply one and simply self-identical."[38] It would be wrong, though, to think that the point of his "philosophy of identity" is to return us to some version of modern metaphysics. Reason is not defined by expressing an infinity of modes and attributes. It *is* everything conditioned and yet very much *not* spent entirely as attributes and modes are supposed to define substance. In principle, reason cannot be defined by any number of modes or attributes. There is a more radical break between essence and attribute for Schelling than Spinoza since reason *generates* those modes and attributes but is not *defined* by any of them. Schelling writes that "reason, therefore, becomes the true in-itself through this abstraction, which is located precisely in the indifference point of the subjective and the objective."[39] For everything conditioned, take organic nature or human culture as examples, we can abstract from them as conditioned and say "this is reason consider *as* such and such" but not reason itself.

As in *Of the I*, therefore, reason conceptualizes all conditionality but is never any one of those conditional objects. What is new in the *Presentation* is a clearer argument for why this

---

[37] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation,"146.
[38] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 147.
[39] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 146. Schelling contrasts the view of reason as an indifferent drawing of distinctions with finite thinking which sees objects everywhere: "to see in things only that aspect by which they express absolute reason, not insofar as they are objects of reflection, which is subject to the laws of mechanism and the duration of time." F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 146.

unspent aspect is grasped only by considering conditional objects. It requires an abstraction[40] to separate the unconditioned from the conditioned, an important one to understand reason properly, but we should not be misled into thinking they are two separate things.[41] Reason as unconditioned is not some "thing" defined in opposition to the conditional. Such separation results from our wanting to understand how radically different organizations of conditionality are intelligible. Thinking about the idea of world peace or the DNA inside cells requires reason's capacity to conceptualize distinctions in different ways. But we come across this not by picturing reason conceptualizing international relations or genetics from afar. We understand reason as indifference by coming to see it as a capacity that *has drawn distinctions* we then unpack.

As Fichte did before, Schelling writes the formula A=A to depict how reason renders the conditioned intelligible by drawing distinctions. He uses it also to explain that articulating the conditional as this or that is what being "unconditioned" is about. That is, without reason's inexhaustible capacity, we would lose sight of how the way we draw distinctions ultimately leads to different ontologies of what exists. We would be, as it were, too close to objects to see their connections and relations, and even less to see these as *one way* in which existence can be conceived. Schelling thinks, further, that this capacity to draw distinctions amounts to a theory of what he calls an absolute "identity" [*Identität*]. It is because reason is inexhaustible that we are able to talk about different ontologies, even reflect on how best to split the world, *without losing*

---

[40] Abstraction has a specific role for Schelling in the "philosophy of identity." It takes a series of acts on our part to unpack "the work of reason" from within a conception of conditionality and display the original distinctions that render it intelligible. Schelling explains, for instance, that "Since abstraction is made from the being of A in its own right. And also form its status as subject and predicate, the sole thing remaining form which abstraction cannot be made, which is therefore really posited in this proposition, is absolute identity itself." F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 147.

[41] In these following remarks, Schelling explains in more detail why "identity" has to do more with *indeterminacy* than with determination as, say, substance or God or any other stand-in for "being:" "The indifference of cognition and being is therefore not a *simple* identity of A as subject and A as object (Spinoza), but the indifference of A=A as the expression of being and A=A as the expression of cognition." F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation of My System of Philosophy," 252.

ourselves in any ontology. In a telling remark, Schelling writes,

> The proposition A=A conceived universally, says neither that A on its own *is*, nor that it is as subject *or* predicate. Instead, the unique being posited through this proposition is that of identity itself, which accordingly is posited in complete independence from A as subject and from A as predicate.[42]

As an unspent power, reason is always self-identical even in the face of conditionality; it is, as it were, always "with itself." When reason draws these distinctions, moreover, it also generates "identity" in the more common sense of the term.[43] When we say that "nature is an organism" or that "minds are brains" we use reason as the self-identical activity to draw distinctions *and* that generates an order of relations within which objects have individual "identities."

In what is a subtle but important point, the Jena "theory of identity" relies on the Kantian idea of apperception more than its modern metaphysical language lets out. On this, I disagree with Dalia Nasser's comment that Schelling "puts forth a Platonic view of the absolute as an unchanging reality."[44] Talk of an "original" or "absolute" identity should not lead us to think of reason as an indescribable "thing" that exists somewhere, for this would be to picture reason as a conditioned object. Identity as indifference is instead about unpacking the presupposed distinctions already drawn by reason; it is a matter of the "*work* of reason" not reason's unchanging identity or *reality*. As I think on some conditional object, say the smell of coffee now or the ocean waves I saw last month, their "identity" depends on reason's ability to project the web of relations between objects. The smell of coffee relates to writing and ocean waves to

---

[42] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 147. Nassar argues that after *Presentation* Schelling no longer uses the formula A=A to express unconditionality. Already an issue for Fichte himself, the formula is an awkward way to present indifference and tends rather to reify reason. Nassar writes that Schelling "does not identify the proposition of identity with the form of the absolute. From the start, he locates the proposition of identity—as the analytic or formal identity of A = A—in reflective thinking." Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 241.

[43] Nassar is highlights this important point as well, indicating that "…identity should not be confused with either the form of identity or with the identity that results from this form—from the synthesis of subject and object." Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 231.

[44] Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute*, 228.

weather patterns and winter memories.

In these cases, reason needs to grasp, move across, and disengage from those relations without confusing itself with any one of them. Identity as indifference means that reason can, in principle, always separate itself from any organization of conditionality because it assigns the conditional to its drawing of distinctions. Reason knows they are *examples* or *instances* of conceptualizing. In Schelling's dense style, "Absolute identity simply is and is as certain as the proposition A=A…it belongs to the essence of absolute identity to be**.**"[45] Similar to Kant's apperceptive "I," any ontology can be traced back to reason's fundamental capacity to draw distinctions.[46] Reason's identity is absolute, unchallenged, because it does not experience the conditional as "alien" but always-already refers it to its capacity to conceptualize. As Schelling likes to say, "nothing individual has the ground of its existence in itself."[47] This "ground," namely reason as drawer of distinctions, is presupposed any time we speak of finite existence.

It does, however, take some serious labor on Schelling's part to express this Kantian point in a way that does not bend too much in the direction of transcendental philosophy. He wants to agree in spirit with Kant and say that thought always carries along an ontology and that ontologies emerge from distinctions drawn *by* and *within* reason. Without the idealist language available, though, Schelling reaches back, *further* back, to medieval metaphysics. At its basis, in "essence," reason is an inexhaustive capacity. Its unspent powers are known to us just as we know the apperceptive "I:" not as a "thing" behind representations but as a logical point to which

---

[45] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation of," 148.
[46] Manfred Frank traces how ideas about "predication" from Ploucquet, Kant, and Leibniz's figure in Schelling early and late "philosophy of identity." Take for instance this passage: "By bringing together Kant's famous thesis about being and the identity conception of predication, there emerges the conception peculiar to Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schelling, according to which the essence of absolute identity presupposes a ground that rejects all consciousness." Manfred Frank, "Identity of Identity and Non-Identity," in *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*, 130.
[47] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 155.

representations belong. Objects under what Schelling calls their "form," as conditional, are the result of distinctions drawn by reason and to which they can be referred back. In the way Schelling puts this, "it is the same identical absolute identity that, with respect to its form of being, if not with respect to its essence, is posited as subject and object."[48] Schelling thinks describing things this way helps him say that reason is unconditioned in *essence*, though not in *form*. When thinking about finite objects, about mental states, organic processes, or aesthetic feelings, we are able to trace them all the way back to those fundamental distinctions that explain what is organic, mental, or aesthetic. In other words, we are able to unpack from within an ontology the metaphysical work of reason that establishes an object as "such and such."

Framing things as such lets us know why Schelling argues in *Presentation* that indifference is the beginning and the end of metaphysics. Reason's unspent powers, like the apperceptive "I," are unpacked from *within* the conditional world as the *source* of its ontology. In other words, as a presupposition indifference is an origin found at the very end. Or, as Schelling writes, "In the highest instance of reality one again finds absolute totality, absolute balance of subjectivity and objectivity."[49]As one may immediately wonder, with indifference at the outset and the end, what lies in between? For Schelling the answer is simple: everything. When Schelling discusses existence, he likes to say that objects are "quantitatively" but not "qualitatively" distinct from one another. Objects represent "determinacy," which emerges from the common capacity to draw distinctions *and* from those very distinctions. Schelling's words on this are:

> …difference, and consequently discriminability of the two [subject and object], would become possible only if either predominant subjectivity or predominant objectivity were

---

[48] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 151. Andrew Bowie and Manfred Frank argue that more attention needs to be paid to the unpublished notes known as the "Würzburg system." One finds there a discussion of identity as "transitive being," meaning as that which always-already is subject and is object without being a synthesis of both. For a more detailed discussion of this and of the notion of identity in Schelling and other German idealists, see Manfred Frank's "Identity of Identity and Non-Identity" in *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*.

[49] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 162.

posited, in which case A = A would have changed into A = B."[50]

Schelling's goal is not as Neoplatonism would say that objects are "unreal" vis-à-vis reason. It *is*, though, to argue that objects are not "the only game in town" because conditionality unfolds within presupposed ontologies, and they emerge from distinctions drawn by and within reason.[51]

This ends up being Schelling's answer to why reason "authorizes" ontologies. We can easily, though wrongly, picture the unconditioned rendering the conditioned intelligible in terms of *creatio ex nihilo*. Schelling knows this, and he is aware that his language complicates the issue. In the *Presentation*, and his "philosophy of identity" overall, he understands essence and form as helpful distinctions to better get his actual point across. Finite objects are part of larger ontologies, and when we grasp ontologies for what they are, meaning *conceptions* of what exists, we realize that reason has to be an even more original activity. It must be the capacity to conceptualize so that we can speak of things we call "ontologies" and their objects. Take this passage as an example of how Schelling rethinks the early problem:

> The most basic mistake of all philosophy is to assume that absolute identity has actually stepped outside itself and to attempt to make intelligible how this emergence occurs. Absolute identity has surely never ceased being identity, and everything that is, is considered in itself—not just the appearance of absolute identity, but *identity itself*, and since it is the nature of philosophy to consider things as they are in themselves…true philosophy consists in the demonstration that absolute identity (the infinite) has not stepped outside itself…[52]

---

[50] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 152. Schelling goes on to explain in this passage, conditionality or "quantitative difference" applies only to an object and the network of relations between objects, whether these be mental or physical, and not to reason itself or "qualitative indifference" as the capacity to draw distinctions: "Quantitative difference between subjectivity and is conceivable only in reference to individual being, but not in itself, or in light of the absolute totality." F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 153.

[51] Likewise, Daniel Breazeale thinks philosophy is fundamentally a matter of unpacking how a conception of conditionality depends on distinctions drawn by reason rather than about clarifying the world's fixed nature whether though modern rationalist or empiricist means. As he puts it, "The task of philosophy is therefore not to *prove* anything by means of discursive arguments, but rather to *display* or to *exhibit* directly the identity it begins with simply by *asserting*." Daniel Breazeale, "Exhibiting the Particular in the Universal," in *Interpreting Schelling*, 95.

[52] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 149. He repeats this elsewhere, such as in this example: "Absolute identity can never be abolished as identity." F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 148.

We *do* come to know reason by reaching back from some object, say a molecule, and pointing to the scientific principles that sustain it and the ontological frame they emerge from. But this does not mean we eventually reach all the way to some ultimate object that sets things in motion, such as the God of modern metaphysics. We need not wonder how reason "goes out of itself," for reason is not an object that then moves but the minimum of assumed distinctions through which we know we are speaking of objects or ontologies.[53]

This answers extensively the first question. We know now that conditional objects are rendered intelligible in the sense that, *in their capacity as objects*, the "work of reason" is assumed from the start. As Schelling puts it, "Outside of reason is nothing, and in it is everything."[54] There is no need to answer how reason "goes out of itself" since the question is wrongly asked and belongs to a metaphysical frame that sees "things" everywhere. But this does not quite solve the second question. If, to pose it once more, the "work of reason" is "housed" within objects as the distinctions that generate ontologies and objectivity, what makes an organic conception of the world better than a mechanistic one? In other words, what about ontologies themselves helps us decide among them, even if they are all at the end the "work of reason"? I do not see a developed answer to this issue in *Presentation*.

Schelling's only criterion in the essay is that ontologies need to be "apperceptive," meaning they need to relate back to reason as self-grounded. Schelling rejects mechanism there as he does in his "philosophy of nature" because, like conditional reason, it is ungrounded. But Schelling is so focused on describing reason as the capacity to draw distinctions that the question

---

[53] Terry Pinkard is, I think, correct to remark that reason for Schelling "can never be the object of consciousness…since all consciousness presupposes our having made the distinction within intentionality between and sensed, knowing and known." Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 90.
[54] F. W. J. Schelling, "Presentation," 146.

of reason's authority does not come up. As long as this capacity is highlighted, as Schelling thinks the organism can do, we avoid the troubles of conditional thinking. But the question of authority *is*, however, an important one. Reason cannot be said to be *entirely* self-grounding if we cannot offer a robust response to skepticism and show how and why some ontologies gain traction and others do not.[55]

In fact, perhaps surprisingly, it is Fichte who asks this in a letter to Schelling written after reading the *Presentation*. Fichte asks,

> The absolute would not be absolute if it existed under some kind of form. But where does its form come from under which the absolute *appears*…Where is this form located?—Or again, how does the *one* become an *infinity*, and then a totality of the manifold?[56]

Though this rehashes themes from the first question it goes a bit further. Fichte not only asks the ancient question "how does the one becomes many?" but also whether, having become many, there is anything new and original to talk about. In other words, Fichte's question, while presented in terms of generation gets at the deeper issue of whether ontologies themselves, as conceptions of conditionality, make contributions towards understanding reason's capacity to conceptualize. Coming to terms with the fact that ontologies emerge from distinctions drawn by reason helps us see that thinking never simply describes the world but comes at it from presupposed distinctions. It aids in dismantling the idea that reason merely retrieves rather than helps create the world as "such and such." But this does not say much about competing version

---

[55] Beiser, for example, believes Schelling cannot escape this dichotomy between infinitude and finitude given the assumptions of his "philosophy of nature." Vater also maintains that Schelling's monism gets in the way of a successful account of the origin of difference. Bowie and Manfred Frank, focusing on the late "philosophy of identity," argue that Schelling has a more sophisticated account than he is given credited for. This is a position Nassar is sympathetic to, though she criticizes Schelling's form and essence distinction.

[56] J. G. F. Fichte, "Fichte in Berlin to Schelling in Jena, October 8, 1801," in *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling*, 66. Indeed, Nassar highlights that Fichte's criticisms played some role in Schelling rethinking of his philosophy in the *Further Presentation of My System*. She writes, "returning to and elaborating these earlier ideas, Schelling implicitly recants and disagrees with se of the basic premises of the 'Darstellung.' In at least two ways, he significantly alters his position in the 'Fernere Darstellung' and, in effect, responds to Fichte's critiques."' Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute,* 240.

of what it means to be conditioned. It does not put what Fichte calls "striving"—the specific conceptions of the world we put forth—at the center of metaphysics. Other than rejecting mechanism as ungrounded, we have no theory for how reason authorizes ontologies other than making sure they do not eclipse the fact that they are *authorized*, rendered intelligible, not retrieved from within the world.

This issue, that metaphysics no longer retrieves the world's logic and yet has no robust theory for why some ontologies are preferable over others, bothers Schelling quite a bit. In the later versions of the "philosophy of identity," he stops using the term "form" and rethinks objects as fundamentally "ideal." There is no need to have ontologies fight one another if conditionality is not supposed to contribute anything besides, as it were, rendering itself "translucid" to show the "work of reason" within. Schelling writes in the 1801 *Further Presentation*:

> [I]n this identity or equal absoluteness of the unities that we distinguish as particular and universal…is found the innermost mystery of creation, the divine identification (imaging) of original and copy that is the true root of every being."[57]

The point for Schelling seems to be underscoring that the criterion for judging competing ontologies is how "translucid" they can be. And to double down on this, in *Further Presentation* he reworks a Fichtean term "intellectual intuition"[58] into his "philosophy of identity." It is the designated word for an ontology that has gone on to shown, so to speak, the "work of reason" as its "insides." As Daniel Breazeale summarizes it, intellectual intuition is "a guideline for *seeing with*

---

[57] F. W. J. Schelling, "Further Presentation of My System of Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling*, 215, 216. Another example of this is the following: "For it is within this form and through it that *ideas* are cognized…blessed beings, which some called the first creatures who live in the immediate sight of God..." F. W. J. Schelling, "Further Presentation," 221. For more discussion of the role of "ideas" in the *Identitätphilosophie* see Daniel Breazeale, "Exhibiting the Particular in the Universal," in *Interpreting Schelling*.

[58] See F. W. J. Schelling, "Further Presentation," 211.

the mind's eye."[59] But this does not quite solve the issue. For though it helps us rule out extreme versions of mechanism, we are still left in the dark about much. [60] What competing "organistic" ontologies are best? How is practical action, the mind, institutions, and history to be integrated? And, most fundamentally, what criterion can we use to draw these distinctions between nature and mind, sociality and psychology?

Putting these problems aside for now, though, Schelling does stumble here upon something highly consequential. Reason is unconditioned in the sense that, at its basis, it is a matter of *drawing* and not of *discovering* pre-made distinctions. Skepticism could not see, in other words, that debates over reason's "ground" presuppose reason in this unconditioned sense. Thus, in talking about objects we always presuppose an ontology as the organizing "work of reason" we then come to know by grappling with what conditionality means. If things are as Schelling puts them, then it may just be the case that reason operates always under the form of presupposition.[61] For modern metaphysics, reason works by *clarifying* either the *chaotic* sensible nature of the world into a more rational though subjective frame, as for empiricism, or the *rational* structure of the world from the chaos of sensible reality, as for rationalism. With a still somewhat new and shifting language, Schelling has come across a far-reaching conclusion: for post-Kantian philosophy reason is fundamentally *creative* not analytical or even synthetic and works *retroactively*

---

[59] Daniel Breazeale, "Exhibiting the Particular in the Universal," 96. Breazeale goes on to say that "For Schelling, philosophy begins with an ascent to the 'standpoint of reason," the standpoint of absolute identity. And once he has attained to this standpoint, the chief job for the philosophical construction worker is simply to look around and see for himself how *particularity* presents itself from this universal standpoint and reconciles itself therewith." Daniel Breazeal, "Exhibiting the Particular in the Universal," 190.

[60] Bowie displays this Schellingian logic of "translucidity" in the following excerpt: "individual thought, like individual objects, are not self-grounding, but this means that they must relate to a higher identity, *given our awareness of the failure to ground themselves.*" Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy*, 64.

[61] In fact, Schelling goes as far as to preview his own late "positive philosophy" in 1801. For instance, in this passage, where he writes that "The fact that some one individual human exists, or that right now, e.g., just so many humans exist, not more and not less, cannot be understood from the concept of a human being." F. W. J. Schelling, "Further Presentation of My System of Philosophy," 210

as it comes to know its own inexhaustible basis and the distinctions it generated.

In these still early years, Hegel's Jena philosophy, especially his *Difference* essay, moves idealism further in this direction. It would not be without some of the same issues that emerge in Schelling's "philosophy of identity," but nonetheless, it does helps move things along. With an emphasis on retroactivity, Hegel would help show why the way an ontology is organized, besides its transparency, matters quite a bit. In Frederick Beiser's words, "like it or not, it seems as if Hegel had a point after all: there must be some white cows in that dark night. The problem is then to explain how they got there." [62] With a more developed sense of what reason's retroactivity entails, Hegel takes at least a couple of key steps towards the idea that reason thinks under unavoidable presuppositions.

IV. Hegel and Reason's Retroactivity

Hegel entered philosophical debates in 1801 with a series of articles defending Schelling. By then with still no program of his own, Hegel used the "philosophy of identity" to present the post-Kantian debates as a stark choice between a new and dynamic metaphysics without ontology or the subjectivism of a metaphysics still beholden to the past.[63] Hegel doubled down on the idea that reason is essentially unconditioned against skeptics such as Jacobi and transcendental idealists such as Fichte or Kant. In Terry Pinkard's words, Hegel "had emerged rather suddenly as a follower of Schelling who drawn a line between Fichte and Schelling in support of

---

[62] Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism*, 567.

[63] H.S. Harris thinks that the 1801 essay is as much a defense of Schelling as it is a revision and critique of Hegel's own earlier philosophy of religion and the ideas of life and love. Harris writes, "much of the indirect exposition of Schelling's principle in the 'comparison of principles' section of the *Difference* essay, belongs to a necessary preamble of 'philosophy as such." Harris, *Hegel's Development: Night Thoughts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 32. For an account of this early period, see H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Development: Towards the Sunlight*, and Jay Bernstein, "Love and Law: Hegel's critique of Morality," *Social Research,* 70, No. 2.

Schelling's understanding of what was required for the post-Kantian project."[64] But in doing this, though as a defense of Schelling's new metaphysics, Hegel argued for unconditionality as fundamentally *retroactive* in a way that did not square well with Schelling. It is such emphasis on retroactivity that leads Hegel to articulate best the central issue of their new metaphysics: if reason conceptualizes the world by drawing distinctions it only retroactively learns about, how does it *authorize* some distinction over others? In other words, what does *objectivity* look like for a metaphysics that no longer just describes the world?

The debates between Fichte and Schelling were centered on the question of what reason is about. For Hegel, who spent some time before Jena on questions of sociality, essentially formulating a "religion without a God," Schelling's unconditioned seemed most appealing.[65] While Fichte dynamized Enlightenment individual autonomy, the idea that reason is unconditional diagnosed best for Hegel why post-Kantian philosophy should not abide by this individualist lens of "transcendental philosophy." It expressed in theory, that is, Hegel's suspicion that neither thinking nor individuals, indeed *not even things themselves*, were ultimately things separate from one another. Fichte's transcendental "I" might be a deed-activity or *Tathandlung* but it was nonetheless an "I" opposed to the "not-I," not reason as universal. Hegel has this criticism in mind when in the 1802 *Faith and Knowledge* he sarcastically notes about "transcendental philosophy:" "the difficult requirement of intellectual intuition has aroused

---

[64] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 154.

[65] Hegle's pre-Jena writings focus on how a new religion could help us conceive of sociality as love and not domination. For this reason, this would be not be a religion which, in appealing to a higher authority, would reintroduce relations of servitude to God. Kathleen Wright brings out the connection between Hegel's early idea of love and his Jena philosophy: "Both love, as at once *Einigkeit* and *Verdoppelung*, and life, as at once *Verbindung* and *Nichtverbindung*, clearly prefigure Hegel's later concept of an identity which is contradictory, namely, an identity which is at once identity and nonidentity." Kathleen Wright, "Identity of Identity and Non-Identity" in *Idealistic Studies* 13, 1 (1983): 21. Charles Taylor also highlights this connection, for example, in this remark: "it is true that there is an important thread of continuity which runs through this change. In speaking in the 'Spirit of Christianity' of the limits of the intellect, Hegel speaks of the unity of love being beyond the 'understanding (*Verstand*), which equates with 'absolute division, the destruction of life…'" Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 70.

general complaint, and we have sometimes heard tell of people who went mad in their efforts to produce the pure act of will and the intellectual intuition."[66] Just as Schelling put it, we cannot rethink metaphysics by going only half way, still beholden to Cartesian dualisms such as subject and object or universal and particular.

Thusly, Hegel is as forward as Schelling in endorsing reason's unconditioned basis. In the "Difference Essay," he writes that "the principle of speculation is the unity of the subject and the object."[67] In our ordinary use, when we talk about the bad weather or the leaves by the driveway, it seems obvious enough that we have two objects in mind: ourselves as thinkers and the objects of thought. Although Hegel does not have a complex theory yet, it is central to his thinking to say why this "seeming" is actually philosophically crucial. Here, though, Hegel wants to argue along the lines of Schelling's philosophy. Talking about such two objects requires we narrow down our field of vision to discuss this or that object *within* the world. It requires we assume some distinctions about modern science and normativity out of which "badness," "meteorology," and "biology" emerge. It is the mistake of modern metaphysics and skepticism to think that either meteorology is engrained into the world's logic, meaning that our discussions about the weather are really about the world's ontology, or that it is subjectively imposed on the world, as Hume has it. German idealism in general, and certainly for Hegel's Jena philosophy, it was important to push for a third option. This would be a metaphysics that outlines how we go about putting together ontologies of existence in a way that does not reduce metaphysics to mere description.

---

[66] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, translated by Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: SUNY University Press, 1977), 157.
[67] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, translated by H. S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), 80.

In the "Difference Essay," Hegel repeatedly calls "reflection" [*Reflexion*] or "finite thinking" the form of reasoning that sees distinctions as engrained in the world's single ontology, in particular Cartesian dualism. More generally, and also more philosophically telling, this is the name Hegel uses in his early writings to talk about *thinking as understood through a metaphysics that only sees things*. As he rather likes to put it, and alluding to the unconditioned, "Reflection, the faculty of the finite and the infinite opposed to it are synthetized in reason whose infinity embraces the finite within."[68] For the reasons Schelling also sketches, this automatic identification of ontology with metaphysics does not see how distinctions generated by reason, like the physical or mental, are not *found* but *presupposed* by modern metaphysics. And even though Hegel understood how important "transcendental idealism" was as a critique of this metaphysics, it failed to overcome philosophy as "finite thinking" in its commitment to the empirical "I." It stopped at the awkward and compromise of rethinking dualisms *within* dualist thinking. As Hegel notes, "Kant turns this identity itself, which is Reason, into an object of philosophical reflection, and thus this identity vanishes from its home ground."[69]

---

[68] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference,* 96. Hegel repeats this point again elsewhere: "the absolute must posit itself in the appearance itself, i.e., it must not nullify appearance but must construct it into identity." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference,* 115. Interestingly, a few pages later Hegel seems to acknowledge that reason's encounter with objects cannot be only through nullifying their independence, preassembly rendering their "seeming" independence some role: "the absolute must have a relation to appearance other than that of nullification." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference,* 115.

[69] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 80. In what seems to be a critique of Kant and Fichte, Hegel writes in *Faith and Knowledge*, "The torment of a nobler nature subjected to this limitation, this absolute opposition, expresses itself in yearning and striving." G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and knowledge.* Furthermore, in a telling passage from the 1801 "Introduction" to the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* Hegel and Schelling warn about the dangers of introducing dichotomies and dualisms emerging from "finite thinking" into our conceptions unconditionality. They write, "it is required of the subject that is to be capable of this reception of the divinity, or of the purely objective intuition of nature, that it should close itself quite generally against every other relationship to any limiting factor at all, and restrain itself from any activity of its own, since that would upset the purity of the reception. Through this passivity of intake, and the equality of the object [in all such pure intuitions] what is represented as result, would have to be just the cognition of the Absolute, and a philosophy that sprang from this root must again be simply unique and in every respect the same." G. W. F. Hegel and F. W. J. Schelling, "The Critical Journal of Philosophy: Introduction," in *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, edited by H. S. Harris and George di Giovanni (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 276.

But if when we *expand* and not narrow our field of vision and step back, we *contextualize* reflection. In wondering how distinctions are drawn, we essentially ask for how ontologies are put together. Hegel calls this operation, perhaps somewhat strangely, reason's "speculative" [*Spekulativ*] capacity. It is likely he has in mind the term's etymology, which goes back to *specula* or "watchtower" and *speculat*, or, roughly speaking, "observing from some vantagepoint." When Hegel says that speculation is the "identity" of the subject and object, we should picture not "substrates" or "transcendental" things, but the capacity to have insight into how reason draws distinctions. In Hegel's words, "Reason, finding consciousness caught in particularities, only becomes philosophical speculation by raising itself to itself, putting its trust only in itself and the Absolute which at that moment becomes its object."[70] Out of speculation, thinking sees the distinctions for why we see the world as divided into two substances or as fundamentally purposive. From the "watchtower of metaphysics," as it were, we survey how reason draws distinctions that split the world in this or that way. Just as Schelling does, then, it is ultimately the capacity for *conceptualization* that Hegel is after.

It is no surprise, then, that as response to Jacobi and other skeptics, Hegel puts it quite categorically in *Faith and Knowledge* that reason should not be treated as a thing. By his lights, it is exactly this belief that fuels Jacobi's worries about reason's grounding. In this passage, for example, Hegel puts the finger on the issue: "Reason, having in this way become mere intellect, acknowledges its own nothingness by placing that which is better than it in a *faith outside and above* itself, as a *beyond.*"[71] As the analytic power to clarify the world's ontology, or as the synthetic but subjective ordering of sensations, reason *does* seem limited. It is either dogmatic or powerless. But

---

[70] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference,* 88.
[71] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 56.

as the general capacity to conceptualize, to draw distinctions and generate ontologies, it embraces *within itself* the very separation between intellect and faith or concept and intuition. This is a point Hegel returns to in the *Logic*, one he summarizes in *Faith and Knowledge* as such: "if infinity is thus set up against finitude, each is as finite as the other."[72] Reason is not the "intellect" if by that we mean the faculty of rational cognition opposed to spiritless matter or thoughtless intuitions. Reason is not one more object *within* the world but the conceptualization of the world as such.

None of this seems radically new. At most, it would appear Hegel adds a few new arguments for why criticisms of reason are misplaced and why metaphysics needs to be rethought along the lines of Schelling's "philosophy of identity." But it is the *way* Hegel comes to this conclusion that, somewhat at least, sets him apart from Schelling and helps us see another path to metaphysics without ontology. Similar to Schelling, Hegel says that reason is the indifference or absolute identity between the subject and the object. He speaks, for instance, in this way: "the Absolute, like reason which is its appearance, is eternally one and the same."[73] He also says elsewhere that "what is opposite and therefore limited is, in this union, connected with the Absolute. But it does not have standing on its own account, but only insofar as it is posited in the Absolute."[74] Comments such as these would seem to indicate that Hegel sees unconditionality in the way Schelling does: as reason's inexhaustible basis unpacked by us from within conditional objects by spelling out assumed conceptual distinctions.

---

[72] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 63.
[73] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 88. John Burbidge writes that Hegel uses the term 'absolute" as a noun [*das Absolute*] only in his Jena Schellingian phase, and in his mature years, only whenever he is describing a fellow post-Kantian idealist or in reference to religion. Hegel uses it more often as an adjective, such as "absolute knowing" [das *absolute Wissen*]. In Burbidge words, "if the noun 'absolute' is restricted to limited and specific contexts, the adjective is pervasive." John Burbidge, "Hegel's Absolutes," *The Owl of Minerva* 29, 1 (1997): 26.
[74] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 96.

This narrative is partially but not entirely right. Both Schelling and Hegel recycle Kant's idea of "apperception" to highlight that conditionality is always traceable to distinctions drawn within reason. But as Hegel sees it, this does not quite say why it is that the conditioned *seems* to also be independent. For him, we dig ourselves into a hole if we reach for Platonic or other dualisms to explain why objects seem independent but are actually not. If we introduce something such as the sensible-supersensible distinction or Schelling's essence-form dichotomy. It is true, to use an example, that a newly discovered bacteria depends on the science of microbiology and this on the concept of "life." But it is also the case that such an object seems to be something in itself; appears objective to our gaze. "In order," Hegel writes, "to overcome these finitudes and construct the absolute in consciousness, Reason lifts itself into speculation…"[75] Hegel shares the belief that we need say why this "seeming" is so, namely that we need to have some theory of "objectivity." The price to pay for neglecting this, though Hegel does not say this clearly until his *Phenomenology*, is the ability to understand why the theory of microorganisms gains objectivity through microbiology and modern science, while the bodily fluids of "humorism" has objectivity only as a historically interesting yet discarded theory.

Without much of his later language, Hegel's indicates that we are able to explain the "seeming" of independence by expanding our field of vision and "stepping back" to the standpoint of speculation. Out of this standpoint, from the "watchtower of metaphysics," we survey just how it is that reason as "conceptualizing" *generates the very "seeming" of independence* that ordinary "finite thinking" presupposes all along. In Hegel's way of framing things,

---

[75] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 88. Hegel writes about this also in terms of the part-whole relationship, meaning the movement from finitude to unconditionality: "Reason reaches the absolute only in stepping out this manifold of parts," G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 89-90. In Taylor's words, finite existence is on its own terms contradictory and thus its "seeming" independence leads us to unconditionality: "We saw above that any attempt to claim independent existence, free from relation to the whole, and hence to its other, on behalf of a finite thing involved contradiction in the strict and thus fatal sense." Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, 106.

> [R]eflection appears to be merely intellect, but this guidance towards the totality of necessity is the contribution and secret efficacy of reason. Reason makes the intellect boundless, and in this infinite wealth, the intellect and its objective world meet their downfall.[76]

It is true, as I said above, that Schelling also thinks we meet unconditionality by spelling out assumptions that go on to render the conditioned intelligible. But what he does *not* say, and what Hegel sees by 1807 as *the* issue of philosophy, is what this "seeming" of objectivity is so that reason's distinctions support it at certain historical times and in some specific ways and not at other times. Why, that is, an organistic view of nature appears increasingly scientifically objective now, once again, but was less so in the 1700s. It is partially true that objects bring along their ontological connections which we come to know when they render themselves "translucid." But Hegel adds in 1801 to this that when we bring out these ontologies, we should also be able to say why some of them support objects that seem utterly independent from us.

Already in the "Difference Essay," though better grasped in his mature philosophy, Hegel emphasizes repeatedly that unconditionality functions not just as activity or capacity but as *process*. Take, for instance, this remark:

> Reason lifts itself into speculation, and in the groundlessness of the limitation and personal peculiarities it grasps its own grounding within itself. Speculation is the activity of the one universal Reason directed upon itself.[77]

As Hegel has it, we should really think of reason as a "movement." Reason first grips some object, such as that newly discovered bacteria, as an independent object, and then, after

---

[76] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 95. Something similar is underscored in the following passage. Hegel comments there as well on what the finite looks like from the position of speculation: "through this connection with the absolute, therefore, reflection's work passes away; only the connection persists, and it is the sole reality of the cognition." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 97.

[77] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 88. It is interesting to note that already in 1801 Hegel had a more active, or "productive" as he calls it, idea of unconditionality than Schelling did. Even at the height of his "philosophy of nature" the unconditioned was an unmovable ground. Hegel writes about reason, for instance, that "In this self-production of reason the absolute shapes itself into a totality." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 113.

"stepping back" to the position of speculation, grasps how reason's distinctions render it intelligible *as a seemingly independent object*. Such process-like view entails, as a consequence, that Hegel stresses the role of "finite thinking" more than Schelling does. Metaphysics, though not essentially connected to any ontology, *is* at the same time linked to any and all of them. Hegel's way of acknowledging this in his early writings is by taking seriously why physical objects, processes, and ideas, seem independent at first sight.

Now, because we learn about unconditionality by coming across the conditioned as "finitely" thought, reason operates in its unconditional function *retroactively*. In a way that previews his *Phenomenology*, Hegel seems convinced that such is the way to speak about the unconditioned without turning it into a thing. And for him the way to think retroactively, as Terry Pinkard also notes,[78] is by seeing reason as the activity that "negates," or "sublates," the assumptions of "finite thinking." In a telling passage, Hegel writes that

> The sole meaning of reason is to suspend such rigid antithesis. But this does not mean that reason is altogether opposed to opposition and limitation. For the necessary dichotomy is one factor in life.[79]

When reason works backwards, it reconsiders the presuppositions of "finite thinking," now with insight as to how reason draws such distinctions. In another example, Hegel comments that "reason, on the other hand, unites these contradictories, posits them together, and suspends them both."[80] It falls short to say that ontologies and their objects are ultimately matters of

---

[78] Pinkard writes the following about Hegel's idea of retroactive negation: "Hegel thus supplied a kind of argument for the absolute that was only adumbrated in Schelling's formulation, but which, so Hegel thought, was nonetheless implicit in such formulations. He also supplied what he no doubt took to be the missing argument for the necessity of 'intellectual intuition.'" Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy*, 159

[79] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 91. Charles Taylors notes that Hegel's turn to retroactivity is also a way to escape axiomatic or formulaic definitions of unconditionality, such a A = A, that end up turning the unconditioned into a thing. In his words, "This is why Hegel holds that the ordinary viewpoint of identity has to be abandoned in favor of a way of thinking that can be called dialectical in that it presents us with something that cannot be grasp in a single proposition or series of propositions, which does not violate the principle of non-contradiction." Charles Taylor, *Hegel* 80.

[80] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference,* 103.

conceptualization. For Hegel, it is equally important to reconstruct how objects' "seeming" independence emerges, *as a seeming*, from conceptualization. Out of speculation, once "finite thinking" is reconstructed or "negated," we see just how distinctions generate ontologies whose objects seem independent, presumably in considerably different ways. I can say with Aristotle that air "goes up" because it is in its nature, or I can say it does so because hot air is less dense.

Further, as Schelling does, Hegel also draws from all of this the conclusion that reason is inexhaustible, although he conceives of its inexhaustibility in a retroactive sense. Reason *is* indifferent to any ontology, as Schelling says, but only when engaged in the backward-looking process of reconstruction. Or, as he puts it in *Faith and Knowledge*, "the inner character of infinity is negation, or indifference."[81] From the standpoint of speculation, we have insight into how reason draws distinctions out of which objectivity emerges. Once we are aware of this, we realize that, properly speaking, this objectivity is a "*seeming*," real and yet not actually independent. We "negate" by understanding that *reason generates that very seeming of objectivity*.[82] Thus, out of the retroactive standpoint of speculation, reason is in "excess" of any ontology so much so that it is reason itself that makes us think there is no "excess," that we merely describe the world's logic.

---

[81] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 190.

[82] Gabriel seems convinced that already in these early years the split between Schelling and Hegel emerges along the lines of the pluralist versus singular presentation of unconditionality. He writes, "Schelling defends a plurality of modes of presentation of this insight in order to illustrate eternal freedom as the constant transcendence over any given position…In Hegel, on the contrary, there is a clear tendency toward an absolute mode of presentation of the infinite, even though the true infinite is also not an object or any other kind of hyperphysical entity to be discovered by philosophical thought." Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 33. Though Gabriel underscores just how early their different styles emerged, I think this does not consider long enough the idea that Hegel is trying to think the question of objectivity, reason's authority, in their new metaphysics. If Hegel seems drawn to a single exposition of unconditionality, as Gabriel thinks, this is in part because he believes we need to also account for the "seeming" independence of conditionality. That is, we need not only depict the unconditioned in art, philosophy, or literature, where finitude renders itself "translucid," but also say something about why some specific understanding those fields is authoritative in, for instance, the twenty-first century. Hegel's tendency towards a singular exposition, even though he does not put it in such historical terms in these early years, has in part to do with trying to think this question, which Schelling does not consider at length.

With this now in mind, does Hegel answer the issue posed by Schelling's philosophy? In adding that unconditionality is a conceptualization of objects' *seeming* independence, he does put forth something that at least takes us some of the way there. Hegel believes that more emphasis on retroactivity helps us not corner ourselves into speaking of the unconditioned as if it were a thing. It is a way for us to say that objects assume the "work of reason" without saying it in the language of "generation," "emergence," or "grounding." It thus contributes to Schelling's own goal in the "philosophy of identity" to give order to his system and avoid answering why the absolute "becomes finite." Reason, as he perhaps infamously writes, is "the identity of identity and non-identity."[83] This line, something Schelling embraced in his later "philosophy of identity," is connected to the idea that unconditionality is retroactive. By not conceiving it as such, we make it seem "as if one were to claim that the absolute in its appearance, it had stepped out of itself."[84]

But this was not the most difficult problem to come out of Schelling's rethinking of metaphysics. It was rather the question of reason's *authority* for a metaphysics that no longer just describes the world. To reiterate, what does objectivity look like for a metaphysics not essentially connected to any ontology? Hegel's answer in these early years is not extensive enough, but he does put us on the right path. He shows at the very least that we need to retroactively reconstruct how objectivity gains its "seeming" of independence. If we do this, then it may be possible to see what about "determinacy" [*Bestimmtheit*] leads us to say that some ontologies explain the world at some historical times and others seem as purely imagined. What is it, in other words, about the

---

[83] G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 156. This is in fact a reconfiguration of a point already made in 1800 in Frankfurt, on his essay "Fragment of a System." There, he writes that "life is union of union and non-union." G. W. G. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 312.
[84] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference*, 115.

way determination comes about, once we reconstruct it as a process, that tells us how authority is gained? For a metaphysics without ontology, unable to appeal to the mere description of the world, this is an incredibly crucial question.

But Hegel does not put forth more than this here. He gets us as far as to seeing why we need to think long and hard about how objectivity in a metaphysics without ontology comes about. It would be the task of the *Logic* to spell out a theory of reason's authority by arguing, in my words, for an unavoidable accountability gap in metaphysics.

V. Conclusion

Early German idealism was born from the idea of metaphysics without ontology. Out of the continuous criticisms that "transcendental idealism" had too many loose ends to tie, Schelling and Hegel came to see the need for a complete rethinking of metaphysics. Worries that reason was ultimately "ungrounded," and calls for bringing back the modern idea of God or the proto-existentialist appeal to faith, were for them the logical result of an interpretation of reason that sees everywhere only "things." Though Kant and Fichte argued for something along what Hegel and Schelling wanted, they had only gone half way and retained a number of dualisms and assumptions from modern philosophy that in turn weaken "transcendental idealism."

Instead, Schelling and Hegel pushed in Jena for an alternative. Reason is not fundamentally analytic nor synthetic. It is the capacity to conceptualize. Out of this capacity, reason draws basic distinctions to engage in analytic or synthetic thinking. From such operations, we draw the distinctions needed to talk about the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, or differently, as a "blooming buzzing confusion." Thus, before we talk about reason in any determined way, we need to be aware that its conceptualizing activity effectively renders it "unconditioned." This was the most important conclusion to come out of Schelling and Hegel's early philosophy:

metaphysics is essentially detached from any and every ontology about what objects exist in the world. Metaphysics considers how we go about conceptualizing the world by drawing distinctions and is, in principle, opposed to any description of the world’s “logic” or single ontology. At this early period, it also gave Schelling and Hegel a key problem to work out in the coming years: exactly how is reason “authoritative” for a metaphysics where it no longer just describes the world? Schelling and Hegel would attempt to answer this through the idea that metaphysics, in principle, carries an accountability gap. But this answer would also divide Schelling and Hegel and would open the door for the critiques of idealism in the second half of the nineteenth century, including Marx’s.

Chapter 2: Hegel's Theory of the Accountability Gap: Authoritativeness for a Metaphysics Without Ontology

> "What was hitherto called 'metaphysics' has been, so to speak, extirpated root and branch, and has vanished from the root of the sciences"
>
> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*

I. Introduction

Among the central goals of the *Science of Logic* was to explain just what went wrong with all prior metaphysics. In Jena, during his years advancing Schelling's "philosophy of identity," Hegel came to see that reason was not a "thinking of things." Just as Hölderlin and Schelling realized, philosophy in their post-Kantian world should no longer be concerned with the bounds of reason or with spelling out reason's function as "faculty." Hegel understood better than most that philosophy had to go back to the drawing board and reconsider what "first philosophy" does. The aim for Hegel was thus to think metaphysics anew without returning to the ideas of either reason as the analytic power to describe the world's logic, or the subjective rational imposition onto a chaotic world. In short, it was about metaphysics without ontology.

This was the key question driving Hegel's maturing philosophy. But unlike Schelling, whose focus remain saying in so many ways what reason's unconditioned is about, Hegel thought no such project would work without a theory of objectivity for a metaphysics without ontology. Without rationalist, empiricist, or ancient frames available at face value, Hegel turned the question of objectivity into that of "authority." Metaphysics needs to spell out where the authority of an ontology comes from when it seems its fundamental distinctions are presupposed and not derived from such ontology. This, a question carried over from Jena, Hegel solves in the *Logic* by arguing that reason always operates through presuppositions it retroactively tries to account for. An ontology is authoritative if it can assign its own presuppositions a meaningful place within that world they generate. For metaphysics without ontology objectivity is *earned* and *retained*, not discovered.

My goal for this chapter is to say in so many words that this all implies a new view of metaphysics defined by an "accountability gap." As the science that studies "being qua being," metaphysics' singular commitment is to the idea that no single ontology can say definitively what

existence is about. Every account is argued from presuppositions that cannot be eliminated in principle without introducing further ones. At the same time though, each account thinks the world as a whole by generating ontologies that try to integrate their presuppositions within such ontology. It is the stamp of Hegel's maturing philosophy to say why this structure does not at all forbid reason's authority. Since objectivity no longer just describes the world, our accounts may for some time, though not in principle, handle successfully their own presuppositions. For metaphysics without ontology, reason's authority is revisable, contestable, and precarious. With no further ground than itself, reason has only its intensely creative life-force to make and remake itself.

II. Thought's Retroactivity

Still animated by his Jena period, in the *Logic* Hegel swaps the question of objectivity for that of authority through an abstract discussion of what he calls "infinity."[1] This, part of an even larger debate over what he titles the "the doctrine of being," Hegel hopes to be a solid critique of reason as the "thinking of things." Generally, there he considers what it means to say that reason knows the world by simply recording objects as "bits" of existence or "qualities," as Hegel calls them. Though we may perhaps describe single physical objects or mental ideas this way, namely by narrowing down to the individual entity, it is at least an open question whether we come to know the world as such this way. In considering such an abstract idea, as "infinity" surely seems, Hegel wants to lay the foundation for what will be a more robust argument later in the *Logic* against

[1] Robert Pippin, Rocío Zambrana, Stephen Houlgate, and Markus Gabriel, all single out the discussion of infinity as central to one Hegel's ultimate argument in the *Logic* that thinking always operates through presuppositions it retroactively learns about. For Pippin, it is connected to Hegel's notion of self-consciousness and self-determination in the *Phenomenology*. For both Zambrana and Gabriel, it is about the thematization of account-giving. For Houlgate, it concerns the moment in the *Logic* where we abandon a "thinking of things" for a more reflexive framework. See Pippin (1989), Zambrana (2012), Gabriel (2011), and Houlgate (2006).

metaphysics as the science that draws out the world's logic. However slightly, that is, he does open the door already here to the idea that reason always operates through presuppositions it retroactively spells out; he opens the door for a metaphysics without ontology.

In the Hegelian literature, the term "*true* infinte" [*wahrhafte Unendlichkeit*] is connected to the overall denial that the world can be understood as a "totality of facts."[2] Hegel is most certainly committed to the idea that any such metaphysical account begs the question. He says, as Kant does, that distinctions such as "difference," "diversity," and "reciprocity" are not found *in* objects but *presupposed* for all objectivity in general. Still guided by lessons from Jena, Hegel understands such "disinterested" descriptions of "what is the case" as beginning from distinctions drawn and not found by reason. It is the *Logic*'s aim to treat in great detail the nature of these distinctions, meaning not in their historical or even experiential contexts. We could say, with Robert Pippin, that the *Logic* approaches a priori how reason draws distinctions.[3] The focus is, in other words, not on consciousness and its objects, but on how, generally put, thinking "that is red" assumes we can separate individual "bits" of existence from each other. What this view takes for granted is that objectivity or "being," *Sein*, is a matter of simply "being there," or Da*sein*.

In the "doctrine of being," Hegel's argument for why this ultimately does not work unfolds by looking closely at how "determinacy" [*Bestimmtheit*] operates. Saying that the world is the totality of "bits" of existence paints determinacy as a matter of boundaries [*Grenzen*] between atomic entities. Red is distinct from green, or hot from cold, by *not being* the other and by

---

[2] For a comprehensive treatment of "infinity," see Stephen Houlgate's *The Opening of Hegel's Logic*, especially chapters 20-22.

[3] To be precise, Pippin says, "Hegel says frequently that a science of logic is a 'science of pure thinking.' This must be understood in the context of what we designate as 'German idealism.' This idealism…has three components. First is the claim that a priori knowledge of the world, the ordinary spatio-temporal world, is possible…That the *Logic* is a work of a priori philosophy is hardly controversial, even though Hegel understands the relation between pure thinking and thinking informed by what is other than thinking in a way that is uniquely his." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), 4-5.

respecting the limits that define each of them. Hegel says this in so many words in the following: "the opposition of its existence and of the negation as the limit immanent to this existence is the very in-itselfness of the something…"[4] But if this is so, as Hegel hints here, then these "bits" of existence are not really found "as they are" but connected to some network through which they are related, contrasted, and individuated. Determinacy, that is, is *essentially* linked to this network of relations, which seems at odds with the idea that existence is about atomic bits or "qualities."

In Hegel's eyes, then, what determinacy requires and presupposes are conceptual distinctions to individuate entities and contrast them to one another. My description of this table and that book entails more than recording in thought two atomic objects. It assumes for Hegel an awareness, what continental phenomenology describes now as "pre-thematic," so that something is a "this" *in relation* to something else it is *not*. The operation of relating and contrasting demands input from elsewhere than these objects themselves in order to understand them as "red" or "green." Our question then is about how determinacy establishes objectivity.[5] It is not really possible to "gather" all bits of existence, as the "doctrine of being" wants, without starting from some understanding of how one bit is something "on its own" in relation and by excluding all other bits, and vice versa. Determinacy needs a general frame that says what it means for something to be *something* before we go on to say that "above" is clearly not the same as "below."

In this way, what seems like atomic bits, almost obviously so, emerges thusly from reason's conceptualizing capacity. "In order," Hegel writes, "for the limit that is in every

---

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2010), 101.

[5] I mean, in other words, that for Hegel the question of determinacy is a reinterpretation of Kant's "transcendental deduction" as the a priori conditions for there being objects at all. For Kant this question involves the ideality of space and time, the unity of apperception, and the categories of judgement. For Hegel, as he begins to do here, it concerns a retroactive reflective process by which thinking recovers and assesses how its own distinctions establish a view of objectivity.

something to be a restriction the something must at the same time transcend it in itself…"[6]

Hegel uses "finitude" [*Endlichkeit*] to emphasize that determinacy *results* from presupposed not discovered distinctions. To grasp determinacy as such we need to use reason's distinctions as an orientating "compass" or framework, as it were, in just the same way we would employ what "infinity" means to orientate ourselves and recognize the finite *as* finite. In this colorful remark, Hegel underscores why finitude, *not quality*, captures best what determinacy is about:

> [T]he finite does not just alter, as the something in general does, but *perishes*, and its perishing is not just a mere possibility as if it might be without perishing…the being such of finite things is to have the germ of this transgression in their in-itselfness: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death.[7]

Our supposedly "disinterested" descriptions of "what is the case" involve in fact a great deal of input from reason. Atomic bits of existence *result* as such, *as atomic*, from reason's conceptualizing activity. That is, in their seeming atomic, we know already that they are all but that.[8]

This, though, does not quite say how reason's drawing of distinctions is related to infinity. We know that in order to speak of "relation-to-self" *as* "relation-to-other" we need some frame independent of such relation that offers us the distinctions and concepts to talk about atomic entities. Hegel spends considerable space arguing why when we attempt to interpret pre-thematic distinctions as themselves atomic entities, we, as it were, try to "square the circle." We veer in the

---

[6] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 104.

[7] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 101. Houlgate explains this "perishing" of finitude as the "internalization" of the moment of rejection of other finite entities. Since what it means to be quality is to keep other qualities, as it were, away, by recognizing that bits of existence depend on their rejection of each other we lose this independent edge. Bits of existence *should* be independent and yet they *cannot* be. Houlgate writes, "These imperfections, however, constitute what the thing actually *is*. What something is *intrinsically*, therefore can only be what it *should* be…Yet a certain should-be is immanent in all things as the internal standard that they set for themselves and that they cannot but fail to live up to." Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Science of Logic: From Being to Infinity* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), 394.

[8] Pippin, for instance, argues that to even single out bits of existence *as* bits we must have at our disposal a variety of conceptual distinctions to differentiate and individuate: "if successful, Hegel will show that infinity is the 'truth' of finitude, that the determination of finitude required for there to be finitude individuals ultimately themselves depend on the self-transformations of thought, on Notional conditions." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism and the Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 105.

direction of treating conceptualization itself as a physical object. As with his critique in the *Phenomenology* that "spirit" [*Geist*] cannot be a mere "bone," those presupposed distinctions that give us existence cannot be objects *within* the world. Otherwise, Hegel writes, "we have before us…an abstract transcending which remains incomplete because *the transcending itself* has not been *transcended*."[9]

Now, this all amounts to an abstract way for Hegel to say that some metaphysical positions, for instance philosophical empiricism, wrongly believe we can separate reason from the chaos of "sensations" as we separate two objects located in the world. But this fundamentally confuses things. The human mind, as in my individual cognitive processes, may be an object of some kind among others. But reason itself, meaning the capacity for conceptualization, is that through which we draw distinctions such as between my cognitive processes and the external world. This is what Hegel calls "bad" infinite, which in general means the idea that infinity is an object among others. As he frames it, "The contradiction is present in the very fact that the infinite remains over against the finite with the result that there are two *determinacies*."[10] Separating the mind from the chaotic sensations of the world turns out to be just more distinctions drawn *within* reason. Or, in Hegel's language, to say that the "infinite" is defined as opposed to the "finite" means that the "infinite" is just another finite thing, one embraced within by *true* infinity.

What Hegel thus calls the "true" infinite is reason's conceptualization. As in his Jena years, he underscores that this capacity is a *process* and not an object in the world. The boundaries that give us determinacy, what makes an object what it is, are *established* through reason's drawing

---

[9] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 113.
[10] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 111.

distinctions and not *listed* or *described*. In general, then, infinitude is Hegel's way of saying that drawing distinctions helps establish and regulate boundaries but cannot itself, as activity, be defined by any boundaries. In Hegel's words,

> [T]he nature of the infinite is that it is the process in which it lowers itself to be only *one* of its determinations over against the finite and therefore itself only one of the finites and elevates this distinction of itself and itself to be self-affirmation, and through this mediation, the *true infinite*.

The central idea about the infinite, as Hegel has been saying since Jena, is that it is not a thing, however large or ineffable. Now, the infinite as such *can* in fact be contrasted with the finite by giving it some boundaries, as when we utter the very terms "infinite" and "finite." But this does not make it a thing since infinity *is that very process of contrasting by establishing boundaries*.[11] This, reason's capacity as process to introduce distinctions and settle on boundaries, is what we presuppose when listing qualities as bits of existence. This process, as Hegel says, "transcends" the finite by embracing it within it as a moment in the process of determination.

Further, in clearer form than the "Difference Essay," Hegel says why reason's drawing of distinctions is essentially a *retroactive* endeavor. Rocío Zambrana and Markus Gabriel both see Hegel's views on infinity as his earliest thematization of what it means to give accounts.[12] For Zambrana, for example, Hegel discusses account-giving in terms of "non-empirical constraints that allow for determinacy, since they render something intelligible."[13] In fact, Hegel is nothing if not clear that by discussing infinity he means to give a prelude to how reason gains authority in a world where it does not simply describe what exists. He writes, for example, the following:

---

[11] Houlgate puts this in the following way. Even if we narrow down to the individual entity, that entity itself, in its very individuality, forces us to broaden our field of vision once again. Houlgate writes, "true infinite cannot be something *other* than the finite because it is the process generated by the finite in which the finite is a constitutive moment." Houlgate, *The Opening*, 424.

[12] For a discussion on this see Zambrana's "Hegel's Logic of Finitude," and Gabriel's *Transcendental Ontology*, chapter one.

[13] Rocio Zambrana, "Hegel's Logic of Finitude," *Continental Philosophy Review* 45, (2012): 216.

> The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than the recognition that the finite is not truly an existent. Every philosophy is essentially idealism or has idealism for its principle. A philosophy that attributes to finite existence, as such, true, ultimate, absolute being, does not deserve the name philosophy.[14]

Metaphysics as "first philosophy" starts with the rejection that reason simply lists what exists. That objectivity, in other words, is about simply "being there." Philosophy concerns itself rather with how reason is able to conceptualize and generate authoritative ontologies of what exists. How is it, that is, that there *are* after all objects such as newly discovered viruses when we know full well that they are not just objects we merely gathered from "out there." From this moment in the *Logic* on, then, Hegel considers the structure of retroactivity to see how reason accounts for the world and generates ontologies we find authoritative.[15]

Though briefly, in noting ideas such as Anaximenes' "air" or Thales' "water," Hegel connects "first principles" to how the activity of accounting helps us put together ontologies of what exists.[16] The physicalist monism of Anaximander, or Empedocles' pluralism, draw metaphysical distinctions and generate ontologies that pre-arrange the world a certain way. These metaphysical debates cannot be put aside when we speak of what sort of objects populate the world. But in being metaphysical rather than physical questions, these debates do belong to a distinct sort of discussion. They are questions not about the world's ontology but rather over the

---

[14] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 124. In the *Encyclopedia* "Logic," Hegel refers to "ideality" in a similar way, drawing attention to the importance of the concept of infinity: "Thus, too, finitude is at first determined in terms of reality. But the truth of the finite is rather its *ideality*…this ideality of the finite is the chief proposition of philosophy, and every true philosophy is for this reason *idealism.* The only thing that matters is not to take as the infinite what is at once made into something particular and finite in its determination of it…The fundamental concept of philosophy, the true infinite, depends on this." G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Logic,* trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel Dalhstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 152.
[15] On this point, Zambrana comments that "Philosophy is accordingly a *metatheoretical* endeavor, since it gives a justification of principles of explanation (e.g., Thales' water). Philosophy thereby gives an account of the authority of any given principle within concrete practices of determination." Rocio Zambrana, "Hegel's Logic," 216.
[16] Hegel's exact remarks are "Not even the 'water' of Thales is that, for although also empirical water, it is besides that the *in-itself* or *essence* of all other things and these things do not stand own their own, self-grounded, but are posited on the basis of an other of "water," that is, they are idealized." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 124.

way we go about drawing distinctions determines what ontology we end up with. They are debates about "ideality," meaning about "account-giving." Hegel frames the issue this way: "Nothing is lost by this idealism because the reality of this finite content…is retained…Nor is anything gained by it, for the same reason that nothing is lost…"[17] When speaking about "ideality," about how to fundamentally split the world, we in no way talk about some object found *within* the world, as Hegel points out. But we also do not engage in a mere abstract inconsequential activity. Rather, we debate about the fundamental capacity to conceptualize and build for ourselves ontologies of what ultimately exists. Whatever we mean by "objectivity," then, we know it is something *established* and not simply about existing as an atomic bit.

Now, it is true, as Stephen Houlgate notes, that Hegel by all measures breaks the "immanent" method of the *Logic*.[18] The "doctrine of being" should emphasize that there is nothing but atomic bits of existence or "qualities" we simply find and record. In his discussion of infinity as the retroactive turn to accounting, Hegel does something he technically is not allowed to do. He thus does not pursue this further and fully pose the question of what accounting-giving is, let alone how accounts become authoritative. What Hegel *does* hint at, though it remains underdeveloped here, is that retroactive reflection on accounting is not the secondary activity of professional philosophers. It is somehow integral to how we establish something as something. Hegel sums this up as "The infinite is the existence reflected into itself …,"[19] or as put in the *Encyclopedia* "Logic," "…being with itself in its other, or to put it in terms of a process, to come to

---

[17] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 125. Indeed, Zambrana argues that "ideality" is a matter of how *normative* criteria, not descriptions of the word's logic, inform reason's authority: "I will argue that they make clear that Hegel understanding ideality as a question of normative authority that is always *precarious* and not ontologically self-determining." Rocio Zambrana, "Hegel's Logic," 219.

[18] Houlgate's words are these: "Hegel departs from his method of letting one category mutate logically into another and instead offers his own reflections on the nature of the infinite." Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening*, 415.

[19] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 110.

itself in its other."[20] Said less abstractly, the boundaries that delimit entities are established through distinctions we need to know for them to function properly. Though Hegel is not quite so forward, he is going in the direction of saying that *objectivity is not authoritative, determination does not work, without the retroactive moment of reflection*.[21]

In fact, Hegel describes the infinite as a "movement" [*Bewegung*], the same term he uses to talk about the "absolute idea" at the end of the *Logic*. He writes, "Thus the finite and the infinite are both this *movement* of each returning to itself through its negation…they are thus a *result* and not the determination they had at the beginning."[22] The "infinite" and "idea" are similar in that they both thematize that retroactive reflection is integral for the very authority of these accounts. Therefore, what emerges from this still underdeveloped idea is that to talk about some object or other always presupposes, in principle, *the capacity to reflect back on how reason draws distinctions and forms ontologies*. Though by narrowing down to some object it seems as if it were an atomic bit of existence, it tacitly brings along such a retroactive reflective capacity. It is in part for this reason that Hegel pictures infinity as a circle. To advance, as it were, to the determined atomic entity is to uncover the reflective capacity and "return back" to the account of the world we hold. As Hegel imagines it, "As true infinite, bent back upon itself, its image becomes the circle, the line that has reached itself, closed and wholly present, without beginning and end."[23]

But even though this all moves in the right direction for Hegel, it does not explain enough. Principally, to say that reason is "infinite" because it is the retroactive grasp of its

---

[20] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 119.
[21] Gabriel captures the sense in which for Hegel reason as infinite is a relating to itself; a sort of coming to self-consciousness. He writes, "For this reason, Hegel conceived the infinite or absolute as an ongoing process of self-constitution, which is not determined over against anything external to this very process." Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental* Ontology,117.
[22] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 117.
[23] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 119.

capacity to draw distinctions leave us in the dark as to how it develops specific authoritative accounts of the world. That is, how does retroactive reflection helps "establish" reason's authority? Hinting at what is to come, Hegel writes in his closing remarks on this section that "The infinite in its simple concept, can be regarded, first of all, as a fresh definition of the absolute; as self-reference devoid of determination…"[24] We know that reason is no object among others but the capacity to generate distinctions that we retroactively recover. Now, then, we have to see why self-reference helps generate authority such that Hegel, when describing it, dares to use the name "absolute." The question, in short, comes down to how reflection is the central component for authority in a metaphysics without ontology.

The basis of this question is taken up first in the "doctrine of essence." Hegel approaches the issue of authority via reflection by criticizing modern rationalist metaphysics. Reason operates always under the form of presupposition. Its authority emerges in the integral process of spelling out, contrasting, and tackling ontological assumptions in a way that ultimately invalidates any sort of metaphysical dualism. Neither sensible against supersensible, nor substance against attribute, are adequate. As Hegel goes on to show, modern metaphysics' commitment to analytic thinking over reason's reinventive and creative edge is its central mistake.

III. Thinking Under Unavoidable Presuppositions

From the "doctrine of essence" onwards, Hegel asks explicitly the central question to emerge from the thematization of "account-giving:" what does objectivity look like and how is it

---

[24] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 108. Repeating a similar point made in the "Difference Essay" and *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel connects the issue of the supposedly unbreachable gap between infinity and finitude to a view of the infinity as thing: "The answer to the question, 'how does the infinite become finite?' Is therefore this: *there is not* an infinite which is infinite *beforehand*, and only *afterwards* does it find it necessary to become finite…the infinite is rather for itself just as much finite as infinite." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 123

established? Or posed differently, as Pippin formulates it,[25] how do we establish the difference between the way things *are* and the way they *seem* without assuming that reality is something we merely describe? The "doctrine of essence" lays the first stone towards Hegel's retroactive idea of objectivity, what he calls "actuality" [*Wirklichkeit*], through a critique of modern rationalist metaphysics.[26] In the "subjective logic," now without the dualisms of modern metaphysics, Hegel shows why reason operates through presuppositions we know reflectively and in such a way that establishes reason's authority. Retroactive reflection, that is, generates objectivity for a metaphysics without ontology.

Under the banner "reflection," Hegel considers what it means to say that the way we give accounts determines what existence turns out to be. Without the assumption that objects are simply "there" for our listing, we need to understand what it means to account for existence. This requires, that is, we broaden our field of vision to ask how practices of accounting emerge. And what is more, this being a key feature of Hegelian philosophy, we need to ask how wondering at all about "account-giving" is essential to the very establishing of objectivity. In Hegel's words, "reflection determines itself; each determination is a positedness which is immanent reflection at the same time."[27] It is in stepping towards this that Hegel first introduces the idea that reason fundamentally operates through presuppositions. Linear thinking, that conception of reason that would picture us reaching out to grasp the world, belongs to the idea of reason as the "thinking of things" and is, by Hegel's lights, central to all the issues of modern metaphysics.

---

[25] Pippin writes about this in terms of the unity of apperception, "Without this ability to distinguish how things are from how they seem to me, there would be as many "I's" as associated seemings, and no unity of self-consciouness." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm*, 122.

[26] Pippin's summary of the goals of the "doctrine of essence" is helpful. Essence thematizes reason's "…independent reflective activity…thought's own projection of the structure within which the immediacy of its objects can be fixed, is required in order for thought to have objects." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism,* 201.

[27] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 340.

Now, the way Hegel lays out his idea that reason "thinks under presuppositions" is by saying it fundamentally "turns back" upon itself. Repeatedly, in discussing essence, Hegel says that reason returns or is bent back upon itself, that it "*in sich selbst zurückkehrt*." In our talking about what exists, as the idea of infinity shows, we begin always from distinctions all of which tell us that rationality is involved before we even explicitly ask ontological questions. Hegel writes that "[o]nly inasmuch as knowledge *recollects* itself *into itself* out of immediate being does it find essence through this mediation."[28] To say that humans are essentially free, or that the essence of humans is rationality, though seeming "statements of fact," they assume we can separate what is essential from what is not. Doing this for Hegel is not an obvious matter but requires thinking on what makes something what it is. Gathering bits of existence together, for example, on its own grants us no criterion from which to introduce such separation. An operation like that happens with hindsight, from asking what those distinctions are the best to help us understand existence. Thus, as Hegel notes about the word "essence," "[t]he German language has kept 'essence' (Wesen) in the past participle (gewesen) of the verb 'to be' (sein), for essence is past—but timelessly past—being."[29] We can come to this "timeless past," to distinguish essential from inessential, when we see that reason does more than collect facts laying "there" for our grasping.

In doing this, Hegel is in a subtle way denying any dualism that places ordinary experience on the side of collecting bits of existence and philosophical thought with higher-order

---

[28] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic,* 337. In the *Encyclopedia* "Logic," Hegel is clearer about what separates "essence" from "being:" "what matters here is not the objects in its immediacy; we want instead to know [wissen] it as mediated." G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia* "Logic," 174.

[29] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic,* 337. In the opening remarks of the "doctrine of essence" Hegel connects reflection with a language of "right" or "wrong" since reflection does not simply list bits of existence but *evaluates* existence by contrasting ontologies with how we give accounts. This is an important component to the idea that objectivity is established as "authority" and never just given. Hegel writes, "The *truth* of *being* is *essence*. Being is the immediate. Since the goal of knowledge is the truth, what being is *in and for itself*, knowledge does not stop at the immediate and its determinations, but penetrates beyond it on the presupposition that *behind* this being there is still something other than being itself, and that this background constitutes the truth of being." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic,* 337.

concepts such as "essence." Ordinary experience itself, of its own, presupposes distinctions that require reflection. However tacit, reflection on what makes something what it is, is at work whenever we think about grounds, fundamentals, or essentials. It is for this reason that Hegel comments, "in essence, by contrast, the determinateness does not *exist*; it is *posited* only by essence itself, not free but only with *reference* to the unity of essence. —The negativity of essence is *reflection*…"[30] From our discussion of infinity, we know there is no description of existence that does not assume distinctions. But Hegel now clarifies this by saying that any such discussion assumes a reflexive structure that point us back to how we go about accounting. And in thematizing "account-giving" like this we do not impose or add reflection to an otherwise linear and fully immersed process that merely describes existence. We *rediscover* or unearth, as it were, the "back and forth" relationship that is there to begin with in any discussion of what is the case.

For ontological thinking, reason is not primarily axiomatic, analytic, or synthetic. Though it moves forward, it goes out and grasps existence, it does this by reflecting, by turning back on the presuppositions from which it begins. Here is an example of what Hegel has in mind: "This immediacy which is only as the *turning back* of the negative into itself, is the immediacy which constitutes the determinateness of shine, and from which the previous reflective movement seemed to begin."[31] An instance of "Hegelese" if there ever was one, Hegel says here that the "objectivity" of an object refers us to the distinctions out of which this objectivity emerges. As in a

---

[30] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 339. Houlgate argues that essence is so reflexive that it cannot grasp any determinate object without right away tracing it back to some metaphysical distinction drawn within reason. Essence, he writes, "is so lacking in immediacy, therefore, that it is utterly *self-negating*. As such it is nothing but the movement of its own seeming." Stephen Houlgate, "Essence, Reflexivity, and Immediacy in *Hegel's Science of Logic*," in *A Companion to Hegel*, eds. Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 154.

[31] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 347. In another passage, Hegel further writes that "…*positing,* inasmuch as it is immediacy as a turning back; that is to say, there is not an other beforehand one either from which or to which it would turn back." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 348. Houlgate touches on how reflection achieves a sense of "immediacy" in being the constant activity that reaches back to metaphysical distinctions to show the roots of determinacy: "The reflexive negative, acquires immediacy, therefore, by doubling back or *turning back* on itself." Stephen Houlgate, "Essence, Reflexivity," 155.

sports game, where the rules of the game are meaningful while players operate within their parameters, reason does not discover the world's eternal ontology but conceives of the world as "such and such" *because* it reaches back to the distinctions of some ontology.[32] That is, to understand why players do what they do, we need to reach back to some distinctions that explain their behavior and which in fact they presuppose.

Hegel likes to say that reason does not "posit," *setzen*, but rather "presupposes" or voraus*setzen*. The idea, as Fichte seems to think, that the self posits itself and the not-self simultaneously is for Hegel an abstraction that misses reason's structure of presupposition. Hegel writes, in his awkward style, that "[t]he turning back of essence is therefore its self-repulsion. Or inner directed reflection is essentially the presupposing of that from which the reflection is the turning back."[33] Crucially, Hegel is *not only* saying that when we reflect on some object, for instance private property, it leads us back to distinctions we already hold to understand it as such. He is *also* saying that when we turn towards these distinctions, they in fact lead us back again to the object from which we began. In other words, that reason does not function linearly means that our conceptual distinctions also do not exist in some Platonic domain. Saying as much would corner us into a dualism in which objects are determined through the instantiation of concepts.

What Hegel wants to indicate, and what renders his him so unique, is that both the object and the ontology it brings along operate as reason does: *always in the form of presupposition*. He writes, "[t]he arriving at itself is thus the sublating of itself and self-repelling, presupposing reflection, and its repelling of itself from itself is the arriving at itself."[34] In other words, there is

---

[32] For Pinkard's (1979) "chess" example, see Terry Pinkard, "The Logic of Hegel's Logic," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (1979): 419.
[33] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 347.
[34] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 348. Hegel repeats something along these lines in the following: "…essence, *being* only as this coming back – is only in the turning back itself." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 348. He writes

no such a thing as reason directing reflection from behind the sciences in the same way as there is no object waiting there to be reflected upon. Thinking discovers that *this* object presupposes *this* ontology, *this* ontology *that* object. We might, through abstraction, separate this process and say, with Fichte, that objects are conceptualized and are not just atomic things. But we cannot lose track for Hegel of the fact that we dig up the capacity of conceptualization from within the structure of presupposition. The movements of football players on the field are not grasped properly without the schemes that conceptualize their movements, but these schemes operate fundamentally, not secondarily, as the presuppositions of their actions. In Hegel's well-known remark, "the reflective movement of essence, is the *movement from nothing to nothing and therefore back to itself*."[35] In Hegel's universe, nothing is, as it were, ever "stable" because reason moves forward by moving backward, backwards by advancing forwards.

With this in mind, the sections on "reflection" aim at saying that reason is fundamentally circular instead of linear. As with the notion of infinity, the thought of anything at all, from physical objects to aesthetic judgements, occurs for Hegel always under the form of presupposition. Hegel sums up this view in the following passage:

> It follows form these considerations that the movement of reflection as an absolute internal counter-repelling…[t]he movement, as forward movement, turns immediately around into itself and so is only self-movement—a movement which comes from itself in so far as positing reflection is presupposing reflection, yet, as presupposing reflection, is simply positing reflection.[36]

---

again something similar in the following: "In presupposing, reflection determines the turning back into itself as the negative of itself, as that of which essence is the sublating. It is the relating to itself, but to itself as to the negative of itself." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 347.

[35] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 346.

[36] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 348. In *Absolute Recoil*, Slavoj Žižek thinks this idea of "absolute repelling," which he translates as "absolute recoil," is an important moment in realizing that reason always thinks under presuppositions. When the structure of presupposition moves front and center, we no longer speak of any "ground" or "foundation" of thinking. Žižek writes, "The book's title refers to the expression *absoluter gegenstoss,* which Hegel uses only once [sic], but at a crucial point in his logic of reflection, to designate the speculative coincidence of opposites in the movement by which a thing emerges out of its own loss." Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a new Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 14-15.

It is a key mistake of modern metaphysics to see reason the linear, where its analytic or synthetic powers reach out to grasp the world's logic or construct order out of utter disorder. But in the way Hegel wants to see the matter, thinking is irreducibly finite. Ontologies are conceived under presuppositions, by assuming some distinctions or other that we must then reflect on to understand why it is that we see the world the way we see it. Both the thought that reaches out to grasp or order existence and that which we take to exist are conceived under fundamental presuppositions. Reason thinks the world is a large container, or that it is a purposive organism, and comes to reflect on this as it thinks on why we take atoms or souls to exist. Without a solid metaphysical "bedrock" to tell us how things really are, we are left with the conclusion that an ontology explains itself by reaching back to its presuppositions, and these presuppositions in turn spell out a world as "such and such." As Hegel puts it, by focusing on one of these, we are right away "repulsed" to the other.

Later, under the section on "ground," Hegel draws out in a bit more detail the most innovative aspect of this idea that reason thinks under presuppositions. As he frames the matter,

> In floundering to the ground, the determination of reflection receives its true meaning – that it is the absolute repelling of itself within itself; or again, that the positedness that accrues to essence is such only as sublated..."[37]

If we understand that reason by putting forth an ontology reaches back to the way it accounts for the world, then there is no "ground" out of which reason starts that is external to the structure of presupposition.[38] Neither Descartes or Leibniz's God, nor Hume's mind, are candidates for metaphysical "foundations" that lie outside the ontology they help support. They are not "prime

---

[37] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 386.

[38] As Hegel's says, the meaning of determination is to "flounder to the ground." The play on words is lost in the English. To "go to the ground," or "*zu Grunde gehen*," is a German expression for "dying" or "collapsing," and Hegel uses the double meaning of "perishing" and "grounding." Reflection traces objects back to their conceptual distinctions but these distinctions are not a "ground" in some supersensible sense. What we learn is that no object is ever eternal, including any kind of "ground," but always conceived under presuppositions.

movers," as in Aristotle, but ontological principles generated within metaphysical distinctions about what the world is like. Descartes' God is needed because of his dualism of substance, while Hume's mind bundles perceptions because of the assumption that the world is chaotic.

In quite a radical sense, then, Hegel begins here a shift that culminates with what he considers to be the key element of his new metaphysics: a "subjective" logic. Without the idea that reason lists bits of existence, and without the assumption that reason thinks of some deeper supersensible reality as the world's logic, we lose the traditional sense of objectivity. Although it takes time for Hegel spell out all implications, to say that reason operates under presuppositions means that *discussions about existence, about ontology, are always constructed from some position.* There is no *sub specie aeternitatis* in the modern sense. For Hegel we come think about account-giving always by reflecting on the distinctions that help us understand the world one way or another. *Our* position, as it were, the particularities through which the world is conceptualized need to be taken into consideration when trying to understand why we hold a certain ontology. As with Thomas Nagel, there is no "view from nowhere" since every view we construct, even the idea that there are no views but only "what is the case," is an example of reason operating under presuppositions.

The structure of presupposition allows us to see the extent of Hegel's critique of modern metaphysics. Under what he calls "the absolute," Hegel submits to criticism those metaphysical accounts that erase from the picture the presuppositions under which the world is conceived. He comes to this by criticizing "substrate-thinking" in general and Spinoza's metaphysics in particular. The idea that existing objects are the "expression" of some deeper ultimate reality, whether these be substance, the God of modern philosophy, or Kant's "thing in itself," emerge for Hegel from the same idea. They are all attempts to say, in the words of early German idealism, that conditional thinking is grounded in an unconditioned axiomatic principle. But

unlike Schelling and Hegel, this axiom is still thought in the way we think objects within the world: as defined or "determined" through boundaries we can spell out. Hegel writes,

> …the absolute itself is *absolute identity*; to be this identity is its *determination*…in the absolute itself there is no *becoming*, since the absolute is not being; nor does the absolute determine itself *reflectively*, for it is not the essence which determines itself only inwardly; and it also does not *externalize itself*, for it is the identity of the inner and the outer.[39]

In the case of the absolute, however, we speak of an object so large that it contains all other objects within. Putting things this way articulates for Hegel a systemic and fatal problem of substrate-thinking: how else does this absolute, reason as such, express itself if not by assuming some distinction or other? The moment thought expresses itself it does so through metaphysical distinctions that then give us some ontology and a whole series of existing objects.

The next logical steps of this view seem obvious enough. For every object we hold we are led to say that "it expresses rationality but is not reason itself." It is perhaps an "attribute" as for Spinoza, or an "appearance" as for Kant, but it is not reason as such. We corner ourselves into the position, as Hegel puts it, that "determinateness has become as such a thoroughly transparent reflective shine."[40] Modes or attributes, though they articulate substance, are not substance as such. Now, even though this is intended as a critique of modern metaphysics, the discussion also puts the finger on what Hegel thinks is wrong with Schelling's early philosophy. Schelling, true enough, says that the "absolute" is not a thing or some substrate, but he cannot but treat it as

---

[39] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 467.

[40] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 467. Brady Bowman thinks that Hegel's criticism of substance is the last step in his critique of modern metaphysics, leading to what Bowman calls Hegel's "metaphysics of absolute negativity," his version of metaphysics without ontology. He writes, "'Substantiality,' Hegel tells us, is a form that characterizes the *immediate* as such, be it the immediacy *of* knowing or the immediacy as it is *for* knowing. To grasp the 'true' or the absolute as *merely* substantial is thus to grasp it as either pure being (e.g., with the Eleatics, or as Schelling does when he conceives the absolute as an 'indifferent point'), or as pure absolute I in the manner of the early Fichte." Brady Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics*, 216. And he remarks further down, "…Hegel's rejection of immediacy…is motivated by metaphysical concerns with the constitution of selfhood as well as by the epistemological concerns that have frequently been that have frequently been identified as the sole motivation behind." Brady Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics*, 217.

such. Because he has no theory for the seeming independence of objects, he considers them, as Spinoza does, as the articulation of unconditionality. But this expression also "gets in the way" by giving the unconditioned determinacy. In the way Hegel wants to argue, without understanding reason as thinking under presuppositions, we are bound to render unconditionality into a thing.

Thus, the major mistake of substrate-thinking is to believe that the structure of presupposition is secondary or "inessential" to reason as such. At bottom, regardless of its commitment to monism or pluralism, it gives rise to dualistic thinking. Hegel follows here his own Jena views and says that substrate-thinking posits a strict separation between reason as the capacity to draw distinctions and reason as the ultimate explanation for an ontology. In the "Difference Essay," Hegel argues for reason's retroactivity as a way to give importance to objects' seeming independence. Only as such, retroactively, does reason recognize objectivity while still saying it arises out of *its* distinctions. Similarly now, there is no need to say that some ontology is an expression of reason but not reason itself because this ontology is already reflexive. Of its own accord, it turns us back to those presuppositions from which we start and hence to reason as the capacity to draw distinctions. It moves us forward towards determinacy by moving us backward towards reason's conceptualization.

When substrate-thinking denies this reflexive character, as Hegel summarizes, we see reason's determinacy as external to reason itself. We think in terms what he calls "external reflection" [*äußere Reflexion*]. We effectively treat reason as a thing by defining it as an undifferentiated entity. Hegel notes, "the absolute which is only *absolute identity* is only *the absolute of an external reflection*."[41] Displaying how far he has moved away from Hölderlin's orbit, Hegel thinks it wrong to believe that anything we say about reason ultimately corrupts it. Perhaps

---

[41] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 468-469.

unintentionally, thinking like that, believing that determinacy corrupts reason, comes close to the scholastic idea that separates the pure idea from its application. As Hegel pictures in the *Encyclopedia* "Logic," "to learn to swim, before he ventures into the water."[42] In Hegel's eyes, there is no substance without attributes, no thing-in-itself without appearances, and no absolute without finitude. All of them, "substance," the "thing-in-itself," and the "absolute" are not things in the way physical objects are. They cannot be defined by describing their boundaries vis-à-vis other things. Whenever we split the world in two and place reason here and its finite ontological regions over there, we introduce a dualism difficult to sustain.

Indeed, Gabriel neatly sums up Hegel's main objection as follows: "every metaphysical system that draws a distinction between two worlds is forgetful of this very operation of reflection…"[43] The very distinction between reason and reason as "such and such," between substance and attribute, is drawn within reason. By starting off from the idea that reason is linear, that it reaches out to grasp the world, we inevitably for Hegel introduce a dualism between reason and the determined sensible world, as for rationalism. But, on the other hand, if we then accept that thinking operates always under presuppositions, we do not think of determinacy as the expression of an undisturbed substance. We see determinacy, instead, as how reason is anything at all and how it is then "turned back," as Hegel says, into its own depths. Just as there is no "view from nowhere," there is also no reason as such, no world in itself. From the start, what we call "reason" and "the world" are integrated into a structure of presupposition we eventually reflect upon. It is true that reason is a capacity to draw distinctions, and it is also the case that for Hegel speculation is the "watchtower of metaphysics" as the view of the whole. But

---

[42] G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia* "Logic," 38.
[43] Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 107.

for Hegel these emerge *immanently* from within the structure of presupposition and are never to be separated as atomic things are.

Already in the "doctrine of essence," Hegel works towards showing this immanent development within the reflexive structure of presupposition. Ultimately, his aim is to argue that objectivity as "authority" develops from the immanent character of the structure of presupposition. Before he can say that, though, he needs to show exactly how determinacy, its presupposed distinctions, and the "view of the whole" via which we reflect on both, relate to one another. Hegel discusses this process under the name "actuality." [*Wirklichkeit*]. And because the overarching goal, though perhaps lost in so much detail, is to rethink objectivity as authority, the theme of actuality spills over to the "subjective logic" and beyond. Karen Ng, for example, notes just how crucial this discussion is for Hegel's philosophy: "Hegel's *Logic*, and perhaps his entire philosophy, attempts to work through and express what actuality is…"[44] In slightly different manner, Pippin also underscores the gravity of this discussion, writing that "Hegel's model of metaphysics, as is indicated by his frequent innovation of the German term for *energeia*, *Wirklichkeit*, is Aristotelian."[45] Hegel's treatment of actuality lays down the first brick for how to conceive of objectivity as authority. It constructs a theory of objectivity for a metaphysics without ontology.

---

[44] Karen Ng, "Hegel's Logic of Actuality," in *The Review of Metaphysics* 63, (2009): 144. Ultimately, the actual or real is historically situated as Hegel recounts in the "philosophy of spirit." The suggestion that reason is thinking under presuppositions is Hegel's first step in establishing how "reality" being historically situated works so that we do not fall into either cultural relativism or the Platonic division into real "forms" and empirical "application."

[45] Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm,* 94. For Pippin, Hegel's reformulation of Kant's "transcendental idealism" turns on rethinking sensibility as already conceptually mediated. Here is an example of what he has in mind: "by rejecting the notion that a form distinction can be drawn between Kantian form and matter, or between nonderived subjective conditions and sensible matter, whether that metaphor is used to illuminate all knowledge or the specific issue of formal apperception and material self-knowledge, Hegel has committed himself to what appears to be an extremely eccentric and implausible theory. Hegel seems to believe that the specification of a wide range of conceptual determination, from philosophical theories to scientific principles, can be shown to develop 'internally' to any subject's *self*-understanding, without reliance on empirical 'matter' and without an exogenous foray into the table of judgements." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, 40.

The major idea behind Hegel's much layered approach is that to be objective, *actual* and not *apparent*, emerges from the way ontologies integrate their own presuppositions once these are retroactively spelled out. Hegel likes to put this in terms of the "back and forth" between some ontology's "interiority" [*Erinnerung*] and "exteriority" [*Entäußerung*]. To be actual means to relate back to and to be able to integrate those metaphysical distinctions we were not aware we held. In his words, "The essential relation, in this identity of the appearance with the inner or with essence, has determined itself as actuality."[46] Since reason learns about its assumptions retroactively, this "identity" between the inner and the outer is neither guaranteed nor automatic. The difference between what *seems* and what *really* is lies is how our conceptions of what exists relate back to presuppositions that do indeed support them. It is entirely possible that although we think the world is a "totality of facts" we employ distinctions that split the world into sensible and supersensible.

As a concrete example, the Haitian revolution clearly put to the test the French revolution's idea of universal freedom. Not only does the Haitian appeal to freedom go beyond the French case by including colonial slaves, but also shows that the French explicit conception of "universality" is at odds with its own fundamental presuppositions. It openly promotes "liberty, equality, and fraternity," but in truth, or *actually* as Hegel wants to say, its metaphysical distinctions generate an ontology that limits who counts as human (white, male, property-owning, etc.). It is a conception of freedom that when compelled to spell out its presuppositions, it lets out a number of contradictions. If we accept this, then the idea of absolute universal freedom has no more objectivity than as an "ideal." We can either flip over and support freedom for white, property-owning men, or develop a new idea of universality. The French idea of freedom

---

[46] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 464.

did not have the objectivity it thought it had, but *another idea* did, one built upon discounting others as humans.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel summarizes the key implication to this idea that objectivity is established via reflection. He writes, "the examination is not only an examination of knowing but also an examination of the standard of knowing."[47] In spelling out some account's assumptions, as the Haitian revolution does for the French, we do not come to see, as perhaps for Plato, that some historical instantiation of freedom failed to "live up" to the idea of universal freedom. We instead realize that such notion of universal freedom was conceived *from the start* under specific assumptions as to who counts as free and who does not. Both, and this is key to Hegel's anti-Platonism, the ideal conceived under assumptions about race, class, and gender, *and* its concrete expression in the historical denial of Haitian independence, depend upon one another. Out of this, then, emerges a fundamental commitment of Hegel's new metaphysics: there are no pre-made criterion against which to judge what we think exists. Every time we measure determinacy against some criterion, such as instantiations against ideal "forms," or our practical action against the moral law, it is not just the concrete that is under examination but also the very criterion against its own unthematized distinctions.

If we thus say with Hegel that reason operates under presuppositions, then this seems to commit us to the view that objectivity is "won" and not "discovered." In the frame Hegel has in mind, for accounts of the world to be objective they need "express" themselves, as Hegel calls it. They have to unfold in a way that risks that presupposed distinctions might actually turn out to be at odds the account's explicit ontology. "The expression of the actual," Hegel writes in the

---

[47] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated and edited by Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 57. G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*: Bd. 3: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2017), 78.

Encyclopedia "Logic," is the actual itself."[48] For metaphysics without ontology the basic elements for how objectivity is "established" are found here. Actuality is neither something we can list, not some deeper reality we access by seeing with the "mind's eye," in Plato's words. It is essentially contested because it results from the debates between the metaphysical presuppositions of ontologies grasped only retroactively. We never really speak of *the* world's logic, in some absolute manner, but of the world conceived as "such and such." Our ideas of what is objective, that a new flu virus was recently discovered or that the constitution is the "law of the land," are the result of being able to still make sense of the world this way in the midst of scientific skepticism or a global transnational order.

This major point, that we only ever talk about the world as conceived "such and such," separates what Hegel calls the "objective logic" from the "subjective logic." The doctrines of being and essence both assume that such a thing exists as the fundamental bedrock of reality. Whether it is the idea of the world as the "totality of facts," or of the supersensible against sensible appearances, these still assume the world as having a single ontology. But in saying that reason thinks under presuppositions, and by rethinking objectivity as "established" though reflection, Hegel moves in the direction of objectivity as a matter of "authority." He writes, on this idea, that "the *objective logic* which it treats of *being* and *essence*, constitutes in truth the *genetic exposition of the concept*."[49] The "concept," among its many meanings, is the name in Hegel's mature philosophy for the view (arising out of Jena) that existence is always conceptualized in this or that way. With the *Logic*, Hegel is better equipped to say how this happens within reason's reflexive structure of presupposition. Reason does not conceptualize the world in the way some

---

[48] G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Logic,* 211.
[49] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 509. As he also writes, "*it is substance that has been let go freely into the concept*." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 512.

God might through an act of intellectual intuition. It discovers its conceptualizing capacity as it retroactively understands that existence is always embedded within some ontology drawn out of metaphysical distinctions.

The "subjective logic," then, considers what it means for the structure of presupposition to generate objectivity as authority. Reason discovers that presuppositions are inherent to what it means to be objective and thus accounts stand or fall depending on whether they can integrate them within; if they can make presuppositions *theirs*. Hegel notes approvingly that "the concept is *free* and only refers to itself…this stage constitutes, therefore, *subjectivity*, or the *formal concept*."[50] Now, in those sections discussing what Hegel calls the "formal" concept, he is particularly keen on saying that the structure of presupposition has "moments" that help and build on each other to establish authority. In what Hegel names the "immediate concept," he tells the story of how reason comes to see its presuppositions as essential to the way it is. He says that universality assumes that it can be "instantiated," or made determinate, and these instantiations, in turn, related back to the universal when we see how a subject holds both together in its individuality. The idea of freedom, for instance, needs particular instances to specify it as "liberal" or "socialist." These come together under, for instance, "revolutionary France," whose universal ideal helps us reflect and understand its concrete developments. Thusly, the concept *integrates reflectively* how its concrete instantiations helps it see better what sort of universal it is in the first place.

---

[50] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 526-527. For Ng, the structure of presuppositions means that contingency has an important role in Hegel's metaphysics. Since we know anything fully only retroactively, we cannot predict or deduce reality with any sort of necessity. As she frames it, "This contingency that is constitutive of thought's self-determining activity, or the contingency that *is* the necessary unfolding and self-exposition of the absolute actuality and the self-exposition of the concept, expresses the necessity of thinking the thing in unity with its conditions, if thought is to think determinate being at all." Ng, "Hegel's Logic of Actuality," 30.

In a way, what Hegel does here is to fill out some of the blanks of his Jena philosophy. There he says that reason's retroactivity should reconstruct objects' "seeming" independence from the standpoint of speculation. In the *Logic*, as in the following passage, Hegel says something similar: "…the concept is to be regarded indeed, not just as a subjective presupposition but as *absolute foundation*; but it cannot be the latter except to the extent that it has *made* itself into one."[51] What the "subjective logic" ultimately adds to this is the idea that reflecting on and integrating presuppositions furnishes an internal criterion to evaluate why sometimes we *seem* committed to an account but turn out to *really* be committed to another. It gives us a theory of objectivity to separate "truth" from "falsehood" but in a way that does not appeal to any eternal criterion, supersensible or otherwise. From within the reflexive structure of presupposition, that is, through spelling out and integrating presuppositions, objectivity becomes a matter of "authority."

Hegel sees syllogistic thinking, especially the "disjunctive syllogism," as the best account for how authoritativeness emerges out of thinking under presuppositions. What is particularly key about the syllogism, in Hegel's eyes, is that it generates its own criterion to separate what is true from what is false.[52] An example of this kind of syllogism goes as such: "A is either B or C, A is not C, thus A is B." For concepts and judgements in the ordinary sense, we hold to the belief that they are purely mental constructs whose "truth" needs to be confirmed in experience or further supersensible truths. But Hegel thinks the disjunctive syllogism generates its own criterion for

---

[51] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 508. Ralf-Peter Horstmann thinks of the concept as "entirely determined in the sense that the concept must contain all determinations that are required for an exhaustive explication of itself (or, as Hegel prefers to say, for its own 'development'). It is maximally complex in the sense that the concept provides the determinations that allow us to grasp subjectivity and its unique self-relation in a non-reductive manner." Ralf-Peter Horstmann, "Substance, Subject, and Infinity: A Case Study of the Role of Logic in Hegel's System," in *Hegel: New Directions*, edited by Katerina Deligiorgi (Chesham: Acumen, 2006), 75.

[52] In general, for Hegel the syllogism, unlike the separate parts of judgements (e.g., subject, predicate, etc.) brought together by the cupula, is composed of "moments" forming a network of relations. This is what Hegel has in mind with the idea that reason is thinking under presuppositions. As he believed already in Jena, any object is what it is in relation to an ontology and to the fundamental distinctions that, in turn, sustain it.

truth within its reflective structure. Of its own, it offers up a simple distinction out which to build an ontology: A is either B or C. Unlike judgements such as "the rose is red," there is not a need to confirm externally, in this case empirically, the truth of the syllogism. The syllogism's two options, whatever "A" ultimately is, set up a matrix for what possibly can exist. By reaching back to this simple set up, we know that whatever is entered for "A," it is ultimately either "B' or "C."

Although this seems highly abstract, what is central for the idea of objectivity as authority is that the syllogism evaluates itself. Hegel writes, perhaps controversially, that "in reason the *determinate* concepts are posited in their *totality* and *unity*. Therefore, it is not just that the syllogism is rational but *everything rational is a syllogism*."[53] This, an alleged example of Hegel's desire for closure, is ultimately an argument against any eternal criteria for evaluating what exists. By doing away with any dualism between sensible and supersensible, Hegel wants reflection to reveal how ontologies presuppose distinctions that test their own commitments. From such distinctions we are able to understand retroactively not only what an ontology depends on but, even more important, *whether it lives up to those commitments at all*. In evaluating whether "existence" is all about atomic bits we do not just use our analytic powers to reach clear and distinct ideas. We see retroactively whether its own fundamental distinctions splitting the world in this or that way match such ontological ideas. In other words, we seek to retroactively reconstruct *whether this*

---

[53] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 588. Zambrana offers a useful summary of how the syllogism sets up its matrix of distinctions. She writes, "…the syllogism makes explicit the dependence on content on the basis of the negativity of form: formal relations—such as hypothetical, categorical, or modal relations—are based on the relations of exclusion that depend on the content of the concepts combined." Rocio Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility,* 98. She also illustrates the idea that thinking under presuppositions rejects any sense of reason's unity that would turn it into a thing. She writes, in her disagreement with Beatrice Longuenesse, "*Pace* Longuenesse, rather than representing a return to original identity, this movement is systematically a *reductio* of the very idea of unity as an instance exempt from division." Rocio Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility,* 99.

account is authoritative or not.[54] The dividing line between "being" and "seeming" is thus not that between reason as such and its appearances but is rather *internal* to the "appearances" themselves.

This is, without a doubt, one the most important lessons out of the "subjective logic." Any distinction we draw between reason and appearance risks reintroducing dualisms. But by seeing reason as thinking under presuppositions we understand the border between "true" and "false" to be a mobile one. The line is established, rendered authoritative that is, *within* a conception of the world as the relation between its explicit ontological commitments and its underlying metaphysical assumptions. Or, as Hegel puts it, we must see the "difference of the concept in the concept itself."[55] The idea that the world is the "totality of facts" renders false a purposive organic conception but might itself turn out to be false if its internal commitments are connected to substrate-thinking. Zambrana sums up the core of Hegel's view in the following: "Hegel argues that inferential patterns determine in relation to a totality of *actual* rather than possible, which will be crucial for understanding *objectivity*."[56] For a metaphysics that has no single ontology, reflecting on presuppositions is how we ask the question of where the line should be drawn the between

---

[54] Hegel writes this illuminating reflection on objectivity. He says, on the one hand, that objectivity is established by distinctions drawn within reason, and on the other, that it nevertheless must seem as something "on its own." His solution is "purpose," the idea that "objectivity" should be the coincidence between metaphysical distinctions, as Aristotle's "substantial form," and the ontological commitment that grow from that. In his words, "At the present standpoint of our treatise, objectivity has the meaning first of all of the *being in and for itself* of the concept that has sublated the *mediation* posited in its self-determination, raising it to *immediate* self-reference…But further, since the concept equally has to restore the free being-for-itself of its subjectivity, it enters with respect to objectivity into a relation of purpose in which the immediacy of objectivity becomes a *purpose* for it, something to be determined through its activity." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 630.

[55] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic,* 526. Beatrice Longuenesse says something along these lines. She writes that what may seem like objective, in the "given" not mind-dependent sense of the term, is from the start a result of thinking itself. Reason must reintegrate this and ask itself serious question about the objectivity of what seems independent and yet the result of reason: "But what is found is, on the one hand, *always already* thought; on the other hand, *re*thought and consequently transformed into thought just as soon as it is found." Beatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics,* translated by Nikole Simek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 150.

[56] Rocio Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*, 107.

"being" and "seeming." That is, whether some ontology is authoritative as it grapples with its presuppositions or rather merely *seems* to be so.

If we grant Hegel, however, the idea that objectivity as authority emerges from grappling with an ontology's presuppositions, what is left of metaphysics? Without eternal criteria of any sort, how are we still doing anything like the study of "being qua being"? This is a task for the concluding chapter of the *Logic* to address. Hegel *does* think that even though we have no supersensible or empirical standard for objectivity we do metaphysics when we authoritatively conceptualize the world in this or that way. But it is his job there to say exactly how reason can speak authoritatively about the world in a way that does not return us back to the Platonic or modern ideas of objectivity. This he does by thematizing what I call metaphysics' accountability gap.

IV. Authoritativeness and the Accountability Gap

Even though Hegel devotes roughly half of *Logic* to criticizing traditional metaphysics, he would be unmoved by the idea of the "end of metaphysics." Just as Schelling does, Hegel dismisses suggestions that reason is merely the "thinking of things" and sees criticisms of reason as denials of *that* type of reason only. Indeed, Hegel in fact praises traditional metaphysics for remaining faithful to the idea that philosophy grapples with the world itself and not its appearances.[57] In the preface, he voices regrets about "critical philosophy's" rejection of metaphysics in a way eerily similar to twentieth-century conversations. Current philosophy, Hegel notes, has "a cultivated people without metaphysics, like a temple richly ornamented in other respects but without a holy

[57] This is what Hegel actually says on the topic: "[t]he older metaphysics had in this respect a higher of thinking than now passes as the accepted opinion. For it presupposed as its principle that only what is known as things and in things by thought is really true of them…" G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 25.

of holies."[58] The issue for Hegel is never really metaphysics as such but rather *how* we do metaphysics. The "critical philosophy," for all its contributions, also opened pandora's box, which skeptics everywhere are eager to seize on the opportunity and declare, as Hegel puts it, that "knowledge has lapsed into opinion."[59]

But, if we believe Hegel, what does *his* metaphysics look like then? Though he abandons the idea that the world has an ontology thinking simply draws out, Hegel is not particularly modest about what his new metaphysics is able to do. He writes about the "absolute idea," for example, that it is "*being*, imperishable *life*, *self-knowing truth*, and is *all truth*."[60] The central problem of his contemporaries is not quite that they return to traditional philosophy, with Jacobi, the romantics, and Fichte as examples, or that they are not modest enough about reason's limits. More than anything else, it is their commitment to philosophical foundations that supposedly lie outside their systems. Because for Hegel reason thinks under presuppositions, he regards such attempt as just more ways of turning reason into a thing. With Fichte and Jacobi probably in mind, Hegel says that they all try to begin their philosophies "like a shot from a pistol, from their inner revelation, from faith, intellectual intuition, etc."[61] And this criticism applies all the same to any system grounded by an "unmoved mover," or as Hegel puts it, "'water,' 'the one,' 'nous,"

---

[58] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 8. In the *Encyclopedia* "Logic," for instance, Hegel mentions that the issue is not with concepts as such but with how conceptualization has been understood thus far: "The standpoint of the concept is in general that of absolute idealism…the claim, so often repeated from the side of sentiment and the heart, that concept as such are something dead, empty, and abstract, refers to this low-level construal of the concept. Meanwhile, just the opposite holds and the concept is instead the principle of all life and thereby, at the same time, something absolutely concrete." G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia* "Logic," 233

[59] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 25. Indeed, he says something similar about logic itself: "For the dead bones of logic to be quickened by spirit and become substance and content, its method must be the one which alone can make it fit to be pure science. In the present situation of logic, hardly a trace of scientific method is to be seen in it. It has roughly the form of an empirical science." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 32.

[60] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of* Logic, 735. In another example of Hegel's "confidence:" "logic is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth unveiled, truth as it is in and for itself. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 29.

[61] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 44-45.

'idea,' or 'substance,' 'monad,' etc.,"[62] since they construct reality as supported by thing-like foundations outside the system of appearances. Thus, however we construe metaphysics, it does not put forth a ready-made foundation, whether this be "being," the "idea," or even "spirit."

As I said at the outset, I believe we can sum up Hegel's new metaphysics as an argument for an accountability gap in reason. I understand this to be the overall idea he portrays in the last chapter of the *Logic* and comments upon in the introductions. Perhaps remarkably, Hegel writes that the "absolute idea" "because of the freedom which the concept has attained in it, also has the *most stubborn opposition* within it."[63] In the Hegelian universe, the "absolute idea" does not grant access to some eternal suppressible reality. At its core, it is an exposition for why it is inherent to metaphysical reflection not to have a single ontology. Why, though it can speak in detail about the process generating authoritative ontologies, it is not committed to any of them. In her commentary, Zambrana says something along similar lines. The *Logic*, she writes, lays out "one nonreversible, ahistorical principle that establishes the necessary historicity of intelligibility."[64] Reason, as Hegel has been arguing since Jena, is not a thing. It cannot be understood through boundaries of any kind, whether these are those dividing "faculties" or the categories of "being" that exhaustively account for what exists. Metaphysics does not unpack reason's definitive categorical structure. It rather says something about *how* we can generate and unpack different categorical structures without reason being committed to any of them.

---

[62] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 45.
[63] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 674. The following is another good example for why it is the "movement" and not the "content" of the concept that ultimately matters: "The *identity* of the idea with itself is one with the process; the thought that liberates actuality from the seeming of purposeless mutability and transfigures it into *idea* must not represent this truth of actuality as dead repose, as a mere *picture*, numb, without impulse and movement…" G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 674.
[64] Rocio Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*, 125.

Hegel portrays this by discussing what he calls the idea's "method" [*Methode*] or "character." As he sums up, "what is to be considered as method here is only the movement of the concept itself."[65] Above, I said that for Hegel reason as thinking under presuppositions means ultimately that the world is always conceived from some position. We may say that the mind helps bring out the world's structure out of the chaos of sensations *because* we assume the world to be rational. Reason does not begin from a disinterested position and goes out to meet the world but is deeply invested in crafting that very world it explains. As Hegel notes in one of the introductions, "there is nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation."[66] Reason's "method" does not refer to the way we sharpen our conceptual tools to then grasp the world's fundamental "reality;" meaning its proper boundaries and nature. The method lets us know that thinking under presupposition is reason's unavoidable character.

We see what metaphysics without ontology entails when we embrace thinking under presuppositions. Doing this makes it possible to give up on the idea of a ready-made world reason reaches out to grasp. In discussing the "absolute idea" Hegel comments,

> The *science of logic* has apprehended its own concept. In the sphere of being, at the beginning of its *content*, its concept appears as a knowledge external to that content in subjective reflection. But in the idea of absolute cognition, the concept has become the idea's own content.[67]

Metaphysics' aim is not to figure out what the world looks like. It studies the relationship between how we fundamentally conceptualize the world and the ways we go about discussing what exists.

---

[65] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 737

[66] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 46. For the same reason, if everything turns out to be mediated, if everything happens within reason as thinking under presuppositions, then the beginning point or idea of foundation and first principle, is immediate and abstract. In Hegel's words, "The beginning must then be absolute or, what means the same here, must be an abstract beginning." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 48.

[67] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 752.

That reason has an accountability gap means that, because *there is no world as such*, our attention should rather be on the complex ways we put together accounts of what exists.[68] I think this is what Bowman means when he approves of Hans Fulda's claim that Hegel's is a "metaphysics without ontology."[69] Reason, as Hegel puts it, sees that any account of the world is also an account *it* has crafted in this or that way, including the very idea of the world as such. Not unlike for Sartre, for whom consciousness cannot "catch itself in the act," apprehend itself as *thing* that is, without being the active subject doing the "catching."

Thus, to say there is an accountability gap in reason it to say that metaphysics now considers the way put ontologies together, in particular their fundamental presuppositions vis-à-vis explicit commitments. But this is only half of the story. Hegel is certainly not advocating the idea that the accountability gap leads to the collapse of reason's authority by saying that all knowledge is "human, all too human." The other half of the story has then to be about what reason can still say in terms of the study of "being qua being" in the strong sense of the term. It is a question over the nature of reason's authority. As I described above, for Hegel objectivity needs to be replaced by the idea of authority as something an account of the world gains or loses depending on how it grapples with its presuppositions. "Truth," Hegel writes, "is but the coming-to-oneself through the negativity of immediacy."[70] We cannot, as it were, map all reality with one single stroke without the presuppositions of this very mapping remaining unknown until after the fact. For this reason, the accountability gap also makes it crucial to discuss just how an account's

---

[68] For a further discussion of this Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, "The Dialectic of the Absolute: Hegel's Critique of Transcendent Metaphysics."
[69] Brady Bowman, *Hegel's Metaphysics*, 36.
[70] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 751. In the following passage, Hegel comments on why reflecting on presuppositions has a role to play within his theory of objectivity as authority: "To hold fast to the positive in *its* negative, to the content of the presupposition in the result, this is the most impotent factor in rational cognition." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 744.

authority emerges even if not guaranteed. The "truth" of some account, that there are only minds and bodies, may or may not turn out to be so true when after the fact we see that it assumes their union in in organic life all along.

This process, what Hegel calls the "dialectical moment" [*dialektische Moment*], is the explanation for how reason goes on to generate authoritative accounts of what exists, though none are descriptions of the world's ontology. Hegel writes that "the immediate character of the beginning must be a lack *inherent* in the beginning itself, which must be endowed with the impulse to carry itself further."[71] This "inherent lack," what Hegel thinks propels the "movement" of the concept, is his way of saying, first of all, that an account of what exists becomes at least temporarily authoritative, namely objective, if it is able to work through and integrate those distinctions about the world from which it begins. There would be only minds and bodies so long Cartesian dualism can somehow integrate its seemingly non-dualist beginning point within a dualistic ontology. This is, of course, easier said than done. This does not only involve an intellectual exercise, as Hegel clearly points out in the discussion of the "practical idea;" a point Zambrana underscores. [72] It is also a matter of an entire normative order, including theoretical and social commitments, built out these presuppositions. These can only slowly, chaotically, and sometimes partially, be spelled out and put to the test. But the overall point remains: in being able to grapple with how it divides the world, reason earns a path to authority, though one fragile and not permanently guaranteed.

---

[71] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 739.
[72] For instance, the following passage, "[a] concrete form of rationality is based on distinctions that articulate what counts as nature rather than Geist, for instance, within a specific society
in a given moment in time." Rocío Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*, 115.

But when reason fails, or no longer can, grapple its presuppositions, then this "inherent lack" propels reason somewhere else. Because this is, sooner or later, bound to happen, Hegel's metaphysics focuses on the *movement* of the concept not the content as if it were some static thing. In other words, Hegel believes he has put together a definitive story for why the authority of any conception of the world can never be total and for how reason reflectively works to reestablish authority anew. It hence seems to me that accountability gap redirects Hegel away from a view of reason as analytic or synthetic and towards reason as fundamentally *creative*. Metaphysics understands questions about existence not to be about "clear and distinct ideas" or about "substantial forms." They are questions about thought's creative power to grapple with the presupposed way it divides the world. Because it comes to know this retroactively, reason has to be "inventive" and give reasons for why it splits the world the way it does. Though, as Pippin points out,[73] there is no Hegelian "doctrine," I think the closest we get to one is something such as this: since reason carries along an "accountability gap," *creative thinking is at the basis of what we call "objectivity."*

Now, it is true that Hegel seldom brings up creativity, and least of all in the *Logic*. But when he *does* bring this up, it is almost always in relation to reason's reflexivity. The following is a good example:

> The isolated subsistence of the finite that was earlier determined as its being-for-itself, also as thinghood, as substance, is in its truth universality, the form with which the infinite concept clothes its differences – a form which is equally itself one of its differences. Herein consists the creativity of the concept, a creativity which is to be comprehended only in the concept's innermost core."[74]

---

[73] Pippin writes, "Hegelian philosophy has no distinct doctrine of its own; its content is the right understanding of past attempt at account-giving in their limitations and interconnection." Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Realm*, 30.
[74] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 534. In another example of creativity through reflexivity, Hegel writes that "the necessity which is the inner identity of things or circumstances different from each other and reciprocally constricting; rather, as absolute negativity, it is the informing and creative principle, and since the determination is

As we saw, the dualism between substance as ultimate structure of reality and its appearances is for Hegel the key if not insurmountable problem of modern metaphysics. But if we understand this dualism through the view that reason thinks under presuppositions, then the division is rethought as the separation inherent to reflexive thinking. Within the structure of presupposition, the modern idea of "substance" just is reason reaching back from determinacy to the general distinctions that support that view of determinacy. The "creativity" of the concept is its capacity to take on any understanding of determinacy and turn back to its fundamental commitments. In other words, the concept is creative because it does not ask, presuming some eternal criterion, "do we have a clear idea of substance?" It asks, rather, "what are we *committing to* when we say substance?" Or what is the same, "how do we make sense of what we seem to be saying?"

Now, this does not mean that creativity clarifies, once and for all, what we are saying by accessing some explanatory criterion. It speaks to reason's reflexive ability to constantly redefine the boundaries between what is meant and what is said. Part of what gives Hegel's philosophy its distinctive shape is that, though we may not be saying what we thought we were, *we are always saying something*. This, which upon realizing it, "moves" us to investigate what it is. Hegel writes in the *Encyclopedia* "Logic" that "the concept is the infinite form or the free, creative activity, which is not in need of some stuff on hand outside itself, in order to realize itself."[75] For a linear view of reason, error is the failure to properly grasp the world by failing to match some eternal criterion. In Hegle's circular understanding, error is the mismatch between an ontology and its presuppositions so that we are led to reconceive both, to try and recast authority, now with this

---

not as limitation but is just as much simply sublated as determination, is positedness, so is the reflective shine the appearance as appearance of the identical." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 532.

[75] G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia* "Logic," 238.

realization on hand. Indeed, this is what Hegel calls a "determinate negation" [*bestimmte Negation*]: failure leads to reconsideration because by failing we realize we were saying, both, more and less than we thought.[76] A mechanistic metaphysics might realize after trying to unpack its world that it presupposed purposive organic life all along and was less mechanistic than it originally thought. It realizes, that is, not "clear and distinct" ideas but the loss of authority of *this* frame and the glimpse of a new one. The concept is creative in that it always does something with what it has.

I thus believe that Hegel's metaphysics focuses on this general creative aspect. It lays out no doctrine for "being" but, as Angelica Nuzzo puts it, presents this reflexive structure of presupposition as the basis of how we come to think objects at all and think *about* thinking objects. In her words, "[t]he absolute idea is no content but a mere form, purely self-referential expression with nothing to express except its own formality."[77] The world is always conceptualized in this or that way. What metaphysics needs to accept, then, is that reason's authority does not come from peering into an eternal supersensible reality. In accepting an "accountability gap," metaphysics can talk all it wants about "being qua being," or "realm of pure thought"[78] as Hegel himself calls it, without subscribing to the idea that the world has a single ontology. In operating always under presuppositions, reason has no eternal reality except for being the "battleground," as it were, upon which authoritativeness comes into being and passes away.

---

[76] Hegel sums up his idea of "determinate negation in the following remarks: "[t]he one thing needed to achieve scientific progress… is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its particular content; or that such a negation is not just negation, but is the negation of the determined fact which is resolved, and is therefore determinate negation." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 33.
[77] Angelica Nuzzo, "Absolute Idea as Absolute Method," in *Hegel's Theory of the Subject*, edited by David Carlson (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005),`195.
[78] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, 29.

These are the contours of Hegel's metaphysics without ontology. The accountability gap is the argument for why metaphysics *can* authoritatively study existence without ever describing the world's eternal logic. Indeed, Hegel writes towards the end of the *Encyclopedia* "Spirit" that the "The absolute mind, while it is self-centered *identity*, is always also identity returning and ever returned into itself."[79] The source of reason authority is the ability to make up the world as "such and such," spell out its presuppositions, revise it and construct it anew. Perhaps this is what Hegel meant by "imperishable life" after all: reason's capacity to survive contestation, even radical loss of authority, by creatively drawing out new authoritative ontologies out of the loss of prior ones.

V. Conclusion

A "science of logic" was Hegel's response to the conundrum resulting from his and Schelling's Jena philosophy. In rejecting the idea that reason primarily "thinks things," and by reconceiving reason as fundamentally unconditioned, they found it increasingly difficult to explain what objectivity was. If their motto can be summed up as "metaphysics without ontology," it was then imperative to explain why we can still say that things such as bacteria, mathematics, or beauty are real. Hegel understood a "science of logic" to be a discussion restricted to the realm of pure thought and meant to show what objectivity was for a metaphysics without ontology. The goal was to figure out in just what way reason's unconditionality reveals a new understanding of objectivity, one no longer tied to the world's supposedly eternal logic.

Thus, what I called here an "accountability gap" is how Hegel rethought metaphysics so as to come to a new view of objectivity. Since we cannot, in principle, "say it all," metaphysics

---

[79] G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Part III of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, translated by William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 292.

conceptualizes the world always out of some determined position. By discussing objectivity, we thus mean to actually talk about the authority some conception of the world has, and not about eternal Platonic realms or atomic bits of existence. This was to be Hegel's answer. The idea of authority helps us explain why we can go on and say that many objects do indeed exist without having to suppose there is one single ontology. For Hegel, authority can be gained and lost, ontologies come and go, and this without reason's unconditionality ever at play. As central to his mature system, Hegel would interpret every sort of determinacy, from natural ecosystems, to art and political institutions this way: an ontology's authority is indeed real, but so is its fragility and the risk of radical loss.

Now, this is most certainly not the end of the story. Schelling had his own conception of the accountability gap as fundamental to his maturing philosophy. Ironically enough, much as the Hegelian concept, Schelling would come to the fore having reinvented himself, ready to emphasize, more than Hegel ever did, reason's inexhaustive creativity. He would criticize Hegel's single focus on the question of authority for minimizing what he saw was the real gap: that between reason's systematicity and its purely creative unaccountable starting point. Metaphysics without ontology needed to mean more than ontological revisability.

Chapter 3: Schelling on Metaphysics as Storytelling: Inexhaustible Creativity and the Accountability Gap

> "The entire world, so to speak, lies caught in reason. But the question is: how did it come into this net?"
>
> -F. W. J. Schelling, "The Grounding of Positive Philosophy"

I. Introduction

In his middle and late philosophy, Schelling radically dynamized the central ideas of his early idealism. Though less in the eye of the English secondary literature, recent work from Dale Snow, Marcela Garcia, Markus Gabriel, and Edward Beach among others, has shown how innovative these periods were in recasting the critique of reason as the "thinking of things."[1] The interpretations emerging from these years paint the picture of Schelling, from the 1809 "Freedom Essay" onward, opening up an incredibly crucial debate over German idealism's commitment to reason's transparency. An overhaul of his philosophy intended to grapple with the lingering issue of reason's authority, Schelling rethinking questions some of the fundamentals of his and Hegel's early philosophy in a way that spills over into Hegel's answer in the *Logic*. This rift comes forth in Schelling's late writings and shows most clearly the different approaches they both took to the question of how metaphysics without ontology that remains nonetheless authoritative.

Schelling's answer, curiously enough, was to recast this question by accepting the very problem. In his middle and his later philosophy, Schelling laid out versions of the split between unconditioned and conditioned that troubled his early philosophy and accepted it by rebranding it as the accountability gap. Whether it is the divide between ground and existence, or later, the pure positive and the conceptual, Schelling took such discrepancy to be inherent to reason itself. This, a lesson drawn out the early idea that reason remains unspent vis-à-vis ontologies, Schelling comes to see through the lens of reason's inexhaustible creative capacity over against its rational, systematic, and conceptual products. This is the thesis I present in this chapter. Schelling's

---

[1] For recent commentaries on Schelling's post-1809 metaphysics see Lara Ostaric (2014), Adrian Johnston (2018), Marcela Garcia (2018, 2015) Judith Norman and Slavoj Zizek (1997), Jason Wirth (2004), Edward Bach (1994), Dale Snow (1996), and Markus Gabriel (2011).

philosophy is notoriously difficult to pin down, especially in these years of constant transformation. But nonetheless, it seems to me that his overall approach to metaphysics without ontology is to say that reason is at bottom a radically creative enterprise, not analytic or synthetic. In other words, metaphysical thinking is a matter of "storytelling" and not of grasping the world's eternal structure.

In this way, Schelling was less moved than Hegel to answer the question of authority. And the reason for this was that Schelling understood authority to be a way of "eclipsing" reason's creativity. That is, as storyteller, metaphysics does not pretend to generate objective descriptions of existence, and when it does, this must involve a good deal of deception. The question of authority for Schelling, was just another of still holding to the idea that reason has the powers to explain rather than creatively interpret. Without radically overhauling our philosophical language, this sort of ontological thinking leads to the belief that systematicity and analytical reason can ultimately grasp the world's logic. Metaphysics needed to go back to its creative roots, to see itself as storyteller rather than an archeologist unearthing with its conceptual tools the categories of being.

.

II. Creativity at the Basis of Reason

Even though the "Freedom Essay" drastically rethinks Schelling's "philosophy of identity" it also carries over key ideas from this period.[2] One of these, that reason is unconditional because it does

[2] See Manfred Frank's "Identity of Identity and Non-Identity" in *Interpreting Schelling* for an account of how his late "philosophy of identity" already rethinks many of the ideas of "Presentation of My System." Frank argues that Schelling reconceptualizes his system to give finitude a more central role. In particular, Frank points out that Schelling uses the construction "as" (e.g., the absolute as matter) to say that the absolute is always understood in some finite way. This resembles the later idea that the ground of existence, in being understood through the categories of existence, remains "dark" to rational thinking.

not spend itself in its conceptualizations, becomes essential to his middle and late philosophy. Reason, as the capacity to draw distinctions, remains in excess of whatever ontology is put forth to describe existence. In Jena, Schelling believed a metaphysics based on organic nature could help him explain determinacy, as in what makes objects living or inanimate, while still thematizing reason's unspent capacity. If all of nature is like an organism, as Schelling proposed, then the totality of objects would, as an organism does, relate itself back to the whole. In other words, Schelling believed that we could talk about determinate objects such as works of art and dogs all we want and still be able to follow their thread back to the ontological ideas that support them and, ultimately, to reason's capacity to draw distinctions.

But starting in 1809 Schelling no longer believes this is true. He is, from this point onward, generally suspicious about the ability of ontologies, whether they are mechanistic or organistic, in portraying reason's inexhaustibility as that, *as inexhaustibility*. To put it succinctly, Schelling is increasingly convinced that ontologies speak merely the language of ontologies. They treat reason's inexhaustibility as one more object within an ontology, as a thing. Thus with this in mind, the "Freedom Essay" goes on to distinguish between question of determinacy, those asking after existence, and those about the "ground" [*Grund*] of existence.[3] In Schelling's words, "The natural philosophy of our time has first advanced in science the distinction between being in so far as it exists and being in so far as it is merely the ground of existence."[4] To ask after the ground of existence is to ask for more than what distinctions help us understand the "mental" as opposed

---

[3] Dale Snow writes that these distinctions is crucial for the overall goal of the essay: the question of freedom. She notes, for instance, that asking questions about the ground of existence are important to Schelling because his contemporaries continued to opposed freedom to being along the lines of contingency and necessity. Schelling's aim, then, is to reconsider "being" as itself contingent. Dale writes, "Schelling saw that the concept of being itself had to be rethought until it could be understood as compatible with the reality of freedom." Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End of Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 156.

[4] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom,* trans. by Jeff Love and Johannas Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 27.

to the "physical." Questions of ground, for Schelling, are those interested in how we come to have distinctions at all. in other words, it is *to ask the reason for reason itself.* By separating "ground" from "existence," Schelling thus hopes to show what inexhaustibility is about when not confused with an object within the logic of some ontology.

Now, both Gabriel and Wolfram Hogrebe see in this preoccupation with "grounds" not dogmatic metaphysical questions about, for instance, how the world was "created," but instead as calling attention to philosophy's long-held belief that the world is intelligible.[5] Thus the first set of questions, those about determinacy, *assume* intelligibility so as to ask about the conceptual distinctions through which ontologies are put together. But the other set of questions, those about ground, make us wonder how it is that we can talk about meaning at all. They take, as it were, philosophy's most elemental tool, the "why," to its most extreme. To think about the ground of existence, that is, reaches for that most ultimate question of philosophy: "why is there something rather than nothing?" Like Descartes' God or Aristotle's "unmoved mover," these questions do not concern the categories of being, the world's ontology, but rather try to answer why we are not ultimately deceived about the world and why there is motion at all.

Like Descartes and Aristotle, Schelling considers what the ground of existence is by discussing the idea of God. Among the reasons for this, is his wish to find out just what is unique about these deeper questions as opposed to those about existence. As a matter of fact, Schelling goes as far as to openly criticize Spinoza for conceiving reality and probably God as things,

---

[5] For example, Gabriel writes that "[i]nsofar as beings are determinate, all such determinations and therefore all beings must be willed, for otherwise the very dimension of sense would never have become established." Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 135. For Hogrebe, Schelling's interest in the question "why" results from his concern with the logic of predication. Judgments imply a transition from a "predicate-free" subject to a determined, predicated one. The act of judgement thus begins from what is an ungoverned and indeterminate position, which Hogrebe thinks this is what Schelling ultimately means by "will." See Wolfgram Hogrebe, *Prädikation und Gensis: Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings 'Die Weltalter'* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

writing that "the error of his system lies by no means in placing things *in God* but in the fact that they are *things*."[6] In whatever way Schelling ultimately understands God, then, it would not be as some fixed eternal foundation for determinacy. As with the unconditioned in Jena, God in the "Freedom Essay" draws distinctions that render objects intelligible. Schelling tells us that "[s]ince nothing is prior to, or outside of, God, he must have the ground of his existence in himself."[7] As an "unmoved mover," God is the stopping point where questions over determinacy and those deeper ones about why there is a world at all come together. Unlike Jena, though, Schelling turns his attention away from how distinctions drawn within reason generate ontologies and towards what *drawing* means at all.

In saying that God holds existence and ground both within, Schelling does not want to allude to God as a container, though it may seem like that. Throughout the "Freedom Essay," Schelling presents reason's "drawing" in the language of "tension" and "desire." He notes, for example, that God is overcome by "the yearning the eternal One feels to give birth to itself."[8] Something about drawing distinctions is unlike analytically generating "clear and distinct" ideas. These ideas happen *within* an ontology and are turned *towards* the objects of that ontology. As Schelling would say, they *assume* all along and not *explain* the capacity to draw distinctions. In this way, when we try to say anything about reason's inexhaustibility with the tools ontologies offer, we see that our conceptual tools actually frustrate our ability to answer why there are distinctions in the first place. Thus, in writing that "the procession of things from God is the self-revelation of

---

[6] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 20.
[7] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 27. Schelling's succinct statement embodies the tension he is trying to articulate. The "one" that exists before being born will not be the same as the fully developed God. And so the question is, which is closer to the ideal of God? For Hegel it would be the process of being born, and what this teaches us believing too much in any beginning or end points as fixed moments. For Schelling, it has rather to do with the tension that seems to remain between origin and end.
[8] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 28.

God,"[9] Schelling does not mean to say that such "unveiling" is the expression of God's thing-like identity, but that expression *is* God. What Schelling also calls "willing," this all tells us that reason's "drawing" is not a thing but an activity of expression, and thus as fundamentally different than objects, we can only *partially* recover this from within our rule-governed ontologies. As Schelling puts it, God's is "not a conscious but a divining will."[10]

At the core of Schelling's argument is the paradox of grasping reason's "drawing" through the fixed distinctions this drawing itself generates. Similar to how some religions prohibit depicting God's infinity, for Schelling what is drawn from within reason cannot be then turned around and used to describe reason as such. Schelling speaks to this when, wanting to underscore how revelation affects God, he comments that "…things having their ground in that which in God himself he is not *He Himself*."[11] To put things somewhat dramatically, even a God cannot avoid the paradox being known through that which it articulates but is, technically speaking not God itself. As will, God generates the very gap between willing and what is willed as well as the frustration of being known through that which is not God. Schelling puts this as follows: "just as little can it be emanation where what flows out remains the same as that from which it flows."[12] Hence, at the heart of Schelling's paradox is the increasing realization that we have nothing but the limited "thinking of things" to talk about why there is a world in the first place. Since reason's

---

[9] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 18.
[10] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 29. For an account of Schelling view of "will" and its relation to the notion of the "unconscious," see S. J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
[11] F. W. J. Schelling, 20. Another central goal of the "Freedom Essay," connecting the idea of freedom to evil, has its source in the fact that God "wills" but must still relate all reality to itself. Though this is frustrating because objects do not represent God properly, *as* will, for humans, freedom morphs into just pure egoism. Michelle Kosch writes about this in the following: "the will does exercise its power in evil, by organizing itself around that principle within it that makes its existence as an individual will possible." Michelle Kosch, "Idealism and Freedom in Schelling's Freiheitsschrift," in *Interpreting Schelling*, 156.
[12] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 18.

"drawing" is indeterminate, our rule-following concepts intended to grasp determination, cannot but misapprehend reason. As Schelling likes to say, the ground is "dark."[13]

With all this in mind, in what is an incredibly crucial remark, Schelling writes that the following summary of his new views:

> Will is primal Being [*Ursein*] to which alone all predicates of Being apply: groundlessness, eternality, independence from time, self-affirmation. All philosophy strives only to find this highest expression.[14]

Schelling's comments express a strong dissatisfaction with metaphysics, including with the post-Kantian sort. In what amounts to a critique of the metaphysical thinking of the day, Schelling questions expectations that reason essentially "clarifies" as it comes to know the world; that it is primarily analytic. Before metaphysical reflection becomes an operation describing the world's ontology, one that figures out the "predicates of being" as Schelling says, it is for him at its basis a matter of "expression." Though it is difficult to avoid misapprehension, metaphysics is fundamentally about articulating, about "drawing," and secondarily about what is drawn. Whether these are the categories of being or those sensations bundled by the mind, Schelling wants to say that metaphysics needs to continue to remind itself that both are *not* what is most "primordial."[15] In his commentary, Bach spells out the stakes for Schelling in similar vein, writing that "The whole thrust of Schelling's ontological voluntarism is to deny the traditional assumption that will is a derivative quality supervenient upon a more fundamental stratum of being."[16]

---

[13] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 27.
[14] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 21.
[15] Snow captures what Schelling has in mind by saying that something "non-rational," or reason's own inexhaustibility as I call it, haunts reason as ruled-governed: "A still more significant step, though easier to overlook is that the nonrational cannot be equated with the natural or non-human; rather it is at the very core of reality itself." Dale Snow, 163.
[16] Edward Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 115.

Now, I believe we can best make sense of what Schelling is suggesting by interpreting it as saying that reason is a *creative* enterprise. On this, Schelling writes that "understanding and yearning now become a freely creating and all-powerful will and build in the initial anarchy of nature as in its own element or nature."[17] Said differently, the "will" that predicates "being" is first a fundamentally creative operation that *then* "sets up" the rules and conceptual distinctions governing some ontology of the world. We struggle to know this original creativity because we always find ourselves within some ontology, but we know that since reason is inexhaustible by any ontology it must be a freely creative activity. If philosophy truly believes that it "begins in wonder," we should then be comfortable with the idea that reason is first creative and only after is it analytic or even synthetic.

Moreover, in advancing this thesis that reason is essentially creative, Schelling casts serious doubts on Hegel's idea that reason's authority emerges from drawing out presuppositions. Metaphysical systems do rely on conceptual distinctions and rules which may be retroactively understood. But as systems reflect on this and take up their own assumptions their creative basis recedes to the background. One could say, as Schelling does, that when reason reflects on the rules that render it authoritative, it forgets its free and inexhaustible creative nature. This anticipates fairly well twentieth-century continental critiques, from Heidegger to post-war French and feminist philosophy, Lucey Irigaray for instance, that Hegel's philosophy is essentially hyper-rationalist in assuming reason's transparency. For Schelling, this is no small error on Hegel's part. Reason's creative capacities, say, its *potentia*, remains fundamentally at odds with the

[17] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 30.

authority, its *postesta*. When authoritative ontologies hold grip over us[18] as we move along and across their commitments, the creative impulses that articulated them fade away.

For Gabriel, Schelling's argument can be succinctly put in the formula: "The transition from x to F(x) established determinacy and lies outside of determinacy."[19] If, as Hegel argues, reason gains authority by spelling out its presuppositions, then *authoritativeness operates along the lines of a radical misapprehension*. In other words, metaphysics' creative edge, its freedom and playfulness, is lost every time an ontology is put forth as authoritative; that is, as rule-bound. "There must be" Schelling writes, "a being *before* all ground and before all that exists—how can it be anything other than the original ground or the *non-ground* [Ungrund]."[20] When asking "reasons" for reason itself we have by then lost sight that it is creative first if we understand "reasons" and "reason" to mean the same.

It is understandable, though, to be skeptical and think that Hegel *is* in fact aware that reason is creative, something highlighted by his reliance on "negativity," on the essentially revisable and flexible character of reason. But Schelling's point is that this reflection comes at the cost of reason's transparency vis-à-vis its creative nature. In its capacity for world-creation, reason is at danger of grasping itself, indeed *deceiving* itself, as operating entirely within a rationalist universe of rules and internal coherence. Hence as Schopenhauer and later Nietzsche argued, thought's creative "life" powers cannot be supplanted by cognition's aims at rational comprehension. On this, Snow writes that Schelling "casts a deeply ambiguous light on the very desire to construct systems."[21]

---

[18] That is, unlike Hegel, who had a nuanced understanding of reason's normative, social, and historical authority, Schelling focuses instead on the *implications* of reason's authority, which is to say, on the loss of its creative edge.
[19] Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 135.
[20] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations,* 68.
[21] Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End,* 142.

Indeed, the "Freedom Essay" goes to great lengths to underscore that reason grasps its creative powers, what Schelling calls "ground," as a matter of intense desire, profound frustration, and ultimately, melancholy. Reason is authoritative, meaning for him systematic and rule-governed, at the cost of failing to recall that it is creative. Schelling writes of this frustration that it is "the incomprehensible base of all reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground."[22] We could say then that in its most basic formula reason's authority comes for Schelling *always in the form of frustrated desire.* We lose track of reason's creativity, of its inexhaustibility, by narrowing down our field of vision and focusing on the rules through which ontologies give us objects such as atoms or "caloric" heat substances. When access to its creative dimension is eclipsed, to the "…pure craving or desire, that is, blind will"[23] as Schelling calls it, then thinking is completely installed within the rules of some ontology that then help it explain authoritatively what exists.

This last point is how Schelling understands metaphysics around 1809. Much along the lines of Heidegger's idea that the "history of being" [*Sein*] is also a history of its forgetting, for Schelling, too, authoritative ontologies of what exists forget what metaphysical thinking is about. Within the language of some authoritative ontology, reason knows its creative capacities as only an unfulfilled desire, a desire to know this creative angle, its inexhaustibility, but without undoing authoritativeness. As Schelling puts it, there is "veil of dejection…spread over all nature, the deep

---

[22] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 29. In other words, reason inexhaustibility, the fact that it is not a thing but does generate the distinctions needed to understands things as such, is an "indivisible reminder" that can neither be properly understood within the rule-govern concepts of some ontology nor entirely eliminated.
[23] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32.

indestructible melancholy of all life."[24] Inherent to authoritative ruled-governed accounts of the world, including organic life itself, is the frustration, the "sadness" as Schelling also calls it, that authoritativeness comes at the cost of forgetting reason's creative basis.

In such way, starting with the "Freedom Essay," there is for Schelling no way, as it were, to "say it all" since every "saying" is a matter of creative expression. Though argued much differently than Hegel, the core of Schelling's argument is similar: there is no description of the world's eternal ontology, and thus there is *no world as such*, since every ontology is an example of reason's creativity. The belief that we *could* say it all is built on a misapprehension of how reason works, one inherent to its very activity. In its frustrated desire, now *against* Hegel, reason shows that even reflection cannot rid itself of forgetting its reason's creative beginning. In an argument that Schelling will not fully spell out until his late philosophy, it is not enough to say reason is "creative" in its ability to do something with what it has. It needs to also say something about the internal tension and frustration that divides reason against itself. As Snow puts it, for Schelling "the clarity of reason and even the immediacy of intuition have yielded to the recognition of longing and desire as the most basic experience."[25]

In the years that followed, during his "ages of the world" project, Schelling developed this insight in more detail under the question "what is the nature of philosophical beginnings?" As Schelling progressively came to see, for us to take creativity at the basis of reason would mean to come to terms and be comfortable with an unruly core within philosophical systems. Without the

---

[24] F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations*, 63. Schelling's comments on nature's melancholy, though seemingly more metaphysical in the pejorative sense, follow the same line of thinking. As determined objects, meaning biological life, nature cannot bring forth the ground, present to itself why there is a world at all, since this ground is fundamentally antithetic to the concepts and rules of any ontology.
[25] Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End,* 161.

rational foundation early German idealist sought after, the 1810s doubled down on the idea that "forgetting" has an essential role to play in generating what we call objectivity.

III. Unthinkable Decision and the Accountability Gap

The 1810s drafts of *Ages of the World* describe in better detail reason's fundamental paradox.[26] In Schelling's groundbreaking idea, in order to say anything meaningful about existence we are required to forget and eclipse the creative basis of our "saying." It is the task of the *Ages of the World* to double down on this idea, explain why reason is essentially unfulfilled desire, and open a line of argumentation that ultimately recasts metaphysics as a matter of "storytelling." Indeed, Schelling would not abandon this last point but rather intensify it in his late philosophy and is a view which then echoed in twentieth-century critiques of "logocentrism."

It is true that much of this is touched upon in the "Freedom Essay," but not quite to the extent Schelling wants. His ultimate goal is to say is that whatever we end up calling "objective" has to be placed along an unstable balance between endorsing and eclipsing creativity. Schelling does not believe as Hegel does that liberal constitutions or musical tones are "objective" due to the authority their ontology enjoys. As in Jena, he is committed to the idea that an unbridgeable gap separates creative thinking and rule-following rational ontologies. For metaphysics to thus come to think "being qua being," to reach "knowledge of universals" as Aristotle puts it, we need to forget the creativity that sets it off. It is perhaps the most crucial innovation of this essay to entertain the idea that such a blind spot is simultaneously the engine for objectivity and what renders it extremely fragile. Schelling understands this blind spot quite literally as reason's

---

[26] There are three surviving drafts of the "ages of the world" project, 1811, 1813, and 1815. I follow the 1815 SUNY Press translation. There is an 1813 translation by Judith Norman with a lengthy essay from Slavoj Zizek in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997).

ultimate past, its origin, and goes on to discuss just how "having time" endangers and ultimately pluralizes objectivity.

In broad strokes, Schelling comes to the question of time by wanting to know how philosophical systems start off or get their "bearings." He believes that in grappling with philosophical beginnings he can get us to think more about reason's creative basis. In metaphysics as traditionally understood, for Plato's forms or Spinoza's axioms, starting off is a question of how *our* thinking *about* forms and axioms "gets going," but it is not something that belongs to forms and axioms themselves. On the contrary, forms and axioms help *explain* time and history by not coming into being or passing away. Thus, to wonder about beginnings in metaphysics is a way for Schelling to ask what should not really be asked: where do those eternal ideas come from and why are we prone to search for timeless criteria? For Schelling to even pose this question, in seeing history *in* eternity, he shows that his focus on "time" has more to do with Nietzsche's genealogy than it does with Plato's *Timaeus*.[27] His is not an account for how eternal supersensible forms explain the universe's *logos* but rather a call to study the "unwritten history" of wanting supersensible dimensions. Philosophy needs to be attentive to what decisions inform the ways it conceptualizes the world, and all the more for systems that see reason as merely laying out the world's ontology.

In Schelling's mind, then, the history of metaphysics, the various dualisms, monisms, and pluralisms, gain their footing out of creative decisions to come to terms with the world in this or another way. It is ultimately a creative free act for monism to say that "all is one," and creative for dualism to split the world into sensible and supersensible. Metaphysics tends, as Schelling puts

---

[27] In other words, Schelling is not interested in any sort of metaphysical, in the pejorative sense of the term, narrative about how the world came into being. He is interested, instead, is saying something about philosophy's pervasive assumption that it "discovers" eternal truths ingrained in a rational world rather than help construe them.

it, to want to grasp the world either as multiplicity, what he calls "expansion," or as a monism, what Schelling names "contraction." In his language, "two principles are already in what is necessary of God: the outpouring, out-stretching, self-giving being, and an equivalent force of selfhood, of retreating into itself, of being in itself."[28] As in Jena, by reason drawing distinctions we are able to conceptualize the world as either unified or multiple. That is, both union and multiplicity are *conceptions* and not statements of fact.[29] But unlike Jena, Schelling now wants to say that drawing distinctions generates a problem for reason the multiple systems in the history of metaphysics are evidence for: though we conceptualize, we do not seem able to conceive everything in one broad stroke. In other words, *the world seems always able to be thought otherwise,* and we cannot seem to stop that.

Thus, similar to the "Freedom Essay," Schelling tell us that metaphysics' open-endedness is representative of the gap between beginning creatively and wanting to say reason grasps the world's logic. Thus, what in Jena troubled Schelling so much, the separation between unconditioned reason and conditioned ontologies, it is now rethought as essential to reason itself. Metaphysics wants to be a science that maps the world's ontology. It seeks to say definitively what existence is about, or in Schelling's words, to "have being" [*das Sayende zu sein*].[30] But in wanting to "say it all," in believing the world is a thing with definable boundaries, metaphysics leaves out its very own "saying." The outmost of tensions ensues, a virtually impasse Schelling

---

[28] F. W. J Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, trans. by Jason Wirth (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 6.
[29] Schelling's talks about the conceptualization in the *Ages of the World* is by marking it as an "x," It is a sign for inexhaustibility, neither A nor B, for instance. Here is an example of that: "one and the same = x is as much the unity as it is the unity as it is the antithesis…both make up the one inseparable primordial being." F. W. J Schelling, *The Ages*, 10.
[30] The text gives a combination of expressions with "*Sein*." As Jason Wirth explains, "*das Seiende*" is use to talk about what exists. "*Sein*," on the other hand, refers to the possibility of being in a more general sense, as in what *was* or could *potentially* exist. For an explanation of this, see Jason Wirth, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Ages*, xxxi.

describes as a "rotatory motion" of unrealized desire.[31] Or, put otherwise, we keep digging ourselves into a hole whenever we try to "say it all."[32] The more we try to think the world as a thing, the more our activity of conceptualization becomes a blind spot.[33] And with that, the more also metaphysical open-endedness cannot seem but a puzzle we cannot seem to solve.

What is thus ultimately troubling for monism, dualism, and pluralism is not quite the fact that they do not integrate each other. It is rather what falling short *illustrates*: that they are and remain *conceptions,* not descriptions of the world's eternal ontology. By actually succeeding to give a complete picture of the world, whatever that would mean, an ontology would enjoy the position of simply expressing the world's logic. But ineffective at quelling "thinking otherwise," reason is overcome, as Schelling dramatically puts it, by "a constantly unremitting urge to be and since it cannot be, it comes to a standstill in desire, as an unremitting striving, an eternally insatiable obsession with Being."[34] We know the name of that mode of reason that is "obsessed with being:" the "thinking of things." So long as we hold on to the idea that the world is a "totality of things," weather as bits of existence or one large God-thing, both of which are known though definitions, we are bound to collide right into the fact that the world can always be

---

[31] In the following remark, written within the context of the so-call "rotatory movement," Schelling pictures a separation between the general freedom of conceiving and the decision to enter the world. To my eyes, this is a good example of the accountability gap in Schelling. At no time, whenever conceiving of the world in one way or another way, do we lose the capacity to conceive otherwise. The saying, regardless of the objectivity of the said, renders metaphysics open-ended. Schelling's words are these: "there must be something between free eternity and the deed of actualization that separates the deed from eternity so that eternity remains free and inviolable." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 79.

[32] For more on the idea of "rotatory motion" see Edward Beach, *The Potencies of God(s)* and Slavoj Zizek, *The Abyss of Freedom*.

[33] Zizek suggests we understand this in terms of an "unconscious decision." From within ontology, as the study of existence, the creative root that gets thinking going is and must remain unconscious. By being indeterminate, it stands for everything ontology is against. In his words, "Unconscious is not primarily the rotatory motion of drive ejected into the eternal past; 'unconscious' is rather the very act of *Ent-Scheidung* by means of which drives were ejected into the past." Zizek, *The Abyss of Freedom*, 31.

[34] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 21.

conceived otherwise. What eludes us, what cannot be counted as a thing, is the very capacity to conceive.

If Schelling is right, then we cannot write the story of the world without plenty of creative writing and this creativity seems at odds with idea that the world has one single rule-governed ontology. To write such history we thus need to abandon dreams that the world has one single account. In what is a slight recasting of the 1809 idea of "will," Schelling argues that to come to terms with creativity requires understanding that we "enter the world" as monism or pluralism based on "decisions" [*Entscheidungen*] not rationally deduced. By abandoning this assumption of the "thinking of things," we can better understand why at some depth we run out of definitions to answer, "why there is something and not nothing." Every ontology emerges from reason's "drawing," and this drawing is radically creative and free, with no ground or rule to follow. As Schelling summarizes, "[b]ut precisely *that* one commences and one of them is the first, must result from a decision that certainly has not been made consciously or through deliberation."[35] Whether we are talking about monism or dualism the point is that creativity and not analytic work underwrites metaphysics.

Now, it is Schelling's signature idea to say that what happens when we renounce the "thinking of things" is that metaphysics becomes a matter of creative storytelling. The German *Entscheidung* has the root of the verb "to cut," "*schneiden,*" and it captures nicely Schelling's idea that the term "decision" represents accepting the arbitrariness of ways we enter the world. Any beginning is an "abysmal freedom,"[36] Schelling says, a creative act to conceive of the world as dualistic or monistic. He notes that "[n]othing lower, even a being receptive to the highest, can

---

[35] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 13.
[36] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 78.

partake in the highest without a cision in itself…"[37] Everything displays the "cut" or the decision to arbitrary starting off in this and not that way. It is thus a great misapprehension to believe that creativity might be retroactively integrated within ontological thinking. Such idea would amount to thinking that our "saying" is really just one more element *within* what is said. Those creative decisions out of which metaphysics begins, the ways it gets its bearings, render it free, even playful, and all of this well before it turns itself into the field of serious rational pursuit.

In his introduction, Jason Wirth calls the "ages of the world" project "a philosophical poem about the rotatory movement of natality and fatality, pain and joy, comedy and tragedy, within God, that is, within the whole of Being, itself."[38] Given the arbitrariness of philosophical beginnings, ontological thinking such as the latest on neuroscience, by being creative inventiveness, is at its roots identical to storytelling. Metaphysics generates narratives about the beginning of the universe. It also develops myths about particles, strings, and viruses, all of which guides us to navigate the story of a scientific physicalist world. As creative inventions within a narrative, these are not definitive answers for what exists, let alone what *should* exist. In a comment in his *Philosophy of Revelation*, Schelling criticizes the idea of the world's eternal logic as

> [O]nly a poetic invention. It was a poem that reason itself poeticized. For reason is bound to nothing, even to the truth. Reason excludes nothing, assert nothing, and perceives everything.[39]

Ultimately, reason draws distinctions not to generate "clear and distinct" ideas but because it is a *storyteller.* Our scientific ontologies are nuanced, but none can erase the fact that they begin

---

[37] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 28.
[38] Jason Wirth, "Translator's Introduction," x. To me, the point of Wirth's comment is that reason, as understood by Schelling, does not seek to retrieve some eternal "ideal" structure out of the world's chaos but shed light on the chaotic nature of the world as such. In other words, to write stories whose aim is not to draw distinctions between what is real and rational and what is appearance and chaos but to the disorder of life as well.
[39] Jason Wirth, "Translator's Introduction," xv. Said differently, reason is inexhaustible and exceeds any and every ontology.

arbitrarily as stories do. We know this, Schelling believes, because no level of sophistication erases metaphysical open-endedness rooted in our ability to conceive otherwise.

Nonetheless, as Schelling knows, accepting this is easier said than done. We do easily give up the "thinking of things" because in doing so we throw away as well reason's objectivity. Because we want to say meaningful things about the world, we want to talk about bacteria, planets, and beauty, the "obsession with being" Schelling speaks about is not really ever erased. We know from the "Freedom Essay" that the answer to this conundrum involves reason forgetting its creative roots. Building on this, the *Ages of the World* completes the picture. It tells us that by forgetting, reason can distance itself from the creative act out of which metaphysical systems gets its bearings. Metaphysics rebrands itself as the objective serious study of "being qua being," though it begins very much with wonder. As Schelling notes, "[t]he decision that would make any kind of act into a true beginning may not be brought before consciousness."[40] In what is the start of Schelling's reply to Hegel, *reason's "objectivity" depends on intentional forgetting*.[41] As we debate in philosophy what "being qua being" might mean, at some depth we are aware that we cannot avoid bringing countless fundamental assumptions, such as that the world is rational, along with any account we put forth. And yet we theorize as if those accounts issue complete and objective pictures of what the world and existence are about.

Elsewhere, in the "Erlanger Lectures," Schelling awkwardly says that the original forgetting at the basis of objectivity is thought's "unprethinkable" [*Unvordenklichkeit*].[42] From *within* an ontology, due to the distance we afford ourselves, the creative act that sets up thinking as rule-

---

[40] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, 85.
[41] This is a key point on which Schelling and Hegel do not agree. In Hegel's retroactive view of reason, no ontology would is authoritative if it cannot "do something," integrate to some extent, what was forgotten. The next section will touch on this disagreement, but Schelling is unmoved by this line of argumentation and, as a matter of fact, so is Marx.
[42] in F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke,* 1. Abt., IX, Stuttgart/Augsburg 1856-61.

governed cannot be thought via those rules. We cannot think, if by "thinking" we understand the discourse of some ontology, that which helps us generate rule-governed thought in the first place. Thus, in opposition to Hegel, Schelling does not think that by reflectively drawing out reason's presuppositions we come to know just what reason does. In fact, *precisely* this emphasis on reflection is how we distance ourselves from reason's creative roots. "There would be no real history of the world," Schelling writes, "without a free beginning."[43] Such free beginning, when thematized retroactively as a matter of presuppositions, is rewritten as one more component within the discourse of an ontology. It is for Schelling one of the key mistakes of metaphysics to believe that nothing is left out when thought turns around and plugs its creative origin into some ontology's categories. It turns creativity into an object among others and sustains that distance between rational thought and its creative beginnings.

Now, it is for Schelling this gap or distance that "time" elucidates. Time breaks into past, present, and future out of the separation between ontologies and their creative basis. Schelling writes that "the past is known, the present discerned, the future is intimated."[44] The present explains what it means to be embedded within the distinctions of an ontology, rules which we have to "discern" because we effectively *live* them.[45] The past, on the other hand, is the forgotten free creative decision which, as Schelling says, we have to relearn. Schelling highlights that "The conscious was grasped as the eternally present but the unconscious was grasped with the

---

[43] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 79.
[44] Jason Wirth, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Ages*, xxxv.
[45] There are few interpretations in the secondary literature as to why Schelling abandoned the "ages of the world" project. Most of them emphasize that beginning-creatively makes it difficult for Schelling to then divide time into neat separations between past, present, and future. Even if the present is, in my language, the ontology we currently inhabit, we cannot really separate it from the creative act that gets metaphysics going as we separate "past" from "present." Creativity is not just past, gone, as it were, as the ability to think otherwise it is still an active player in the present. Snow notes that "God's freedom also explains his inability to finish *The Ages of the World*: difficult as it is to know the past, at least what is past can in principle be grasped. The second two sections Schelling had planned, "The Present," and "The Future," are realized through God's freedom, which is, on the terms of Schelling's understanding of freedom, unfathomable." Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End*, 197.

ascertainment of what is eternally past."[46] Just as with nature's "sadness," what time illustrates is the ways in which thinking's creative beginning is at odds with objectivity and has to be placed as a permanently *distant* and unrecognizable past. The gap between ontologies and their creative basis, so long as we uphold their objectivity, is an unavoidable gap between "now' and "then." Thus, the past, as Schelling likes to repeat, is *eternal*: "a past that did not first become past, but which was the past from the primordial beginning and since all eternity."[47]

We may agree with Hegel and say that metaphysical accounts gain or lose authority by reflecting on their presuppositions. But Schelling would underline that such process is nowhere near transparent. On the contrary, when doing metaphysics, we distance ourselves from our own creativity in order to protect a theory of objectivity such as Hegel's. Metaphysics' objectivity is thus extremely fragile since it is built upon a careful balance between wondering as the basis of metaphysical activity and the subsequent intentional forgetting. Snow captures what this view ultimately means for Schelling's philosophy: "[f]rom this point forward Schelling will be concerned with the attempt of the human to reach the divine, or the return of reality to its point of origin, the Absolute."[48] Better said than perhaps at any other point in his Jena philosophy, Schelling sees that what separates "human reality" from the "absolute," or ontology from reason's unconditionality, is the structurally-integral gap without which "human reality" would lose any sense of objectivity. In Schelling's language, "that which negates all revelation must be made the ground of revelation."[49]

---

[46] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages,* 44. As Snow comments, temporality results from the gap between conceptions and conceptualization as such. Ultimately, she writes, "[t]his is what it means to say that reality is historical." Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End*, 190.
[47] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 39. Schelling talks about this elsewhere in the following way: "the primordial state of contradiction, that wild fire, that life of obsession and craving, is posited as the past." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages*, 38.
[48] Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End*, 190.
[49] F. W. J. Schelling, *The* Ages, 30.

As with Hegel, I believe we can describe Schelling's post-1809 views on metaphysics, at least those of his middle period, as thematizing his version of the accountability gap. The basic separation for Schelling lies between metaphysics' objective accounts of the world and existence and its purely creative origins. We know that for Hegel this gap emerges from reason as thinking under presuppositions. But for Schelling the gap arises most palpably when we try to integrate reason's radically free creative basis within what are otherwise ruled-governed objective accounts of existence. Hegel is not necessarily wrong to say that thought operates under presuppositions. But the lesson we should draw from this for Schelling is that reason is always at odds with itself: its philosophical beginnings, as the free creative decisions to enter the world one way or another, escape any and every objective account of what the world is like. In other words, we cannot "say it all," or really "say anything," without our account excluding the very "saying." The more metaphysics believes its concepts can think things as they eternally are, the more unable it is to grapple with how the unavoidable possibility of thinking otherwise weakens metaphysics embolden sense of objectivity.

Although we may end up, as Hegel thinks, seeing creative philosophical beginnings retroactively as monistic or pluralistic philosophical commitments, as "starting points" they are radically ungrounded. This is for Schelling metaphysic's "unmoved mover:" the elemental creative act to conceptualize the world in this or that way. It is a presupposition that essentially *cannot* be understood within the parameters of the very ontologies it sets up without undoing the objectivity of those ontologies. When we reach down to the depths of fundamental questions, such as "why is there something and not nothing," there are no reasons one could summon to tell us why this ontology is better than that one. There are no conceptual "reasons," that is, for reason itself. Because every account is a creative conception, the more objective and totalizing we

make them, the more blind we are to the gap separating them from their own creativity. In short, *the accountability gap is metaphysics' irrevocable ability to conceive otherwise*.

If things really are this way, though, with metaphysics as storytelling, what does metaphysics actually do for us at the end of the day? In other words, what do our multiple creative stories do other than eclipse our creativity? The tales we tell each other, even though they obscure their beginning points, still help render sensible whatever situation we find ourselves in. And what is more, given that metaphysics can always conceive otherwise, we can render our situations sensible out of infinite number of vantage points. To put it succinctly, *storytelling is Schelling's mature articulation of metaphysics without ontology*. It does not give us anything resembling an eternal rational ontology. The accountability gap argues why metaphysics, properly understood as creative, means the world can be conceived out of a plurality of ways. Reason is inexhaustible, as Schelling says already in Jena, since we cannot integrate our "saying" as some fixed object within the said. Whatever account we are talking about, whether modern day physics, sixth-century medicine, or phenomenology, they represent different forms of stepping into the world. Metaphysics without ontology entails that we can always the story *another way*, or we can tell *other* stories, *more* stories.

For Marcela Garcia, this awareness is carried over in the late philosophy, which tells us that "negative philosophy realizes that it is situated, posited, within a historical, practical framework…to give an account of this larger framework purely rational thought is not enough and we must find a new way of interpreting reality."[50] To be aware that that our "situatedness"

---

[50] Marcela Garcia, "How to Think Actuality? Schelling, Aristotle and the Problem of the Pure Daß," in *Kabiri: The Official Journal of the North American Schelling Society*, vol. 1 (2018), 45. Indeed, Schelling describes in a handful of passages that negative thinking generates an understanding of its limits and take us directly into the positive philosophy. It should lead us away from a purely rationalist framework to a broader way of seeing things, which hopefully, is able to integrate reason's creativity as storyteller. Schelling summarizes in the Berlin "positive

does *not* result from an enteral rational order but from how we tell stories, this is one of Schelling's most important philosophical contributions. The ideas that we are "political animals," sinful beings with flesh, or nature's "crown jewel," are "situated stories" we tell each other as historical tales of who we are. Even more crucial, and perhaps what is unique to Schelling, they are situated stories in the sense that the embolden, almost arrogant, sense of objectivity they normally entail hides an ungrounded and arbitrary starting point, which if singled out may unravel them all.

Indeed, as the "ability to think otherwise," Schelling's accountability gap advances a radical form of philosophical pluralism. When our rational thought feels the restrain of its rule-governed capacities, when our ontologies can no longer answer the philosophical "why," there is no reason why it would not reach out to a religious, artistic, or allegorical language. Since metaphysics is about stories and so are other intellectual traditions that try to picture in their own ways this fundamental "why" of beginning with wonder. All are for Schelling good examples creative storytelling. Given that metaphysics has no single ontology, because we do not try to approximate some eternal order, artistic, religious, and other forms of storytelling are just as worthwhile. For example, as Gabriel puts it, Schelling's accountability gap supports an "ontological pluralism."[51] Though there may be issues of internal coherence within ontologies, reason's creative basis ensures we can enter the world from many points.

Such is Schelling's version of the accountability gap. In his late writings he would carry this insight of creativity and inexhaustibility even further and drive a more obvious separation between reason and its ground. Overall, though, the lesson remains the similar. Without buying

---

philosophy" that "[i]n its culmination, the negative philosophy contains the demand for the positive." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 153.

[51] See Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, chapter 3, section 2.

Hegel's idea of objectivity as "authority," Schelling sketches an unique avenue to the accountability gap: every ontology beings with a purely creative act to enter the world in this or another way and no amount of analytic work may do away with the ability to conceive otherwise. Metaphysics without ontology is about the many even infinite ways we tell stories, and this should be celebrated as reason's strength and not its weakness. But this *does* mean that Schelling and Hegel seem to come to a similar conclusion in very different ways. In looking at Schelling's Berlin "positive philosophy," I sketch what their difference really come down to and why they miss each other in what are crucial philosophical intersections.

IV. Two Kinds of "Metaphysics Without Ontology"

It would seem that with metaphysics as storytelling Schelling found a way to escape the worse of the "thinking of things" and get to what really happens when we do metaphysics. However, there is a sticky point to all of this, one Schelling realized and turned his attention towards in his late philosophy. If objectivity demands we forget reason's creative roots, what prevents myths and stories from erasing thinking's creative freedom? Schelling is increasingly bothered by this and unmoved by Hegel's thesis that reason is reflective enough to spell out its presuppositions and know itself as creative. The philosophical innovations he sketches out during this period thus shed light on his unique approach to metaphysics without ontology. And furthermore, they demonstrate the extent to which Schelling and Hegel had different concerns in mind and ultimately missed each other.

The Berlin "positive philosophy" draws a pronounced wedge between ontologies and their creative roots mainly in order to tackle the prospect of hyper-rationalism. Schelling argues that metaphysics as traditionally understood, as rational inquiry, seeks to answer the question "what" by turning towards the rules through which determinacy comes about. As in the

"Freedom Essay," when philosophy talks about the idea of freedom, or when I discuss the recipe for a dish, what we do is appeal to concepts and distinctions drawn within an ontology. But we can also talk about the fact that anything as "existence" is the case or ask "why" there is intelligibility such that philosophy can ponder about which objects are real. In Schelling's words, "it is two entirely different things to know what a being is, *quid sit*, and that it is, *quod sit*."[52] Philosophy may thus address *what* things are, what renders them determinate objects, and *that* things are, which is to say, wonder "why there is something and not nothing."

But unlike the "Freedom Essay," Schelling does not see in this the unavoidable splintering of reason as it goes about theorizing the world. Philosophy may begin with wonder, but at the end of the day to wonder and to do metaphysics proper are not the same. The former puts the question "why" front and center while the latter *entertains* this question in so far as it gets us going in the direction of drawing general conclusions about what the world is like and what objects exist. Hence, when Aristotle starts his metaphysics with wondering, or when Descartes begins with radical doubt, these are only steppingstones towards saying that *what* exists does so as "substance." Schelling calls this the pervasiveness of philosophy for "the *academy*" over a "philosophy for *life*."[53] If "wondering" drops off from the metaphysical picture that is not because saying statements about the world generates a paradox. It is because we actually have two independent though related domains of philosophical inquiry: one centered on feeling "awe" towards the world, the other on rational inquiry.

---

[52] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 128-129. Bowie reminds us that the distinction between negative and positive philosophy has roots that reach back to Schelling's 1804 *Philosophy and Religion*, in which "a philosophy that reveals the structures of the finite world can only reveal the relative non-being of every determined thing, and thus cannot explain why there should be such non-being at all, rather than the positive absolute." Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern,* 129.

[53] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 198.

It is with this in mind that Schelling describes metaphysics as "negative" and critical science. Its basic task is to weed out incorrect ways of conceptualizing the world. He understands negative philosophy as tasked with figuring out what conceptions of determinacy do not hold up to criticism. As with Hegel's immanent method, negative philosophy reflectively tests positions about determinacy hoping to reach a "theory of all theories." In the Berlin lectures, Schelling refers to this goal as the "*prius,*" the driving force, of metaphysics to reach an ultimate theory of determinacy. Said otherwise, metaphysics desires to grasp the world as such. Indeed, countering his earlier philosophy, Schelling says that metaphysics wants a definitive account of existence or "being." In what is quite a reversal, Schelling practically says that metaphysics *is* after all the "thinking of things," and mainly, the thinking of largest of all things: the world. He comments, for instance, that for negative philosophy, "the concept of being must, therefore, be produced."[54] As the "*infinite capacity to be* [*das unendliche Seynkönnen*]," the concept of "being" is metaphysics' demand for the word's logic.

Though Schelling seems to undertake a shocking reversal, if negative philosophy is properly understood, such demand is just that, a *demand* for the world's logic.[55] It is the desire for knowing the world as such, its single ontology, a desire that then compels metaphysics to review its categories and try to settle for the best expression of what existence could potentially be. As Schelling puts it, within negative thinking, "it is…only a logical world in which we move."[56] Metaphysical thinking does assume that the world has an ontology. But because it begins from the question "what" and leaves behind the wondering of the question "why," it is a limited

---

[54] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 143.
[55] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 153.
[56] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 134.

enterprise to begin with.[57] Schelling combines Aristotle's metaphysics with Kant's "critical philosophy" to say that *metaphysics is ontological thinking* and *not* really thinking that considers conceptualization as such. If negative philosophy is true and honest with itself, meaning if it submits itself to critique in the Kantian sense of "limits," then we see that its domain treats only rational inquiry about what could *potentially* exist and not what *really* exists.

It is thus in the nature of metaphysics to want one single ontology of the world. In light of that, earlier German idealism was wrong to think that in rejecting the "the thinking of things" philosophy needed to redefine entirely what metaphysics meant. What before seemed to jeopardize reason's creative roots, namely the idea of objectivity, Schelling now avoids by quarantining metaphysics within the domain of rational inquiry. Since negative philosophy only answers the "what" and not the "why," Schelling notes that "through the nature of its very content, thought is drawn out of itself."[58] We thus need *another* kind of philosophy to *supplement* not replace rational inquiry, one no longer metaphysics and suited to discuss why there is a world in the first place.[59] As Schelling puts it, "that this being itself *exists above* that being: this can no longer be a task of that negative science, but of a different one, which in contrast is to be called a positive science, and for which that negative science first sought the proper and highest object."[60] Philosophy under its "positive" guise would start off from the culmination of negative thinking and seek to say something about why there is a world at all.

---

[57] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 203. Schelling writes about God as an "inversion" of the way we normally think about existence, namely where potentiality comes before actuality. As he puts it, "We could, therefore, also call it an inverted capacity to be, namely, that capacity to be in which the potency is the *posterius* and the actus is the *prius*." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 199.

[58] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 160.

[59] Schelling is clear on this point. In a handful of passages, he remarks that negative thinking properly understood—not abused as with Hegel—generates an understanding of its own limits that take us directly to positive philosophy. In his words, "In its culmination, the negative philosophy contains the demand for the positive." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 153.

[60] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 145.

Now, since we are no longer within metaphysics, this positive philosophical domain does not treat determinacy as rational inquiry. In fact, Schelling says that positive philosophy is empiricism, though not the modern kind. For Hume and Locke, the mind still *knows* existence when it is struck by representations, even if not in rationalism's systematic way. Schelling's interest in empiricism, more than anything else, lies in the idea that experience serves as a vehicle for coming to terms with the world's radical "contingency."[61] On this, Schelling comments that "the question of the *whatness* of a thing, this question directs itself to *reason*, whereas—*that* something is…can only be thought by experience."[62] Empiricism, unlike rationalism, is aware that thinking comes too late, once the world as such is the case, and does not brush this fact under the rug of rational systems.[63] As Schelling would go on to say, it is about *revealed* and not conceptual knowledge. Metaphysics delivers us to the doorstep of the positive, but revelation is a way to talk about why there is a world without erasing its contingent character.[64] It would thus be wrong to see revelation as pertaining the a priori study of God. Revelation tries to build *another* kind of thinking, one comfortable with the world's ultimate contingency.

---

[61] Schelling expands in the following his brand of empiricism. His empiricism is not a matter of knowledge through sense data but of "proof" that existence cannot be derived through necessary laws of thinking: "[t]o express this distinction in the sharpest and most concise manner: the negative philosophy is *a priori* empiricism, it is the *Apriori* [*Apriorismus*] of what is empirical, but, for this very reason, it is not itself empirical. Conversely, the positive philosophy is an empirical *Apriori*, or it is the empiricism of what is a priori insofar as it it proves that the *prius per posterius* exists as God." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 181.

[62] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 129.

[63] Though thinking "comes too late," Schelling stress that existence and thinking are not two different substances as in, for instance, Cartesian dualism. Existence is not some transcendent reality thinking cannot reach but rather the fact that what we theorize is never secured as the world's logic just because it follows conceptual rules. Schelling writes, "[i]t is true that what is real does not stand in opposition to out thinking as something foreign, inaccessible, and unreachable, but that the concept and the being are one: that the being does not have the concept outside of itself, but rather has it within itself." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 130.

[64] In Schelling's words, "the philosophy that comprehends the actual God…the positive philosophy, and so the philosophy of revelation will be a consequence of, or even a component of it..." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 188.

In this way, the answer to "why there is something and not nothing" turns out to be quite simple: the question itself is the answer. Such open-ended question gets at what Schelling believes is central to positive philosophy. It takes up what negative philosophy says about determinacy and recasts it against the awareness that we do not know and could never come to know why existence is the case. As Schelling summarizes, "*that* it exists is something purely contingent."[65] To escape the "thinking of things" philosophy must propose an entirely novel philosophical language whose aim is to get us to see that rules for determinacy only go so far.[66] "I want," Schelling writes, "that which is above being [*über dem Sein*], that which is not merely being [*das bloße Sayende*], but rather what is more than this, the Lord of Being [*Herr des Seyns*]." For us to leave behind the narrow focus on "being qua being" we need a philosophical language that does not reify wondering about the world into ontological thinking. Such another kind of philosophy, then, would move those unanswerable "why" questions to the center stage so as to illustrate that ontological thinking has clear limits, as Schelling says, "before which reason bows down."[67]

Now, where does all of this leave Hegel's philosophy? The short answer for Schelling is that Hegel's focus on reason as fundamentally retroactive eliminates contingency from the metaphysical picture. Schelling summarizes this in the following way: "[t]he philosophy that Hegel presented is the negative philosophy driven beyond its limits."[68] Since Hegel situates the

---

[65] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 130.
[66] Bowie sees this in terms of the contingent "status" of determinacy, which can never account for why there is something and not nothing. As he illustrates in the following example, "The positivity of the positive philosophy lies in the demand for an explanation, even in the case of geometry, or logic, of the fact that there can be self-contained a priori system of necessity. Such systems cannot, and this is the fundamental point, explain their own possibility." Andrew Bowie, *Schelling and Modern*, 155.
[67] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 161. Bruce Matthews, in his introduction, writes that "the spirit of modern philosophy clearly tended to formal, critical, and thus *negative* results, and it was precisely the force and vitality of the *positive* that Schelling believed had been sacrificed by his erstwhile collaborators Fichte and Hegel." Bruce Matthews, "Introduction," in *The Grounding*, 7.
[68] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 145. Hegel's philosophy is negative philosophy that has forgotten that the concept of being does not say *that* it exists but only what it would be like *if* it existed.

accountability gap within thinking under presuppositions, any question about existence is a question about the *authority* of ontological thinking. We are led right away to consider how well an account can handle drawing out its most fundamental presuppositions. But questions about how ontologies get their bearing in the first place, about why ontological thinking has no answer for "why there is something and not nothing," these questions are completely left out. Being so committed to thinking under presuppositions, Schelling would say, leads Hegel to narrow his vision field until he cannot see anything but ontological commitments and their fundamental conceptual assumptions. And, as Schelling also likes to say, "reason, in as much as it merely takes itself as its source and principle, is capable of no *actual* knowledge."[69]

In this way, the whole *Science of Logic* is "negative philosophy" in that it emphasizes how determinacy comes about. But, as Schelling sees it, Hegel's philosophy does not stop there but goes much further by translating questions of "why" into those of "what." Instead of thematizing how ontological accounts get their bearings through free acts of conception, Hegel "hypostatized the concept with the intent of providing the logical movement…with the significance of an objective movement…"[70] Without seeing the arbitrary beginning acts that set up ontologies, Hegel's focus turns rather to how these same ontologies rediscover and integrate such acts as their own presuppositions. That is, not that dualism begins with a free creative act to split the world but, rather, whether dualism is really "dualistic" at the end of the day once we draw out its presuppositions. Thus, although Hegel's metaphysics has no single ontology, he does not see the

---

[69] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*, 196. Snow captures neatly how this point is important for Schelling's turn to mythology. She writes, "the philosophy of mythology returns the emphasis on the individual, the particular, and the symbolic so characteristic of aesthetic reason in the hope that the more flexible framework of myth will be able to catch and retain the richness of reality. That this was only particularly successful may be seen from the philosophical point of view not just in Schelling's increasing use of references to *Angst* and *Angest des Leben*s but in his inability to put the philosophy of mythology into a final form." Dale Snow, *Schelling and the End*, 214.
[70] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding,* 151.

larger conclusion that unanswerable questions of "why" are eclipsed by responses to questions of "what." Metaphysics is not really for Hegel about the decision to enter the world in this or that way, but instead about the philosophical puzzle of grappling with unavoidable presuppositions.

In his 1830s "Munich Lectures" Schelling puts his finger on precisely this error by highlighting how Hegel's *Logic* begins. He notes, for example, that "[i]n order to give the concept movement, Hegel therefore has to go back to some beginning where it is not yet what it should become."[71] In what Schelling understands as Hegel's narrow vision field, the starting-point of the *Logic*, the question of existence, is already thematized in terms of some ontology (i.e. atomic existence) and its as-of-yet unthematized presuppositions. From this starting point, it follows that the next step would be to ask about these presuppositions, to thematize them, and thus to render the beginning that was "not yet," as Schelling puts it, into "what it should be." Hegel's idea that we always think within some ontology Schelling sees as "stacking the deck" in favor of studying questions of "what" over those of "why." In an almost pre-Kantian passage, Schelling notes,

> The reason why he [Hegel] ascribes to pure being an immanent movement lies in that the thinking with which pure being beings feels the impossibility of stopping at this uttermost abstractness… only in the thinking mind does this necessity lay and it is forced upon it by its experience.[72]

It is because Hegel's philosophy turns on arguing that reason always thinks from within and draws lessons out of ontologies that he does not see what is ultimately most crucial about existence: *that it is and we do not know why.* Put otherwise, Hegel loses track of reason's creative and contingent beginning by emphasizing how shapes of reason gain, lose, and regain authority.[73]

---

[71] F. W. J. Schelling, F. W. J. Schelling, "Grundlegungen der Positiven Philosophie 1832-1833," in *Sämmtliche Werke* Abteilung 1, Band X, Hg. v. Karl F. August Schelling (Stuttgart/ Augsburg 1856-61), 218.
[72] F. W. J. Schelling, F. W. J. Schelling, "Grundlegungen," 219.
[73] Interestingly, Schelling sees Kant as coming the closest to his own sense of positive philosophy. Unlike German idealism, particularly Hegel, Kant's idea of sensibility in the "transcendental aesthetic" thematizes that reason is conceptual and that concepts without given sensibility are "empty." In his words, "Kant was so close to achieving

It is along these lines, in fact, that Bowie, Frank, and Fred Rush criticize what they see as Hegel's narrow focus on "reflection."[74] In wanting to generate a theory of authoritativeness for metaphysics without ontology he commits himself to reason's transparency. And given *that* commitment, Hegel would indeed be right to say, for instance, that art and religion are "deficient" forms of self-knowing vis-à-vis reason's transparent logical language. If we expand our focus, though, we will then see that such emphasis on transparency is exaggerated. Reason might be able to consider and reconsider ontologies' authority by retroactively coming to know and grapple with presuppositions. But this does not address how reason's creative roots are at odds with system-building as such. Or what is the same, it does not say anything about the ways ontological thinking leaves out questions of "why" and rushes to pick up questions of "what," all of which are easier to solve and bring along the satisfying feeling of certainty.

Above all, what Hegel's metaphysics neglects is its very fixation on objectivity. Whether historical or eternal, Schelling would say that objectivity is a story reason tells itself, like the stories of art and religion, both of which give creative answers to the unanswerable "why." In Rush's words, "[h]is logic does not and cannot address Schelling's fundamental concern: that there is a world at all, something rather than nothing, a something prior to the very possibility of a structure like Hegel's logical system."[75] On this account, it is hence ultimately Hegel's central philosophical innovation which undoes him. By turning its attention to giving a theory for how

---

this resolution, since, on the one had, he acknowledged the impossibility of denying of that which necessarily exists as an immediate concept of reason, and he, on the other, recognized the concept of the most supreme being [*Wesens*] as the final, lasting content of reason." F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*," 207.

[74] Manfred Frank argues, for instance, that Hegel's commitment to reflection pre-determines what metaphysics fundamentally is about. He comments, "if reflection is construed as being autarchic, it has no need for any input from existence." Manfred Frank, "Identity of Identity and Non-Identity" in *Interpreting Schelling*, 144. Fred Rush directly connects Hegel's idea that reason thinks under presuppositions to logical necessity. He writes that "Hegel's view is problematic, then, because for him thought is *both* the necessary and sufficient basis for *being*." Fred Rush, "Schelling's Critique of Hegel," in *Interpreting Schelling*, 220.

[75] F. W. J. Schelling, *The Grounding*," 220.

reason generates its own flexible criterion for objectivity, Hegel does not see that other modes of reason such art, religion, or mythology, do something similar. *Pace* Hegel, as the argument goes, if we take a broader look at what reason does, we see that it is unable, just as are art or religion, to include the "saying" within the "said." No matter how reflective, ontological thinking is one more way of telling stories about why there is a world and how to come to terms with it. Objective rationality might be a quite powerful narrative, but it remains a narrative.

Now, keeping the accountability gap and metaphysics without ontology in mind, what do the differences between Schelling and Hegel come down to? Gabriel sums up nicely a key point of difference in the following way:

> Hegel and Schelling agree about the belatedness of necessity, with the important difference that Schelling applies belatedness to the insight into belatedness itself. According to Schelling, belatedness is, therefore, belated with respect to itself. The necessity of contingency is itself contingent.[76]

For Hegel, the "concept" presents best metaphysics' accountability gap. It thematizes that when giving an account of the world reason turns back on itself to grasp its own presuppositions. If we then add to this Schelling's distinction between "what" and "why" questions, we see that rational thought acts like any other form of thinking when it comes to those most fundamental "why" questions. It might be the best explanation for determinacy, but in terms of answering "why there is something rather than nothing," it is storytelling in the way art and religion are. That is to say, reason retroactivity does not single it out as somehow unique when it comes to "why" questions.

While both Hegel and Schelling reject the idea that reason is linear, meaning that it reaches out to grasp the world's eternal logic, Schelling believes that rational metaphysics is not privileged enough to mark itself as above any other mode of thinking. In what Gabriel calls

---

[76] Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 132.

"belatedness," the logical necessity with which medieval philosophy lays out God's ontology is for German idealism the result of prior assumptions drawn within reason and rediscovered in hindsight. That much both Hegel and Schelling agree upon. But according to Hegel, a "science of logic" presents best *this* philosophical commitment, namely that metaphysics carries an accountability gap by thinking under presuppositions. Hegel is concerned that other ways of articulating this insight are not nuanced enough to say in so many word's Hegel's central innovation: that "authority" achieved and lost through spelling out presuppositions explains objectivity within metaphysics without ontology. We might discuss with authority what bacteria and liberal freedom are even though we reject anything like an eternal world's logic. It is for this reason that Karen Ng and Adrian Johnston argue that for Hegel "necessity" emerges retroactively.[77] We know why bacteria are "real," or why "man" does not equate to human, given the authoritative ontology we operate under.

But Schelling has his own worries. For him, Hegelian philosophy stops all too short. The critique of the "thinking of things" out of which German idealism emerged should render us deeply suspicious of any theory of objectivity. Had Hegel paid attention to this, had he and other idealists not been so eager to construct accounts of determinacy, he would have seen that any criterion for objectivity is at odds with how metaphysics actually builds philosophical systems. From his middle period onward, Schelling argues that the study of "being qua being" cannot really integrate the idea that metaphysical reflection begins out a free decision to step into the

---

[77] Adrian Johnston advances the idea that since reason works retroactively for Hegel, "necessity" is the necessity of contingency. That is, only when reason spells out its presuppositions does it understands why it "said" things the way it did. Johnston writes, "[t]he modality of contingency surfaces before that of necessity. Therefore, the contingent definitely appears to enjoy a certain priority over necessity in Hegelian thinking." Adrian Johnston, *A New German Idealism*, 85. Karen Ng argues something along the same lines, writing that "[i]n the absolute moment, actuality and possibility are thought in their unity and therefore in their necessity, a determinate necessity that contains negation and contingency within itself as its own presupposition." Karen Ng, "Hegel's Logic of Actuality," 167

world in this or that way. In other words, what is most philosophically relevant about thinking the world is that nothing definitive can really be said without misinterpreting how we say it. Schelling says in the 1840s "Lectures on Mythology" that trying to "say it all" is something that "perpetually withdraws from us, after which we would be compelled to hasten without ever being able to reach it."[78] What ultimately rises Schelling's eyebrows, then, is that Hegel turns metaphysics' accountability gap into an engine for his idea of objectivity. It is true that for Hegel authority is revisable, even historical, but in Schelling's eyes this misses the extent to which metaphysics is storytelling when it comes to the deepest and most unanswerable questions.

Hence, the ways in which Schelling and Hegel interpret the accountability gap come down to what ultimately moves them. Although both reject modern philosophy's idea that the world has one single ontology and ultimately rethink reason as "creative," they see this creativity differently. Hegel's core philosophical innovation, what makes his philosophy distinctively "Hegelian," is that we do not really think "ungrounded first acts" or "foundations" since reason always thinks under the form of presupposition. Hegel thus sees reason's creativity in terms of this formulation. Reason is not primarily analytic for it does not work by reaching clear and distinct ideas about the world. Nor does it discover some inner "law" of thinking. Reason is "creative" because whatever it authoritatively says about the world it does so without any eternal criterion and under presuppositions it imaginatively copes with. Reason earns authority by interpreting the world while creatively integrating assumptions it only learned about in hindsight. In short, thought is above all creative because it is *always able to do something with what it has*.[79] What

---

[78] F. W. J. Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology*, trans. Mason Richey and Markus Zisselsberg (Albany: SUNY University Press, 2007), 13.

[79] In a sense, the idea that reason thinks under presuppositions it must spell out brings Hegel closer here to Kant's idea of "aesthetic judgement" in the "third critique" than to the "determinate judgements" of the "first critique." In particular, the idea that aesthetic judgment involves the free play between sensibility and judgement is close to what

ultimately moves Hegel is thus the question of objectivity for a metaphysics that has no single ontology. The ways we might authoritatively discuss mathematics, new plant species, and the legitimacy of the International Criminal Court without any eternal criterion to appeal to.

For Schelling, the situation is otherwise. His post-1809 breakthrough aims to argue why German idealism was ultimately wrong to focus so much on the question of determinacy. Just as Hegel does, Schelling believes every conception of the world is supported by distinctions assumed and not explained by such account. But unlike Hegel, key for Schelling is to demonstrate how this conclusion casts doubt on objectivity, whatever its kind. Above all, Schelling's philosophy is built to say that the deepest philosophical questions, those philosophy cares the most about, are unanswerable and often misread as questions of determinacy so as to appear as if having "answered" them. Such is Schelling's overall motivation: to get us to consider what being unanswerable means within philosophy and why metaphysics likes to exchange the "why" for the "what." Given such motivation, then, reason's creativity is interpreted as the *arbitrary and free act of conceptualization that sets up the world for metaphysics* to get its bearings and discuss what is objective.[80] German idealism was born out the critique of modern philosophy, and if it wants to root out the desire to "say it all," it needs to be suspicious of the idea of objectivity, whatever its form.

And yet the issue of objectivity does not really go away. Metaphysics might be storytelling and believe its stories too much. But, since we do seem to do this on a daily basis, the question

---

Hegel means by the "back and forth" of reflection out of which reason's authority emerges. This playful "back and forth" is often left out when interpreters put emphasis rather on the "first critique" and the the idea that the categories of thinking transcendentally determine content delivered by sensibility to generate rule-governed experience.

[80] Though Schelling speaks approvingly of Kant in his Berlin "positive philosophy," we need to keep in mind that Kant strictly separated experience as entirely rule-governed and objective from metaphysics larger questions, such as "why there is something and not nothing," which are unanswerable. But such total separation misses Schelling's overall conclusion: that experience as rule-governed and objective is not as secured as Kant thinks and is ultimately a story likes those of art and religion.

stands: how do we distinguish between "good" and "bad" stories? The idea that our stories develop an internal criterion to separate the Ptolemaic from the Copernican universe, or liberal from communistic freedom, is not made automatically redundant by metaphysics as storytelling. We have two kinds of metaphysics without ontology unable to meet each other at exactly this issue. One kind emphasizes, as Hegel does in the *Phenomenology*, the "the suffering, the patience, and the labor of the negative"[81] through which authority is established, lost, and reestablished. The other underscores that metaphysics tells creative stories like art or religion and that such stories, especially those with expansive and shiny conceptual toolboxes, take on a life of their own.

Accordingly, then, why did Schelling and Hegel miss each other to leave us two kinds of metaphysics without ontology? In a way, this question was already answered through the critique of reason as the "thinking of things." It is a direct consequence of the commitment out of which idealism was forged: leaving behind the idea that reason counts ready-made things, including itself, without wanting to give up the ability to say meaningful statements about the world. Reason needs to draw the distinction between real and unreal without this distinction being set in stone *and* without emphasizing such distinction at the cost of the very activity of "drawing." It is a balance both Hegel and Schelling found incredibly difficult to strike. In particular, they were unable to consider something along the following lines: reason might be properly authoritative and yet not entirely transparent, or a storyteller whose stories generate criteria we do not control. For Hegel, that authority might come at the price of eclipsing reason's outmost creativity, and for Schelling, that we take the first step in storytelling but do not control the logic of our own stories, and especially, what they write about us. In short, they were unable or unwilling to consider that

---

[81] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 13.

reason's authority might result from creative and plural narratives that generate, as it were, metaphysical "monsters" which ultimately turn around and control *us*.

But such is not the last word on metaphysics without ontology. The post-idealist debates that followed picked up the legacy and open-ended questions left behind by idealism's incredibly imaginative philosophy. Marx's "materialism," one among them, would try to carve that "middle-road" Hegel and Schelling could not really find to meet each other.

V. Conclusion

Schelling's post-1809 philosophy mounted without a doubt an extraordinary challenge to earlier German idealism via its own version of the accountability gap. What troubled Schelling in his Jena years, namely that a space separated reason as the capacity to draw distinctions from reason's ontologies, was rebranded as inherent to reason itself. Thus, that there is an accountability gap means for Schelling that no ontology, however sophisticated, can in principle include reason's inexhaustible capacity to draw distinctions. The very capacity to conceptualize can never be counted as one more element within what is conceptualized. Schelling came to the conclusion that it is not possible to ever "say it all" for at each instance the activity that does the "saying" is left out.

As Schelling considered the full range implications to this, he turned his view of the accountability gap against ontological thinking in general and the notion of objectivity in particular, especially Hegel's. Since the world cannot be mapped in one broad stroke, and since accounts of the world presuppose fundamental acts to conceptualize it in this or that way, metaphysics as the science of being gets its bearings through unaccountable acts. Whatever universal lessons it draws about the nature of the world and existence, it does not discover but generates them through the creative and free decision to step into the world in this or that way.

Reason is fundamentally creative, and in such a way that is at odds with the idea of objectivity. At the end of the day, the accountability gap means for Schelling that metaphysics is about storytelling, just in the way religion and art are. For Schelling metaphysics without ontology should leads us to suspect rather than rethink the concept of objectivity. It should help us be comfortable with the real possibility that reason is unable to answer the deepest of questions.

This leaves us with two kinds of metaphysics without ontology: one focused on rethinking objectivity as authority and another one focused on radical creativity at odds with its own objective goals. But though German idealism first put forth the revolutionary idea that metaphysics might have no single ontology, it does not have the final word. It leaves much to be debated and rethought beyond the historical borders of idealism. One of these avenues of debate, Marx's materialism, goes to the core of why Hegel and Schelling' miss each other. In introducing what I name "natural decay," he dares idealism to be *more* idealistic and to fully live up to the commitment of metaphysics without one single ontology.

Chapter 4: Marx's "Materialism" as Metaphysics Without Ontology: The Accountability Gap and Natural Decay

> "We deal with that deterioration which no doctor can cure, and which little by little brings about death "
>
> -Karl Marx, *Capital*

I. Introduction

At his inaugural lectures in Berlin in the 1840s Schelling spoke to an audience that would go on to form the "existentialist" and "materialist" decendents of German idealism. Himself now a critic of idealism's major ideas, especially as presented by Hegel, Schelling's lectures rendered palpable the rift in metaphysics without ontology. German idealism split itself open over the question from which it was forged: how should we understand objectivity within a metaphysical framework open to ontological pluralism? At the height of their mature philosophies, Schelling and Hegel did not find agreement on whether the accountability gap in metaphysics spurs reflection on the ways we account for the world or problematizes philosophy's commitment to transparency and rationalization.

From the replies that surfaced in the second half of the 1800s, Marx's "materialism" sketched a narrative for exactly why Schelling and Hegel did not find one another. As idealism did, Marx was committed to metaphysics without ontology and commented loudly and repeatedly on the problems with reason conceived as the "thinking of things." Though at times awkwardly devised, Marx's brand of materialism rejects any theory of biological or physical determinism as more examples of the world's single ontology. This much Marx agreed with Hegel and Schelling and their radical rethinking of metaphysics. But Marx interpreted metaphysics without ontology and the accountability gap in quite a different way than Hegel and Schelling did. He believed idealism, and philosophy in general, prioritizes organization over disintegration, determinacy and life over decay and entropy. The reasons for this ultimately come down to what Marx sees is idealism's "flat" non-discriminatory ontology.[1] Early German

[1] I borrow this term from Markus Gabriel's *Fields of Sense*. Gabriel presents his ontological pluralism as "flat ontology" within which existence is a matter of being "determined" by belonging to any of the potentially infinite

idealism's central innovation, that reason draws distinctions and supports ontologies, translates existence to questions about determinacy, and so to speak, stacks the deck in favor of organization over the disintegration.

Above all, materialism raises what I call here "natural decay" to the philosophical level. It replaces the idea that ontology is "flat," meaning that all existence is equal under the umbrella of determinacy, with ontology as essentially discriminatory. Marx's most lasting metaphysical contribution is to say that ontological thinking, whether in its Schellingian plural or Hegelian authoritative kind, articulates two narratives at the same time. The philosophical monisms, dualisms, and pluralisms in the history of philosophy conceptualize the world and presuppose narratives about what natural decay is and what to do about it. At this high theoretical level, it is *these* narratives which Marx believes have been deemphasized, if not lost, in the history of philosophy, and are also the common root of German idealism's splintering. From the materialist viewpoint, what ultimately fractured idealism was the following. It was the shortcomings to see that ontological thought earns authority by treating existence not only as a question over determination but also over "extinction;" namely, as the practical task of keeping entropy at bay.

Such is the thesis of this chapter. After his early critique of Hegel's philosophy, Marx's works tried in so many forms to picture this other narrative of natural decay in all its implications in his middle and late writings. Though not always consistently, Marx's philosophy represents a *realignment* of metaphysics without ontology that joins elements from Schelling and Hegel, even as it inaugurates a new metaphysical framework.

"fields of sense." It is unclear to what extent Gabriel would say Hegel's metaphysics advances a flat ontology, but given his focus on the question of determinacy, I think there are enough similarities.

II. Two Senses of "Existence"

It goes without saying that Marx was not a traditional metaphysician. But he was, in fact, an *unorthodox* metaphysician whose intellectual education in Berlin unfolded literally in the midst of the split between Hegel and Schelling. In 1841, Schelling settled in Berlin with clear royal instructions, in Pinkard's words, to "stamp out the dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism."[2] As with other neo-Hegelians, Marx was not destined for the academy but for a life of migration and financial insecurity in ways that certainly shaped his philosophical views.[3] During the 1840s he sketched out the basics of his materialism in large part through a critique of Hegel's political philosophy. Ultimately, as Hegel and Schelling do, this materialism would argue that metaphysics has no single ontology about existence. But the way Marx goes about this is unique and reflects back on idealism in important ways. In particular, in Hegel's political philosophy Marx singles out issues with idealism's "flat" non-discriminatory ontological thinking. To think existence is to discriminate among objects. According to Marx, we are involved in two simultaneous narratives whenever we describe what exists. And since idealism could not wrap its head around that, materialism needs to be more "ideal" than even idealism itself.[4]

Marx's earliest piece on Hegel, the 1843 *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, though a rebuttal of the "theory of the state," as Jonathan Sperber writes, "had nothing in it about political economy, the working class, or socialism." [5] Its "introduction," which was

---

[2] Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 662.
[3] Jonathan Sperber, *Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013). As Sperber further remarks, "not a single Young-Hegelian would obtain a university position; they would be forced into careers as freelance writers, journalists, and other financially uncertain positions." Jonathan Sperber, *Marx*, 64.
[4] By this I mean that materialism contributes to thinking about the ways we define existence, which is in part what German idealism was meant to do. As an inheritor to Kant's "ideal" study of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, German idealism is mean to be a more comprehensive account of the ways we go about describing existence by shedding new light on what thinking, nature, and sociality might mean.
[5] Jonathan Sperber, *Marx*, 113.

published the subsequent year, does neatly sum up the reasons why Marx broke ranks with contemporary criticisms of Hegel to focus on what he saw were larger philosophical issues. The upheavals of capitalist industrialization, the defeat of Napoleon at the hand of continent-wide counter revolutions, and the increasing importance of colonialism, all was evidence depicting the ways modern liberal states actually work. As he took copious notes, Marx wondered why Hegel's "theory of the state" and its signature emphasis on "right" seemed unable to draw any philosophical conclusions out of the liberal project's exhaustion.

In the "introduction" Marx paints in broad strokes what materialism is about. He notes that across Europe we see "a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society…which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no particular right because no particular wrong but wrong generally."[6] True, this observation seem sociological at first, but for Marx it goes some way towards ultimately saying that "flat" non-discriminatory ontological thinking oversimplifies existence. Specifically, what Marx describes as a "non-member member" draws out the ways in which Hegel's political philosophy depends on *two* senses of existence it is unable to properly theorize. Hegel's view on social membership, its roots in the idea of normative right, prioritizes existence as a matter of determinacy. It underscores the ways in which human sociality needs to be organized given the kind of life we are and hence our biological needs, roles within civil society, and cultural practices. But for Marx this emphasis on right renders Hegel's political philosophy blind to a second way of speaking about existence apparent when states turn to a social class not treated as a social class. The thrust of Marx's critique, then, lies in saying that

---

[6] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Introduction," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 186.

such a "non-member member" is no historical or political contingency but ultimately a window into another way of addressing existence.

Now, we can think about this through the same example Marx has in mind: the French revolution and the "third estate." While the first and second estates, namely the royalty and clergy, are the real members of the French *ancien régime*, the "commoners" are a powerless generic umbrella group that ties together everyone else. At the outbreak of the revolution, though, as Emmanuel Sieyès argued in the 1789 *What is the Third Estate?*, "commoners" were politicized not so much as an ostracized social group but rather as the "true" and direct representatives of the state itself. For Marx, among others, the third estate does not depict bigotry as much as it is a window into another meaning of existence that theories of right assume but do not thematize. Marx comments that "the speculative philosophy of right, that abstract extravagant *thinking* on the modern state, the reality of which remains a thing of the beyond."[7] The third estate is such "beyond" but not solely in terms of exclusion, oppression, or otherness. In order to properly grapple with the modern state, we need to know what this "beyond" is about and the ways it is obfuscated by the theory of right.

To my mind, such a "beyond," what Marx connects to practice and revolution, is ultimately a matter of how we tackle the prospect of our extinction.[8] Take the following passage,

> By heralding the *dissolution of the hereto existing world order*, the proletariat merely proclaims the *secret of its own existence*, for it is the factual dissolution of that world order. By

---

[7] Karl Marx, "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 329.

[8] I believe that all other concepts used to draw a wedge between idealism and materialism fail, whether it be labor, practical action, or even biological and economic needs. What separates them is rather metaphysical in nature and begins—though this becomes more nuanced later on—by rendering the question of extinction philosophical. Underappreciated in the history of philosophy, it is *by* seeing things through the lens of extinction that the ideas of labor, and economic and biological needs, take on a different form. This change is also in line with the intellectual transformation of the times, as shown by Malthus' work on population growth, Ricardo's rebuttal and focus on labor, and Darwin's theory of evolution.

> demanding the *negation of private property*, the proletariat merely raises to the rank of a principle of society what society has raised to the rank of *its* principle.[9]

It would be wrong to see the third estate, now called the "proletariat," as seeking a place among the clergy and royalty of the French state, or as Hegel would see it, within a renewed *liberal* French state. Though with ideas still evolving, Marx does not believe the proletariat is merely a challenge to liberal political theories as "essence" is a challenge to "being" for Hegel. In other words, materialism does not "correct" Hegel's political philosophy, namely does not just show what liberalism is *actually* like while keeping his metaphysics untouched. Instead, materialism *rethinks* social membership philosophically by shifting the discussion towards the ways the proletariat highlights the crucial role of property, especially private property. And in doing so, we enter into a conversation over existence as a matter of extinction.

Marx does not understand property in the way Hegel does, meaning as the objectification of individual freedom.[10] Not only in the well-known idea of "estranged labor" from the "1844 Manuscripts" but also in his 1843 report on the "Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood," Marx connects property as "appropriation" to carrying out biological needs. *Private* property, though, is an abstraction that twists the general idea of appropriation beyond recognition. Specifically, what private property does is to essentially mistranslate the natural roots, as it were, of appropriation into the abstract idea of ownership. Said otherwise, life's "right" to carry out its needs and

---

[9] Karl Marx, "A Contribution: Introduction," 187. In other words, the proletariat questions whether property is really about the objectification of human freedom. By standing as a group whose role is to *not* be a real member of society, Marx thinks the proletariat let us see that property is about the ways we tackle the issue of extinction.

[10] For a discussion on this see Andrew Chitty, "Recognition and Property in Hegel and the Early Marx," in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, (2013) 16: 685-697. Marx *does* give Hegel credit for emphasizing "labor" even though he conceives it within the structure of self-determination. He writes that "[t]he outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phänomenologie* and its final outcome…is thus first that Hegel conceives of the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; and that he thus grasps the essence of *labour* and comprehends objective man—true because real man—as the outcome of man's *own labor*." Karl Marx, "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," 333.

continue to exist is replaced by the specific legal, political, and economic tools that come with ownership and that benefit those who own. In the "Debates on Thefts of Wood," Marx notes that gathering fallen wood was a long-standing custom that tacitly acknowledged life's most fundamental right. But once private property entered the scene such custom was definitely done away so that ownership of forests could be legalized. "The gatherer of fallen wood," writes Marx, "only carries out a sentence already pronounced by the very nature of the property, for the owner possesses only the tree, but the tree no longer possesses the branches that have fallen from it."[11] At closer look, it seems private property gives two arguments at odds with each other: its basis on "appropriation" is undercut by the ability that comes with ownership to buy and sell.

At the philosophical level, what these comments illustrate is a crucial slippage between two philosophical frameworks. Within one, property encompasses the demands, anxieties, and practical action emerging from the prospect of extinction. Within the other, property entails the ways human life expresses its freedom and determines itself. The issue with liberal political theory, is hence that it sees property along a *continuum* that includes biological needs as well as our determination as "spiritual" cultural beings.[12] I believe it to be absolutely central to Marx's philosophy to say that in speaking about property (and ultimately existence) we move across two

---

[11] Karl Marx, "Third Article Debates on the Law and Thefts of Wood," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 227. Marx's overall aim in these remarks is to argue that the philosophical notion of private property, its roots going back to Locke's idea that individuals' labor is objectified in changing nature, does not work once we consider the ways it is part of a larger system of exchange and production that requires accumulation. This ends up depriving the large majority of the very goal it derives its justification from.

[12] By this I mean that in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel takes on his own observations about organic nature and treats them from the point of view of legal personality. It is *subordinated* to the legal person, and later to the universal rules within civil society organizing individual persons, that biological needs are taken up. Hegel thus treats the question of extinction ultimately within the continuum of norms that inform the ways we understand and organize legal personhood, property, and the economic spheres of production, exchange, etc. Hegel writes that "[t]he rationale of property is to be found not in the satisfaction of needs but in the superseding of mere subjectivity of personality. Not until he has property does the person exists as reason." G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 73.

philosophical frames. Since we are "life," we uphold simultaneously freedom and culture while desperately acting to avoid our extinction. For example, Marx notes that "equality" in light of extinction is less lofty of an ideal than we typically think, entailing rather something along these lines: in the "*stomach of the beast of prey*, nature has provided the battlefield of union…the organ connecting the various animal species."[13] By thus looking closely at the reasons gathering fallen wood seems so obviously "theft," Marx wants to question the idea of a philosophical continuum from biology to culture and open up another narrative to get at what existence is about.

But this all assumes Marx's ideas on political economy. In the early writings, it is actually religion within the modern state that helps Marx illustrate what he sees wrong with Hegelian philosophy and liberal theory. Religion remains compelling not as a holdover from past times or due to modernity's fragmentation, as neo-Hegelians argue.[14] Marx's views on this are nuanced and put religion at the center-stage of the ways we express existence as concern over extinction. Marx writes that "*Religious* distress is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real distress and a *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions."[15] In similar manner to Schelling, it is religion that helps us we generate stories to grapple with existence in ways we otherwise could not. To be religious is not to be "ideological" in the pejorative sense of believing made up stories. Religion aids us articulate the ways in which our lives are precarious and deeply fragile. It helps us say, as

---

[13] Karl Marx, "Debates on the Law and Thefts of Wood," 230.
[14] This neo-Hegelian idea of "fragmentation" is a popular way for contemporary Hegelians, Pippin and Pinkard for instance, to interpret the social context within which German idealism emerged. In *After the Beautiful*, Pippin actually approaches the second half of the 1800s through this lens. He surveys the ways Hegel's philosophy of art might explain Europe's fragmentation, whether because of industrialization or modernization. This is not too far off from the way Jürgen Habermas discusses some of the key obstacles of the European Union. In *The Crisis of the European Union*, he especially underlines the issue of fragmentation along nationalist lines due to EU's lack of budgetary and real political unification.
[15] Karl Marx, "A Contribution: Introduction," 175-176.

Schelling would put it, that what we do is express our unpredictable existential condition in such way that the very giving-voice becomes an end in itself.

Unlike Schelling, however, religion for Marx occurs within a "state of affairs which needs illusions."[16] We continue to hold to religion in the ways we do because we do not have the political or philosophical tools to think through existence as the concern over extinction in any other way. For Max, it is not enough to say that metaphysics as storytelling is the way we make sense "that" we are instead of "what" we are. We need to take the further step and ask how existence a matter of extinction might be reflected back in the ways we think about objectivity, whether this be as theoretical or political philosophy. Marx writes that the "the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the *criticism of religion* into the *criticism of law* and the *criticism of theology* into the *criticism of politics*."[17] Although Marx does speak at times as if "reality" was hidden beneath "ideology," his overall goal is to get us thinking about extinction as a philosophical question in the way Schelling cares about the ways philosophical systems get their bearings. In doing this, he can *then* ask how something like the concern for extinction is imprinted in our theories of determinacy and ultimately in how reason's authority comes about.

Thus, when Marx says that his goal is to "unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms"[18] this does not turn on saying that the liberal state needs to rework its foundations, or even that

---

[16] Karl Marx., "A Contribution: Introduction," 176. Indeed, Jean Hyppolite also highlights how important it is for Marx to demonstrate that Hegel's political philosophy is ultimately "mystifying." He writes that "there is in the Hegelian State, as Marx showed at length *a mystery which is in fact a mystification.*" Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, trans. John O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 124. On my way of putting things, this is ultimately about the difference between discriminatory and non-discriminatory ontological thinking. What Marx calls "mystification," are the ways Hegel and idealists collapse questions over extinction into those over determinacy.
[17] Karl Marx., "A Contribution: Introduction," 176.
[18] Karl Marx., "A Contribution: Introduction," 176.

philosophy needs to "end" in favor of politics.[19] By attacking philosophy, writing statements such as that Hegel "has only found the *abstract, logical speculative* expression for the movement of history…,"[20] what Marx really has in mind is the now-familiar critique of the "thinking of things." More precisely, by "speculative expression" he means the metaphysical commitment to figuring out what existence is by spelling out its "logical" definition, as Max calls it. And thus in saying that "Germans *thought* what other nations *did*,"[21] though probably grouping Hegelian philosophy with the "thinking of things," Marx is putting his finger on existence as a question over extinction. "To be," on this understanding, is less about figuring out the ways we go about thinking existence, about what sort of life we are, and more about the ways the irrevocable nagging problem of extinction continuously demands unanswerable answers, instills chaos, and might foment pain and abuse. When Louis Althusser writes that with Marx's writings we see the "emergence of a new conception of philosophy,"[22] or when Etienne Balibar comments that "after Marx, philosophy no longer is as it was before,"[23] I believe they underscore just this point. In the history of philosophy, as Aristotle said, metaphysics seeks knowledge of universals. The question

---

[19] This is not to say that Marx's philosophy on praxis, especially during the early 1840s, does not often operate by reducing philosophy to mere abstraction and underscoring the role of political action. But this is a view Marx walks back by the late 1840s. If we want to understand why Marx more than Hegel or Schelling emphasize revolution, class, and exploitation, the answer has to be elsewhere. This is why I do not believe Etienne Balibar is wrong when he says that there is no Marxist philosophy if by "Marxist philosophy" we mean another theory of determinacy. His exact words are these: "there is no Marxist philosophy and there never will be; on the other hand, Marx is more important for philosophy than ever before." Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, (London: Verso, 2007), 1

[20] Karl Marx, "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," 329.

[21] Karl Marx, "A Contribution: Introduction," 181.

[22] Louis Althusser, *For Marx,* trans. Ben Bewster, (London: Verso, 2005), 32. Althusser has a more orthodox understanding of Marx's philosophy. What makes materialism unique for him is that it is able to properly grasp the historical and class-informed reasons for some philosophical view or another: "a philosophy that is capable of accounting for the nature of theoretical formations and their history, and therefore capable of accounting for itself, by taking itself as its own object." Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 39. I do not think Althusser is entirely wrong, though. But what matters is that we do not end up with a philosophy that *reintroduces* the "thinking of things" under the guise of "material reality."

[23] Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 4.

of existence is predominantly a question over "substance," regardless of whether this be a historical or multi-faceted substance.

Indeed, from his early to his late writings, Marx likes to use the term "appearance" [*Erscheinung*] to illustrate philosophy's inclination for this sense of existence. Similar to the ways Schelling rejects collapsing questions about "that" into those of "what," materialism denies that questions over existence are essentially about determinacy.[24] The following is an example of that:

> Man, who looked for a superhuman being in the fantastic reality of heaven and found nothing but the *reflection* of himself, will no longer be disposed to find but the *semblance* [*schein*] of himself, only an inhuman being, where he seeks and must seek his true reality.[25]

Philosophy commonly deals with "semblances" in that it treats questions over existence non-discriminatorily as questions over determinacy. What Marx, perhaps sarcastically, calls the "fantastic reality of heaven" says in so many words that philosophy considers questions over extinction along a continuum with questions about cultural and normative expression. Marx thus writes that "[t]he establishment of *true materialism* and of *real science,* by making the social relation of 'man to man' the basic principle."[26] On the approach I have been advancing, materialism does not really say that thought is an illusion needing to be replaced by pure political action.[27] Marx's life-long projects were almost all exclusively theoretical. But it does say that the issue for materialism depends rather on the reduction that happens when existence is considered within the continuum of determinacy, as idealism normally does.

---

[24] Though the *Logic* argues the very distinction between "appearance" and reality depends on conceptual distinctions, Marx wants to say that to focus on the nature of determinacy is fundamentally "mystifying." It mistranslates questions of extinction into those of determinacy in the way for Schelling reason collapses questions of "that" into those of "what."

[25] Karl Marx, "A Contribution: Introduction," 175.

[26] Karl Marx, "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," 328.

[27] Indeed, Marx was never really a proponent of positivism as it emerged in the late 1800s. He did focus on economic production data and other sociological statistics but rejected *philosophically* the idea that data on its own is a collection of statements of fact. Sperber writes that "Marx was well-acquainted with the works of the positivists and was less than impressed with them." Jonathan Sperber, *Marx*, 402.

In this way, it is an understanding of existence as a matter of extinction what Marx ultimately means by materialism in his early philosophy vis-à-vis idealism's "semblances." To be precise, this entails a philosophical approach whose focus is the ways we build, so to speak, an "existential foothold" against extinction. In the "1844 Manuscripts," Marx writes the following:

> Nature is man's *inorganic body*—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.[28]

It is true that, as Schelling says, rational thought misses the arbitrary ways we assemble metaphysical stories and thus consideration of whether our views about existence are contingent. But as Marx sees it, to think about existence as a question over extinction means more than saying that "existence" is not a question over concepts and metaphysical distinctions. As Marx notes, what is crucial for such another sense of existence are the *actions* we take to ultimately gain an "existential foothold." That is, we need metaphysical stories to tell ourselves something about why we repeatedly engage in practices the way we do so that our world may *continue* to exist. In other words, why we dig up and fight over the earth's resources, panic during economic crises, or send most industrial production to the other side of the world.

Indeed, the more Marx distinguishes idealism from his still-developing materialism, the more fundamental this "foothold" becomes. In the "Theses on Feuerbach," he writes,

> The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the *object, or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity*, *practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in

---

[28] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, 275-276. Interestingly, Marx argues that any conception of the natural world that forgets about labor understands it abstractly. That is to say, that it does not emphasize extinction and what we do within nature to gain an "existential foothold." Marx writes that "[b]ut nature too, taken abstractly, for itself—nature fixed in isolation from man—is *nothing* for man, it goes without saying that the abstract thinker who has committed himself to intuiting, intuits nature abstractly." Karl Marx, "Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic," 345.

> contradistinction to materialism the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism, which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. [29]

Marx actually gives German idealism credit for understanding better than Feuerbach does that what we call "real" is not a "thing" but the result of the ways we decide to step into the world—the "subjective" and "active" side, as he calls it. That is, that metaphysics has no single ontology and is not the "thinking of things." But materialism for Marx ultimately should say more than that. It should also say that in putting together any ontology, what Marx calls "objectivity," metaphysics also gives an account of the ways we secure a foothold against our extinction. Even though by treating questions over extinction we do not study "being" as a matter of substance, we do generate narratives whose goal is to help us go on and secure ourselves against extinction.

For this reason, and though we have to wait until his later writings, the name for these narratives about extinction is "property." Marx notes, on this point, that "Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive of human activity itself as *objective* activity."[30] According to materialism, property involves existence not as a matter of determination because it turns rather on securing mechanisms and resources to build a foothold against extinction. It helps the feudal lord who in owning estates controls crop-yield, the owner of capital who converts money into factories and shops, or the slave-owner who puts enslaved people to work. And as Schelling notes for metaphysical systems, *choosing* one or another of these narratives goes hand in hand with choosing a way to step into the world. Feudalism

---

[29] Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, 3. Balibar writes on this very passage that "[a]ll in all, then, it is not difficult to derive the following hypothesis from Marx's aphorisms: just as traditional materialism in reality conceals an idealist foundation (representation, contemplation), so modern idealism in reality conceals a materialist orientation in the function it attributes to the acting subject, at least if one accepts that there is a latent conflict between the idea of representation (interpretation, contemplation) and that of activity (labor, practice, transformation change). And what he proposes is quite simply to explode the contradiction, to disassociate representation and subjectivity and allow the category of practical activity to emerge own its own right." Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 25.

[30] Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach," 3.

needs a metaphysics about human hierarchies, capitalist private property about individual equality. To collapse them within the continuum of determination would be to not see the ways they both respond to different logics: one focused on generating an existential foothold, the other on an ontology of what things exist and what the world is like.

Now, if we grant this is all to be true, what does it mean for metaphysics without ontology? The answer we get in the early writings is preliminary but Marx is moving in the direction of saying that ontological thought is ultimately not "flat" or non-discriminatory. Marx agrees that what we call "real" has no single logic that thinking simply brings out in the way it goes about defining objects. Indeed, Marx likely, though wrongly, groups Hegel and Schelling within the camp of the "thinking of things." But what is unique about his materialism, and what is ultimately most philosophically relevant to us, is that it understands *ontological thinking to be fundamentally discriminatory*. When we reflect on what sort of objects exist, or as we settle on what "being qua being" is about, we do not treat existence solely as a question over determinacy and thus equally across the board. Opposed to idealism, for materialism questions about nature, sociality, or history, might be interpreted as related to determinacy, namely to the nature of intelligibility, the natural word, or normative distinctions within which thinking and being take place. But they might also be interpreted as questions about extinction, namely the ways thinking, nature, sociality, and history are embedded in practices whose goal is to generate a foothold against our extinction. How much, for instance, and of what do we produce? Who produces it? And, perhaps most importantly, who owns it?

In other words, some objects, the sofa in my apartment, my university institution, and the covid-19 disease, are objects grasped through the fundamental distinctions of some ontology describing physical, biological, and symbolic objects. But some of these objects, and in fact often the very same objects, belong to narratives about the ways we cope with the prospects of

extinction; or, property for short. Whether it be my consumer patterns, my source of income, or these as related to unprecedented health risks, the fact is that we treat these objects and benefit from them differently under the guise of extinction. As "determined" objects, they belong to groups of determinacy, for example physical, mental, or organic. But as objects in light of extinction, they operate entirely differently. No longer as a matter of what it means to be "mental" or "physical" what matters is their *currency* vis-à-vis the question of survival. Marx would later place along this axis a whole array of crucial question over class, exploitation, and economic crisis.

Alfred Schmidt writes that "[n]ature was for Marx both an element of human practice and the totality of everything that exists."[31] For instance, along the lines of Spinoza's *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, we come divided to what we call existence. We approach it either in terms of the processes of determinacy through which we establish what objects mean, or through the demand that we establish an "existential foothold." Thus, to raise Jean Hyppolite's question: "[w]hat was Marx's view of philosophy? This question unavoidably turns into the question: What did Marx think of Hegelianism?...*The crisis of Hegelianism is the turning-point of philosophy*."[32] Such "crisis of Hegelianism," as I have put it, is ultimately the crisis of "flat" ontological thought. To ponder about existence means to split our thought into two simultaneous narratives with two philosophical frameworks in a way that seems to have eluded German idealism.[33] Idealism circles around this, as Schelling does with the idea that metaphysics is a creative storyteller, or Hegel with "authority" as reason's achievement. But if existence has two senses, then perhaps we can

---

[31] Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Verso, 2014), 27.
[32] Jean Hyppolite, *Studies*, 119.
[33] Marx's middle period, but especially his late writings, make it clear why this is not a question of metaphysical dualism. Even though Marx often falls for such dualistic language, dualism splits the world into two *because* both dimensions are supposedly different and yet they are also about objects' determinacy.

have the cake and eat it too: metaphysics as a creative storyteller about our situated existence, including extinction, and authoritative ontologies that tackle extinction and tell us who we are.

But this remains in sketch until the later writings. Marx would pick up then the idea that existence has two senses and offer his materialist account of metaphysics without ontology. In his most explicit writings on materialism, those of the middle period, Marx gives more details about existence as a matter of the ways we tackle extinction. And in the large-scale critique of political economy in the late 1850s and 1860s, in his *mature* materialism, we get the ultimately picture of Marx's metaphysics without ontology. What the history of philosophy has overlooked, the reason why existence is also a matter of extinction, turns on the philosophical idea of "natural decay." I thus now turn to such discussion.

III. Marx's Theory of Natural Decay

In the late 1840s and 1850s Marx focused on the ways we go about building an existential foothold. The writings of these years, which Althusser calls the "works of the break," are populated with deeply creative insights and seemingly insuperable obstacles.[34] In the late 1840s Marx realized that classical political economy, especially that of David Ricardo, was key to his understanding of materialism. It was the missing piece needed to show the way existence as a matter of extinction helps establish the authority of some account of the world. Though Marx never used the term, these years witness the emergence of philosophical idea I call "natural

[34] In the years between 1845-1857 Marx's materialism remained tied to the critique of neo-Hegelianism. Marx and Engels would often oppose their emphasis on material life to abstract thought in a way that seems dualistic at best and reductionist at worse. Althusser writes about these years in the following manner: "I propose to designate the writings of the break in 1845, that is, the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *the German ideology* which first introduce Marx's new problematic, though usually still in a partially negative and sharply polemical critical form, by a new formula*: The Works of the Break.*" Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 34.

decay" as the ultimate philosophical explanation for why existence is always said in two ways. When laid out completely, this would be Marx's most substantial contribution to metaphysics without ontology: the world has no eternal logic because answering authoritatively what existence is about depends not on definitions or inferences but on the ways we build an existential foothold and ward off entropy. An ontology's authority is not drawn exclusively from distinctions establishing determinacy. It is drawn as well from its currency in addressing the deterioration of objects. At its best, materialism is ultimately not another metaphysical account but an realignment of German idealism's metaphysics without ontology. The idea that existence has two senses means that a conception of determinacy is authoritative at all if it addresses deterioration with some success and keeps entropy at bay.

In the 1845 unfinished polemic piece known as "The German Ideology," Marx and Engels argue that their materialism, unlike Feuerbach's, interprets questions about extinction not in crude naturalistic terms, such as human sensations, but in the ways they contribute towards building an existential foothold. To be sure, materialism should depict how objects "slide" between the two senses of existence. For instance, Marx and Engels note that "[t]he cherry-tree like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well know, only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become 'sensuous certainty' for Feuerbach."[35] These commercial transactions that transported the cherry tree from region to region cast what is otherwise just an organic object under the light of extinction. It is crucial for Marx and Engels, especially in these years, to say that Feuerbach's emphasis on sensations is "idealistic." In other words, his materialism hinges on adding more

[35] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, (London: International Publishers, 1975), 39.

"objects," so to speak, alongside those already considered by German idealism. To put it bluntly, Feuerbach's materialism is really an idealism because it is a *reinterpretation* of what determinacy is all about by underscoring sensations.

Hence, in opposition to this, Marx and Engels do not believe materialism adds any new objects or reconsiders determinacy. Instead, it asks about the ways an existential foothold informs reason's authority. In their words, Feuerbach "does not see that the sensuous world around him is not a thing given directly from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society."[36] As a matter of fact, most polemics against contemporary Hegelians comes down precisely to this point. Marx and Engels understand the neo-Hegelian emphasis on "critique" to mean that their philosophy still takes place against the background of determinacy, and which they call simply "philosophy." Their disagreements do not see German idealism's problem to be its non-discriminatory understanding of existence as determinacy. They sum up, "German criticism has, right up to its latest efforts, never left the realm of philosophy."[37] When Marx and Engels label philosophy "ideology," as they do in this piece, or when they speak about "true" material reality, what they want is to challenge the idea that existence is solely a matter of determinacy.[38] Their word-choice is no doubt poor, but not something the history of philosophy is unfamiliar with.

---

[36] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 39.
[37] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 28.
[38] Daniel Brudney captures this general sense in the following way: "[i]n the end, then, I take Marx's basic accusation to be that the Young Hegelians remain methodological rationalist. For Descartes, the illusions produced by the senses can be left behind, and one can ultimately attain to truth by the light of reason, The Young Hegelians, Marx is saying, similarly think that the illusions of social life can be left behind if one takes the standpoint of self-consciousness or the 'species' or the 'ego.' The objection to an insulated standpoint is not so much that it is abstract or disengaged (in contrast to the objection to the philosopher's standpoint or to that of civil society). The objection is that it mistakenly presumes insulation from the impact of social reality, and so mistakenly presumes that what it registers must be pure truth." Daniel Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 274.

It is in fact this issue that ultimately breaks up neo-Hegelian philosophy. Marx and Engels write that Bruno Bauer and David Strauss "demand to interpret the exiting world in a different way, i.e. to recognize it by means of a different interpretation."[39] In doing this though such views entirely miss the point. In a post-Hegelian world, as Schelling realized, the issue is no longer about the nature of determinacy, namely about how to theorize the categories of existence. It turns rather on calling into question the ways ontological thought earns authority. Marx and Engels' unique thesis, what pull them apart from neo-Hegelians, is that such authority arises partly from the way some ontologies ultimately help build an existential foothold. They comment that "it has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the connection of their criticism with their own material surroundings."[40] By "German reality" I do not believe Marx and Engels mean to give a metaphysical argument for what is reality and what is appearance, since that is exactly what philosophy, as they see it, is all about. "Material surroundings" is rather a way to say that ontology should consider the connection between building an existential foothold and the authoritative hold an answer to the question of the "being of beings" has, as Heidegger put it.

Further, because doing this entails giving up on idealism's non-discriminatory or "flat" ontological approach, the infamous debate about "ideology" [*Ideologie*] enters the picture. At most minimum a field of study in itself, Marx and Engels use this term to paint in broad strokes philosophical systems that do not consider existence in its dual sense. Meaning to say that replies to the question of being whose answer is to inquire into how we establish determinacy and entirely miss existence's second sense. Balibar goes as far as to underscore "ideology's" important

---

[39] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 30.
[40] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 30.

place in Marx's materialism in opening up an avenue to discuss "production" as concerned with extinction: "[b]y transforming the symbolic notion of '*praxis*' into a historical and sociological concept of *production* and by posing a question unprecedented in philosophy…the question of ideology."[41] It would be wrong to say that economic production as biological needs was absent from the history of philosophy, since Aristotle already considered the crucial role of household production or "*oikonomos*"—the root word for "economy." But it *is* the first time considering the question over extinction is advanced as a matter of metaphysics not just political philosophy. Ideology tells us what happens when we grab fast to the view in which ontology stays put here, politics there.

Thus, though the theory of ideology is nuanced, the fundamentals are the same as what Marx calls "appearances" in the earlier writings. So long as ontology considers existence non-discriminatorily, as a question over determinacy, it does not see the connection between authority and production. As Marx and Engels put it, "[i]n all ideology, men and their relations appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura,* this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process."[42] To phrase it in stark terms, the disagreement between idealism and materialism comes down to whether theories of determinacy can accurately capture the role of extinction within metaphysics. Marx's answer is an emphatic "no," and more specifically, that building an existential foothold has little to do with determinacy but does have a say on an ontology's authority. If materialism is to be metaphysics without ontology and not traditional metaphysics, then neither production nor "material reality" can be anything like what stands behind the veil of

---

[41] Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 35.
[42] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 36.

ideology. Louis Althusser is thus not wrong to say that "[i]deology has little to do with 'consciousness,' even supposing this term to have an unambiguous meaning. It is profoundly *unconscious*, even when it presents itself in reflected form."[43] We do not need to pierce behind ideology to grasp "real" objects. We need to see exactly what ontology misses in its focus on determinacy.

For Marx and Engels that would mean to turn our attention to production. As is perhaps all too well known, production is for them the central mechanism through which an existential foothold is built. But what is most philosophically important about such idea is that it plays by the rule of extinction and not of determinacy. In other words, materialism does not intend to give an ontology about organic life in order to rationally plan for our biological needs. Marx and Engels write about production neither that it reveals what is ultimately real, as in traditional metaphysics, nor that it is solely human anthropology. Take the following example:

> [T]his mode of production must not be considered simply as being the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their lives, a definite *mode of life* on their part.[44]

Although a somewhat preliminary remark, this helps us put aside the idea materialism's focus on production has to do with a metaphysics of the *homo economicus*; a worldview centered on production. The question about the role of extinction is not answered by yet another account of what exists but by explaining the role extinction plays *within* those accounts. On the view I have been advancing, in order for materialism not to be traditional metaphysics, its emphasis on production has to be about the nature of ontology's *authority,* not about eliminating ontological

---

[43] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 233. He continues on to say that "ideology is a matter of the *lived* relation between and their world. This relation, that only appears as '*conscious'* on condition that it is *unconscious*." Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, 233.

[44] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 31.

thinking itself. It is true that Marx and Engels write lines such as, "what individuals are depends on the conditions of production,"[45] but we read them as traditional metaphysics because *we* retain a non-discriminatorily approach to existence. If we expand our field of vision, we then get a better sense as to the way authority is connected to building an existential foothold.

The question hence turns on what such a connection is. Above, I mentioned that this had to do with the concept of "property," and said as well that such discussion assumed Marx's extensive studies on political economy. *The German Ideology* takes the first steps towards this. Marx and Engels put forth the idea that to grapple with the prospects of extinction is essentially about the *ways* we may build an existential foothold. In other words, it is not simply a matter of survival or extinction. They write that "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."[46] Opposed, for example, to Thomas Malthus' conclusion that overpopulation is inevitable given the earth's finite farmland, materialism argues that extinction is a question posed always against the background of the way we go about building an existential foothold. Because materialism is born from the commitment to existence as dual, not only is determinacy but also extinction a matter of the ways we approach the question. However we come at the issue would thus be reflected as the way we conceive of property. Bluntly put, are production, exchange, consumption, all of which are crucial for building an existential foothold, done from an individual, communal, or hierarchical ownership?

---

[45] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 30-31. It seems Balibar sees Marx's thinking in terms of traditional metaphysics: "'The German Ideology' makes a case for 'production' yes, as the production of goods, but also, and simultaneously, as a deeply metaphysically telling point: *The German Ideology* sets out an 'ontology of production' since, as Marx himself tell us, it is production which shapes *man's being*." Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 35

[46] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 41-42.

It is a key aim of "The German Ideology" to say through historical modes such as slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, that the question of extinction, like that of determinacy, is not answered through definitions or "eternal truths" about what organic life or human anthropology needs. As metaphysics without ontology, the issue of building an existential foothold is always taken up against a conception of property that emphasizes some way of producing, consuming, or hording. Marx and Engels note that "the satisfaction of the first need, the action of satisfying and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired, leads to new needs; and this creation of new needs is the first historical act." Ownership, though it is about the way we possess things, because we are talking about building an existential foothold, it is also about who owns factories, hospitals, supply lines, inventories, investment funds, endowments. Neither are human needs written down in some eternal "book of nature," nor is our conception of property ever detached from the need to build a foothold against the prospects of extinction.

It is in light of this, in terms of how ownership addresses extinction, that property connects to the authority of ontological thought. "In contrast to German philosophy," Marx and Engels write, "which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven."[47] Marx and Engels' materialism is not centered on putting forth a rejoinder to idealism's supposedly "subjective," as in Berkley's idealism, philosophical core. Even though at times they tend for a reductionist positivist language, Marx and Engels cannot ultimately mean to say that the "illusions" of metaphysics are grounded in true "material" conditions, given their commitment to not give any more metaphysical accounts. For example, one of their most reductionist statements sums up the following:

> Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of

[47] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology,", 36.

> independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual work, also their thinking and the production of their thinking.[48]

Marx and Engels do not write that "morality, religion, and metaphysics" are illusions we somehow could do away with. Rather, they say that these forms of consciousness are ideological in the sense that philosophers believe debates over what we mean when we talk about "morality, religion, and metaphysics" is what counts in establishing authoritatively what they are about. In other words, that existence is a non-discriminatory reflection on the nature of determination.

If we grant them the idea that existence has two senses, then the passage above would say something different. It would say that the ways we cope with the question of extinction, namely the conception of property we embrace to build an existential foothold, contributes to the overall authority of ontological thought. In the 1847 *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx comments that "[t]he hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist."[49] However deterministic, even fatalistic, this passage might sound, we cannot interpret Marx to mean anything like "efficient causation," for that would entail he is offering yet another theory of determinacy; a mechanistic one, to be precise. More in line with his critique of traditional metaphysics, the "hand mill" is the sort of technology, which in helping us generate an existential foothold, *may* authorize feudal stratification into serfs, lords, and kings. But it *could not*, for example, authorize anything like modern individualism. Individuality, private property, and modern science are backed up by ontological categories emerging from modern rationalist and empiricist philosophy that are authoritative because they successfully build an existential foothold. Indeed, they might be *too* successful for their own good, given our ecological crisis.

---

[48] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 36-37.
[49] Karl Marx, "The Poverty of Philosophy," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works,* vol. 6, 166.

It is in light of this, "The German Ideology" comments that "slavery cannot be abolished without the steam-engine and the mule jenny, serfdom cannot be abolished without improved agriculture."[50] If we are to "abolish" serfdom, which is to say, for the grip of some ontology over us to vanish, then some other way to build an existential foothold must be available. The technology on hand, or the result of cumulative economic transactions, may open up the "playbook," so to speak, of otherwise unthinkable social and political scenarios, and ultimately rethought ontological categories. Marx and Engels summarize that "history is the succession of the separate generation, each of which uses the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations."[51] There is no mechanical cause-effect relation, just as there is no "determination in the last instance," as Althusser argued,[52] because these both still interpret materialism to be another non-discriminatory account of determinacy, one surprisingly similar to reductivism biological naturalism and physicalism. In other words, our ability to build an existential foothold through some conception of ownership narrows down or opens up the kinds of ontological systems and metaphysical distinctions that may be authoritative. It is in *this* manner, not as metaphysical causation, that ancient slavery in the household is connected to naturalized social hierarchies, and these to an authoritative metaphysics of natural and world purposiveness.

Traditional Marxism interprets the critique of political economy as emerging from an ontology of production and an even larger metaphysics of biological and physical reductionism.

---

[50] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 38.
[51] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 59.
[52] That is to say, for Althusser the economy casually determines seemingly non-economical social life ultimately even though it does not seem to determine me typing these words right now. Althusser all but sees economics as traditional metaphysics, especially modern rational philosophy, understands substance. In other words, the economy is for him a matter of determinacy, in particular of social ontology. For more on this see Louis Althusser "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx*.

On this view, biological needs, production, and natural processes as presented in modern physics are what is most fundamentally real. Materialism's basis would not be considerably distinct from philosophical naturalism's belief that the world is made of physical entities, processes, and particles. But if Marx thinks existence has two senses, with extinction playing a role in establishing authority, then his metaphysics cannot ultimately be a naturalism as traditionally understood. Marx and Engels write in "The German Ideology" that "the celebrated unity of man with nature has always existed in industry, and so has the 'struggle' of man with nature."[53] In whatever way we conceptualize materialism, the bottom line is that it should say the following: objects are defined by the conceptual distinctions that determine them whose authority depends on their role towards building an existential foothold. Now, in even broader strokes, materialism argues that metaphysics overly emphasizes determinacy at the cost of surveying the philosophical role of what I believe is ultimately a matter of "natural decay."

In the writings between the 1850s and 1860s, those on political economy, Marx paints a detailed picture of the ways natural decay is crucial in establishing the authority of a conception of the world. In his comments on Hegel written in the unpublished 1857 "*Grundrisse*" he says that

> Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being.[54]

Echoing ideas from "The German Ideology," what distinguishes materialism from Hegelian philosophy is the concern with "being" as produced rather than "being" as thought. In my interpretation, this means to grapple with "existence" as a question of extinction and not only as

---

[53] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German ideology," 40.
[54] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 101.

a matter of determinacy. Further, in the 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx adds the following note: "just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness."[55] In order to see why some conception of the world gains or loses its hold over our theoretical and practical beliefs, we need more than the back and forth relation between ontological commitments and their most basic metaphysical assumptions. Philosophically speaking, we need a theory for why any discourse on determinacy is essentially haunted by the radical risk of losing authority in existential ways not quite considered by Hegel.

The longer answer to this requirement lies in looking at the idea of natural decay, which we may piece together from the critique of political economy and in relation to Marx's prior notes on materialism. The 1867 volume 1 of *Capital* frames its study in the following way:

> The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears [*erscheint*] as 'an immense accumulation of commodities;' the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity.[56]

Commodities are bought and sold in the open market because, or rather *if*, they are objects of need. For us to know what capitalism is ultimately about, we should know just how it fulfills private commercial interests by finding needs for what it sells. Marx was especially fascinated by this and made that known in writing.[57] To frame this as a question, what exactly is the process by which private commercial desires alone also satisfy needs so that commercial exchange is considered "fair"? This is a way for also asking why Hegel embraced liberal economics in the

---

[55] Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 29 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 261.
[56] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 125. In his foreword to the *Grundrisse*, Martin Nicolaus touches on Marx's struggles in finding a starting point for his critique of political economy. He finally settles on the commodity, in Nicolaus eyes, because it is "that category which occupies a predominant position within the particular social formation being studied." Martin Nicolaus, 'Foreword,' in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 37.
[57] See *The Communist Manifesto* for remarks on capitalism's innovate, dynamic, and unrelentless forces.

Philosophy of Right. In Hegel's eyes, the market coordinates my particular needs and those of everyone else in a way that presents it as a universal system to satisfy human needs. But Marx thinks that by studying what commodities are he may show that such is really a distorted story.

Marx arrives to this by analyzing the notion of "value" in quite a philosophically interesting manner, as David Harvey notes.[58] In essence, his reply to Hegel's appeal to liberal economics and to market economists themselves is this: the "universal" character of the market, orchestrating particular wants and needs, is a partial story emerging out of the exceeding theoretical emphasis on determinacy. Besides conductor of interests, the market is just as much a collection of profit-motivated *particular* commercial interests. These collection of these chaotic interests does repeatedly fall short of carrying out what might be described as the universal "need for needs and wants," such as during economic crises like the housing market collapse in 2008 or the oil market implosion in 2020. But the philosophical basis for knowing this lies with natural decay. The logistics of supply and demand do not by themselves say why the need for food should bring along "food deserts," or why the need for haircuts requires low-paid service jobs. In broad terms, the narrow emphasis on determinacy does not let us consider entirely why we produce and how we go about doing it. In other words, that natural decay is the reason why we need an existential foothold and the constant production of objects.

But to understand natural decay, considering that *Capital* looks at the ways capitalism essentially operates, it is crucial to untangle Marx's approach to David Ricardo's "labor theory of

---

[58] For instance, in *A Companion to Marx's Capital*, Harvey gives the following anecdote to illustrate this: "[o]ne year I tried to read Capital with a group from Romance languages program at Johns Hopkins. To my intense frustration, we spent almost the whole semester on chapter 1. I'd keep saying, 'Look, we have to move on and get at least as far as the politics of the working day,' and they'd say, 'No, no, no, we've got to get this right. What is value? What does he mean by money as commodity? What is fetish about?' and so on … it turns out they were all working in the tradition of somebody I had never hear of … that person was Jacques Derrida." David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), 4.

value." If we want to know what happens under private property in order to construct an existential foothold, then we should look into how people come to own things. For Ricardo, commodities' "exchange-value," namely the ratio of "x" tables worth the same as "y" chairs, is not explained by the fact that people want them, meaning their "use-value," or the number of them available for purchase. Rather, as Marx puts it, it is a matter of the "[s]ocially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for any given society."[59] In the standard explanation, "x" tables are worth "y" chairs because the same social labor time was used to produce them. In this line of thinking, people come to own by exchanging equally valuable items under the common denominator of social labor time. Ricardo's position, when considered in relation to what it might mean to say that objects decay, turns on this: to build an existential foothold, societies need economies and that essentially means privatized production plus markets within which the equal or "fair" exchange of useful objects happens.

Marx does in general agree with Ricardo's idea of value. This is so because it centers on the toil and grind of production instead than on, for example, Adam Smith's markets of supply and demand. But Ricardo also stops short for Marx. He considers these toils, all of which contribute towards what I have been calling an existential foothold, in terms of the quantifiable ratio for exchange, meaning an object's price. In other words, his idea of value narrowly focuses on the ways commodities relate to one another at the expense of asking the more fundamental question of why we go to the market and exchange in the first place. Antonio Negri is thus on point in noting that Marx entertains traditional economic ideas to then redefine them almost

---

[59] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 151-152. To be exact, Marx alters Ricardo's labor theory of value by rethinking labor as *social* labor, meaning the average time it takes to produce some object given available technology.

entirely. In his words, "this capacity to grasp a concept in order to explode it, to displace the analysis each time onto a new indeterminate terrain."[60] Value might be defined as the number of hours required to produce something, but if that something has no use, then it is all but worthless in economic terms. This being so, why not look at what it means for something to be "useful," and once we are there, at the ways useful objects is made so that they can be taken to the market and sold. After all, a bead loaf may cost four dollars at the supermarket, six at the bakery, and proportionally speaking, a whole fifty dollars from a thirteenth-century baker.

But though that would seem to make sense, we cannot so straightforwardly engage in that. What Marx calls "fetishism," another of his well-debated ideas, is an argument for why neither Ricardo nor Hegel cared much for studying the ways we establish what is useful, let alone how we come to produce it.[61] "A commodity," Marx writes, "appears [*schein*] at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[62] As is common practice for Marx, when the term "appearance" [*schein*] is used he means to say that something is being systematically misunderstood. Economists reduce the question of production to either social labor time or supply and demand through the sales price that combines production costs. But that contributes only to the measurement *equalizing* commodities, to their exchange value, or as it

---

[60] Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons From the Grundrisse*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, Maurizio Viano (New York: Autonomedia, 1991), 13.

[61] Enrique Dussel traces Marx's evolving opinions about the role of fetishism in his study of capital. The fetishism of commodities was omitted in the 1867 publication, although it was included in references throughout the text. It was added as a section on its own in the 1873 edition, the last in Marx's life. For a detailed study of the drafts of *Capital*, see Enrique Dussel, "The Trouble with Ricardian Marxism: Comments on 'The Four Drafts of Capital: Towards a New Interpretation of the Dialectical Thought of Marx,'" in *Rethinking Marxism* 3, vol. 14 (2002): 114-122.

[62] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 163. Michael Heinrich sums up commodity fetishism in the following way: "Marx took aim at the central issue of the critique of political economy, namely, that the *naturalization and reification* of social relationships is in no way the result of a mistake by individual economists, but rather the result of an image of reality that develops independently as a result of the everyday practice of the members of bourgeoise society." Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 34-35.

were, the "language" internal to commodities themselves. However, neither supply and demand nor social labor time treat the ways we establish what is useful or the ways we go about producing it. Though buying bread at the supermarket or with the thirteenth-century baker involves paying money, baking bread through industrial methods or with flour milled from the local lord's estate is entirely another matter.

Therefore, the market economists' target is all too narrow. While value might not be set by imperial decree, it is also not a question of cost units or, as Aristotle says in the *Politics*, supply and demand.[63] Much of the fascination with the "fetishism of commodities" lies in Marx's argument for why such narrow focus is ingrained in economic activity itself. He comments,

> The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.[64]

We may ultimately exchange useful objects because food, appliances, even commodified experiences, are continuously subject to decay. But neither we as consumers nor economic theory actually act on this or think about it in this way. By having to exchange at the market, in knowing if things are wanted only by taking them to the market, we obsessively fixate on price. At the end of the day, then, Marx is trying to say that the *ways* we produce very much help establish what we believe we need or want and thus what has value. In other words, rare-earth minerals are needed for computer and car batteries because we *want* Netflix and Nissan Leafs and *desire* entertainment

---

[63] Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle Volume Two*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1994.
[64] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 164-165.

and a responsible lifestyle. Both supply and demand and the labor theory of value leave out this crucial connection between what we think is useful and the ways we produce at all.[65]

Put otherwise, liberal economics misses the point that value results fundamentally from the conception of property we hold and the technologies we employ in production. Economic transactions and the science of economics are "fetishistic" to the extent that they assume property and technologies count only towards price but do not set what is valuable. Marx comments that "[t]o the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labors appear [*erscheinen*] as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things."[66] In our commitment to find a common denominator between largely distinct objects, we do not see the extent to which the answer to the fundamental question "why should we produce?" sets down parameters for what is valuable at all. To be precise, the ways we set production has a large say in what we come to see as wanted. Ultimately, as Schelling also does, Marx's argument essentially says that "why" we produce is not captured by the value formula but does set up "what" could be valuable.

It is the case that materialism's goal is not to supplement economics with a metaphysics of human anthropology or a physicalist approach keen on treating existence as impersonal material events. Alfred Schmidt writes that the "social labor-process [is] a process of nature."[67] But if there is something that encapsulates Marx's materialism, it is that labor is not an ahistorical organic

---

[65] I believe Balibar to be right when saying the following about the idea of "commodity fetishism:" "[i]t is not merely a high point of Marx's philosophical work, entirely integrated into his critical and scientific work, but one of the great theoretical constructions of modern philosophy." Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 56.
[66] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 166.
[67] Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept*, 92. Schmidt is quite helpful in panting the picture of Marx as a thinker of the natural world instead of the humanistic conception still largely dominant. He writes, for example, that "[t]he content of this metabolic interaction is that nature is humanized while men are naturalized." Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept,* 78.

process, as in what makes plants grow and capture sunlight or animals hunt for food. The "labor-process" is "natural" not as in biological determinism but as in being essentially concerned with natural decay. "That" we produce depends on the fact that existence constantly deteriorates. Such is most clear when it comes to physical existence, and *Capital* is populated by mentions of what Marx calls the "wear and tear" of objects such as machinery, human bodies, and tools.[68] Here is one example of them: "[t]he same applies to the labour embodied in the spindle, without whose wear and tear the cotton could not be spun."[69] But though Marx discusses mostly physical objects, we could make the case that natural decay ultimately encompasses everything that exists, such as thoughts and institutions, which lose their currency and appeal if not reinforced or repeated.[70] Now, "what" this all translates into, to use Schelling's way of putting things, what needs or wants we connect essentially to human anthropology, such is a question whose answer emerges in the ways we recruit our sense of property and technologies against the issue of decay.

Marx comes to this point by considering one of his major interests: surplus value.[71] He summarizes that "[h]owever much we twist and turn the final conclusion remains the same. If equivalents are exchanged, no surplus value results."[72] Exactly what makes market economics so appealing, namely that it explains what fair exchange entails, also should eliminate surplus from

---

[68] For instance, the following passage: "[t]he labour-power withdrawn from the market by wear and tear and death, must be continually replaced by, at the very least, an equal amount of fresh labour-power." Karl Marx, *Capital*, 275. And this one: "[w]e will further assume that the wear and tear of the spindle, which, for our present purpose, may represent all other instruments of labour employed." Karl Marx, *Capital*, 293.

[69] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 293.

[70] I discuss this further in the next section, but it seems to me that without saying so we return to a mind-body metaphysical dualism or a natural reductionism that believes only in physical entities.

[71] In *Reading Capital*, Althusser lays out what is likely the most complete philosophical account of Marx's criticisms of classical economics and its inability to understand surplus value. Generally speaking, Althusser sees Marx as reading economists "symptomatically." That is, describing the assumptions blinded them from considering the source of surplus in production. In production liberal economists saw only costs but never stopped to think about ownership. In Althusser's neat formulation, they had "the correct answer to a question that has just one failing: it was never posed." Luis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Mecharey, Jacques Ranciere, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2016), 22.

[72] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 266.

these transactions. If we believe price is the result of production costs then it should reflect them and leave no room for surplus. But if price is about bargaining, then the high demand for my commodities should also adjust upwards the costs for raw materials I use in order to account for my future further demand. Unless we are ready to bestow money with the mystical abilities to multiply itself, there does not seem to be an clear answer. And as a matter of fact, Marx does think economic theory going back to Aristotle as placing hopes on some magical way in which money begets more money. In his sarcastic tone, "by virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs."[73]

Be that as it may, we want to know not only what explains surplus but why we continue to believe that money begets money. Said otherwise, as Balibar puts it, why is it that "fetishism is not a subjective phenomenon or a false perception of reality [but] constitutes rather the way in which reality cannot but appear."[74] We seem to find it troublesome to detach ourselves from the fact that value is realized in the market, in the moment of exchange, and thus conclude that surplus has to emerge in that process as well. As both David Harvey and Michael Heinrich underscore, despite my Walkman containing ten units of labor time, the painful fact that no one wants to buy it means that its potential value cannot be realized.[75] Being wanted, then, has an enormous say in what value is about. Our answer to the question of surplus and to what value means at all therefore lies in the ways we produce. Neither value nor surplus value are strictly speaking concepts concerned only with exchange.

---

[73] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 255.
[74] Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 60.
[75] As Henrich sums up, "[t]he substance of value, and thus the value-objectivity, is something only obtained by things when they are set into relation with one another in exchange." Michael Henrich, *An Introduction*, 53.

In his transition from exchange to production, Marx highlights the connection between the making of useful things and how surplus comes about:

> [L]et us therefore, in company with the owner of money and the owner of labour-power, leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes places on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow them into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice 'No admittance except on business.' Here we shall see, not only how capital process, but capital itself is produced. The secret of profit-making must at last laid bare.[76]

Economics typically sees production as a component towards a cost formula expressed as price. But such cannot be the entire story because formulas like this must at some point break down. In short, what was not made in the restricted economic sense has no value. Neither humans nor the entire natural environment for that matter are made in such a way. In consider production, what is ultimately key are not production costs but the mechanism through which what was not made in the economic sense is brought into economic calculations.[77] Depicting that would give us a good sense as to what surplus is and ultimately some insight into production's philosophical basis.

It is with that reason in mind that Marx substitutes the discussion of commodities for a study of the process of production. In my language, away from the restricted rules of exchange and towards what happens when production is understood as grappling with existence's decay.

---

[76] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 279-280.

[77] The question of how to understand this point in which Marx no longer criticizes economic discourse but transitions into what seems like a metaphysical discussion about labor, divides interpreters. Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, wants to be faithful to Marx's spirit without accepting the metaphysics of *homo economicus*. In his words, "[w]e would distinguish this spirit from other spirits of Marxism, those that revert it to the body of Marxist doctrine, to its supposed systematic, metaphysical, or ontological totality (notably to its "dialectical method" or to "dialectical materialism"), to its fundamental concepts of labor, mode of production, social class, and consequently to the whole history of its apparatuses." Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1993), 110. On the other side of the spectrum, G. E. Cohen, the most influential "analytic Marxist," argues in *Karl Marx Theory of History* for a determinist Marxism. Scarcity and human intelligence are the foundations of a naturalist metaphysics that guarantees not only a struggle for survival but the development of technological innovations. He writes, for instance, that with Marx "the battle in the soul is replaced by the battle with the elements, a war of labour reproducing itself in antagonism between and inside men. The biological and geographical condition which for Hegel were but instruments of and opportunities for spirit's self-assertion have their autonomy restored to them." G. E. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 22.

Natural resources of whatever sort, and we may include human labor, though not made are to some degree owned. Individuals could own estates and corporations purchase rights to the subsoil or hire the physical and intellectual labor of hundreds. What Marx repeatably calls "primitive accumulation" is the way ownership used under capitalism to gear production towards that existential foothold. That is, property as acquired before we reflect on and establish rules for ownership, and which is used to control the production process. In his words, "an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but its point of departure."[78] In my view, resource ownership is no primarily about going to the market and engaging in equal exchange and based on predetermined rules. It is instead about *control* over the ways we build an existential foothold. Commodities from oil, sugar, to meat, as much as ownership of factories, oil fields, or intellectual copyrights, all represent command over the process through which we address the deterioration of consumer objects, city infrastructure, and our own bodies.

It is control that is ultimately at the root of surplus value. Its "secret," as Marx likes to call it, can be summed up as this: liberal conceptions of value overlook that in owning the ways we produce, whether the natural environment, assembly lines, or "Silicon Valley" tech laboratories, companies own *all* products that end up in the market. When they reimburse factory workers or technicians, they do so according to the hours worked or the agreed upon contract but entirely independent of total production. In other words, anyone who does not own the production process is reimbursed a "fair" wage according to the rules of social labor time. But whoever owns food production, telecommunication industries, car companies, or delivery services, receives not

---

[78] Karl Marx *Capital,* 873. Marx writes elsewhere: "[t]he legend of theological original sin tells certainly how man came to be condemn to eat his bread in the sweat of his borrow; but the history of economic origin sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential….and from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work." Karl Marx, *Capital*, 873.

a wage or compensation but rather owns and enjoys the value of all products minus expenses. The more output, then, the cheaper the expenses are, the more enjoyment. In Michael Henrich words, "only because the wage is not viewed as payment of the value of labor-power, but rather as the payment of the value of labor, can surplus value appear as profit, that is, as the fruit of capital."[79] To put it in contemporary terms, surplus emerges from the fact that owners have what is essentially a "copyright" to all products sold in the market, while non-owners are paid for their contributions and must rent a copyright license to go about their lives.

Hence, at stake in the idea of value is much more than liberal economics could chew. To ask about ownership and to ask about prices in the market are two different kinds of questions. The latter is a question asking us to calculate either the sum total of social labor units in an object or the equilibrium between supply and demand. It is a matter of considering a certain useful object, my Honda hatchback or Microsoft Word license, under a certain rule for determining value, such as social labor time. To put it in my terms, value in this way is about determinacy, the distinctions that render something what it is, in this case as applied to commercial objects. But ownership is not defined by social labor time or market equilibrium but is rather presupposed. The "abode of production," as Marx calls it, should not make us think of a metaphysics in which factories and coal mines are what is ultimately real. It should compel us to picture value in connection to existence as a matter of extinction. Framed in this way, for any economy that practices exchange, *value expresses the decay of objects and the effort, sweat, and creativity it entails to replenish, reproduce, or create new objects.* Put as such, ownership is about building an existential

[79] Michael Henrich, *An Introduction*, 142.

foothold, and as both Enrique Dussel and Negri highlight, about the ways capital possess a copyright over the entire process fighting off decay.[80]

In the following passage, Marx sums up his thoughts on decay and underscores what useful objects do in light of existence as a matter of extinction:

> The labour process, as we have just presented it in its simple and abstract elements, is purposeful activity aimed at the production of use-values. It is an appropriation of what exists in nature for the requirements of man. It is the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, *the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence*, *and it is the therefore independent of every form of that existence*, or rather it is common to all form of society in which human beings live [emphasis added].[81]

The labor process should not just evoke images of industrial factories and assembly lines. It should also make us picture medical supply lines, farming and delivery systems, and the repair of internet server farms. These generate useful items because anything that exists decays one way or another and needs to be repaired, sustained, or replaced, be that our bodies, my car's tires, or the appeal of technologies and fashion norms. As Schmidt sums it, we produce fundamentally because "use-vale is subjected to the process of natural decay."[82] Now, the fact that with capitalism we have a situation in which the copyright over the "universal need for needs and wants" is private, meaning both decision-making and the overall process, that is but one approach towards addressing decay. It responds to the deterioration machines and the decay of our bodies by producing an unimaginable number of objects.

---

[80] Negri writes the following: "[i]n truth a great deal of ignorance or complete bad faith is required in order to reduce 'use value' (in Marx's sense) to being only a residue or an appendage of capitalist development! Antonio Negri, *Lessons*, 70. Dussel, on his part, writes that "[i]f this might be true when human beings produce collectively for their own benefit as a community, to the extent that the savings of necessary time is based in capital, that savings consisting of living labor is not for the benefit of humanity but is instead at the service of the desired increase in the value of capital itself." Enrique Dussel, "The Definitive Discovery of the Category of Surplus Value," in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, ed. Marcelo Musto (London: Routledge, 2008), 7.

[81] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 290.

[82] Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept*, 74.

In fact, both *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* underline that continuous production helps maintain the usefulness of all objects in general. For instance, in the chapter on surplus value Marx writes that "while labour, because it is directed to a specific purpose, preserves and transfers to the product of the value of the means of production, at the same, throughout every instance it is in motion, it is creating an additional value, a new value."[83] In the *Grundrisse* he is even more direct, commenting, "[t]he capitalist thus obtains this preservation of the old value just as free of charge as he obtain surplus labor,"[84] and writes a page prior, "it can therefore only be said that he reprocessed these values in so far as *without* labour they would rot, be useless."[85] Labor not only creates an output of objects in the way economics presents GDP. By continuing to produce, it extends the useful character of a range of other objects. Driving across the country might deteriorate a car, but an unused though technologically outdated vehicle could become just as useless. In Harvey's words, "it is, therefore, contact with living labor that resuscitates the value of dead labor congealed in past products."[86]

As I describe in more detail in the next section, at the center of natural decay is the idea that without constant repetition deterioration wins the day. In the way Marx emphasizes, without constant replenishing things, they rot, whether they are used or not. Technologies become outdated, infrastructure deteriorates, and fashion or music norms turn stale. In order to build the existential foothold Marx talks about from his middle writings onward, we need more than a stockpile of canned goods or survivalist gear. We need constant production, reinvention, and creative reuse. As Marx's writes, without constant replenishment "we deal with that

---

[83] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 316.
[84] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 356.
[85] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 355.
[86] David Harvey, *A Companion*, 118.

deterioration, which no doctor can cure, and which little by little brings about death."[87] And that applies for Marx to physical items through the wear and tear of machines, outdated airports, and deteriorated ecosystems.

It is precisely as such that the authority of conceptions of the world is challenged in existential ways not anticipated by idealism. It is not enough to say what determinacy is and how it comes about, even if that involves the contingency of entering the world in this or that way. We need to also consider how authority is kept up, sustained, and repaired. Marx thought of materialism as saying in detail, more than Hegel and Schelling do, what is it that we do to avoid outright extinction. In producing, exchanging, consuming, we might not be doing metaphysics in the standard sense but we help replenish the deterioration of objects without which reason's authority would not be possible. We call this "value," and see it the clearest when unemployment reaches unimaginable levels, institutions fumble, and supply lines and medical labs are strained. That is a test not only for political and economic institutions but for the objectivity of modern science and its most intimate ontological categories.

Such are the fundamentals of Marx's theory of natural decay. Overall, it argues that reason's authority depends on the ways our accounts of the world help build an existential foothold and ward off entropy. Although this idea develops in Marx's middle period, his critique of political economy offers a detailed picture of what it means to generate an existential foothold and thus of the ways reason's authority might be tested. But this theory leaves unanswered questions in connection to German idealism, especially metaphysics without ontology. I consider that in the following section.

---

[87] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 312.

IV. Materialism, the Accountability Gap, and Metaphysics Without Ontology

The term "natural decay" is mine and not Marx's. It is used twice by Alfred Schmidt in *The Concept of Nature in Marx* to explain the relationship between labor and nature in what is ultimately his non-romantic theory of the natural world. Here is one of those instances in which Schmidt touches on natural decay: "a use-value is subject to the process of natural decay," and explains this as "[t]he 'transformation' of the materials of nature by the destructive force of the extra-human influences exerted by nature."[88] My intentions in using the term are more philosophical. By this I mean as a label that bundles together, both, the splitting of existence into determinacy and extinction and the ensuing need for an existential foothold. Ultimately, natural decay is the case for why the deterioration of objects is philosophically relevant. It should be read as a realignment of German idealism's emphasis on the question of determinacy. And more generally, of metaphysics' as the study of substance, or "what does not change, " as opposed to entropy.

It would not be wrong to ask if Hegel does not already address this, perhaps even better. He does, after all, touch to some extent on decay and extinction by conceiving reason's authority as pending on grappling with presuppositions it knows only in hindsight. In one stroke Hegel renders the "queen of all the sciences" essentially precarious and revisable. We could then interpret this as comments towards reason's exposure to extinction or decay. In recent readings of Hegel this feeling is echoed and emphasized, for instance Karen Ng's idea that for Hegel reason is essentially "life."[89] On this reading, reason loses the analytic sheen it enjoyed during the heights of rationalism. As life, what is more, it lives or dies together with the fate of historical communities. Probably with something like this in mind Marx returns to Hegel in his late years,

---

[88] Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept*, 74.
[89] See Karen Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

declaring in the preface to *Capital*, "I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker, and even here and there, in the chapter on the theory of value, coquetted with the modes of expression peculiar to him."[90] Marx is particularly keen on Hegel's rejection of the "thinking of things" in favor of a social and historical sense of objectivity as "authority."

Despite these similarities, there are substantial differences. In my opinion, materialism's key philosophical insight argues that precariousness and revisability still interpret natural decay from the perspective of determinacy. For such organistic readings of Hegel, entropy would be connected to how reason finds itself continuously exposed to challenges it is unable to entirely eliminate. But in its most compelling presentation, materialism would argue that this does not go far enough. For it, the activities reason engages in to replenish or repair itself as "life" gain an upper hand that in principle generates immensely adverse and unforeseen consequences. Marx's turn to economics paints a picture of how the mundane acts we do feed into circuits of capital flows and industry demand that then come back to dictate those very mundane acts. He sums up that "capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living-labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[91] If we thus are persuaded to say that reason is "life," we should then be able to explain how it engages in practices that entrap it in unintended immense circuits of production or domination. How life, as it were, carries along more "life" than it can handle.

To some significant degree, this line of argument matches Schelling's own doubts in idealism. He too attends the question of existence and concludes that "to be" is not about definitions but creative interpretations that help us make sense of why there is something and not nothing. Marx holds a similar belief. We wrongly detach entropy from metaphysics proper

---

[90] Karl Marx, *Capital,* 102-103.
[91] Karl Marx, *Capital,* 342.

because we start off from the assumption that existence is about timeless "substance." Note in these remarks Marx's "Schellingian" approach:

> The legend of theological original sin tells certainly how man came to be condemn to eat his bread in the sweat of his borrow; but the history of economic origin sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential….and from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work.[92]

Despite the economic language, as Schelling does, Marx argues against the idea that a system's original assumptions could then be retroactively rationalized using the rules of that system. Just as Schelling puts it, these presuppositions cannot be reintegrated into a rational complete account because they are external to the system they set up. Applied to Marx's economic interests, that who came to own what before the "eternal" rules of free market exchange were set up should not be retroactively legalized using those rules.

With such in mind, Manfred Frank sums up that "there existed a powerful tradition of materialistic argumentation which, nourished by Schelling's late lectures, was critical of Hegel."[93] Both Schelling and Marx conclude that existence is more than the network of distinctions through which determinacy is established. Marx splits existence into two with the goal of saying in so many words that existence is also about what Marcela Garcia calls "facticity," meaning the concern over why we exist the way we do.[94] These kinds of questions are for both essentially open-ended and both are suspicious of rational philosophical replies as doing more interpretive

---

[92] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 873.
[93] Manfred Frank "Schelling's Critique of Hegel and the Beginning of Marxian Dialectics" in *Idealistic Studies* 19, vol. 3 (1989): 254. For more on the Schelling-Marx connection see also Jürgen Habermas, "Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling's Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the History of Philosophy," in *The New Schelling*, eds. Judith Norman and Alistair Welchman (London: Continuum, 2004).
[94] In other words, not what kinds of distinctions and their social normative expression led us to understand ourselves in this or that way. Instead, *why* we are the kinds of beings that express themselves in such a way and are continuously subject to historical or environmental contingencies and crises.

harm than good. Thus, whether it is the 1840s attention to the proletariat challenging Hegel's ideal state, or his comments on the violent "primitive accumulation" that establishes rules for private property, the objective is to put the finger on facticity as undeniably crucial. Marx and Schelling both look past philosophical system-thinking to underscore just how important contingencies are to the ways we theoretically think of ourselves and practically live.

But those similarities also reveal a central disagreement. To the materialist's eyes, the major issue with rational beginnings is that they detract from seriously considering the entropy brought along by natural decay. Rational starting points blur the connection between what might be authoritative and what helps us keep entropy at bay. To put it as a question, why do I believe in metaphysical purposiveness so that my local lord seems to have the natural authority to demand three quarters of my harvest? If existence is more than the Hegelian "back and forth" between metaphysical distinctions and their determination, we still must say how objectivity as authority comes into being. Marx and Schelling part ways over this issue. For Marx, storytelling as creative thinking about the world does not go far enough. It does not consider what Marx believes is the mechanism that connects existence as extinction to reason's authority. That is, mundane acts under some conception of property, as in ordering groceries on Instacart, chip away or back up the authority of liberal politics and economics by warding off natural decay.

Be that as it may, materialism has bigger fish to fry for it to really be a realignment of idealist philosophy. Such can be put in the following way: does natural decay and thus what draws us to an existential foothold pertains only to physical objects? It would surprise no one to say that Marx does generally have physical objects in mind. His infamous comment about the

"real social foundations" sustaining the "superstructure" is just one among many.[95] Despite this, though, he does occasionally dabble in other issues. Consider this comment on Greek art:

> But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.[96]

The first sentence reads as one would expect a Marxist art reading to do. But in the next sentences Marx wonders why aesthetic pleasure survives if art forms are mere articulations of economic circumstances. As he asks, in what sense "is Achilles possible with powder and lead?"[97] We obtain no real answer to this question but, by asking what kept Greek art alive all this time, Marx does think it over out of the standpoint of natural decay. Why has its hold on us not deteriorated as Homer's world has? This then opens up an avenue to consider if non-physical objects, as in memories, institutions, or artistic appeal, ward off decay as physical objects do: through reproduction, repetition, exchange, and circulation.[98]

It is true that materialism emphasizes physical life. But we could advance the claim that it should include anything we say "exists." I believe in fact this might be the only avenue to escape physicalism or metaphysical dualism. This is, to be exact, that if only physical objects deteriorate,

---

[95] His remarks are: "relations of production constitute the economic structure of the society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy: Part One," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 29, 263. In the 1845 *The Holy Family*, this positivism is even more pronounced. Marx and Engels write that "from real apples, pear, strawberries and almonds I form the general idea 'Fruit,' if I go further and imagine that my abstract idea '*Fruit,*' derived from real fruit, is an entity existing outside me, is indeed the *true* essence of the pear, the apple, etc." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Holy Family: Critique of Critical Criticism," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works,* vol. 4 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 57.

[96] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 111.

[97] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 111.

[98] Deleuzian-inspired Marx interpretations often emphasize labor's creativity in order to combine intellectual with physical labor under one singe banner. A good example of this is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*. This get us closer to the idea that production should not be essentially linked to physical production. But it depends on a vitalistic metaphysics of labor that is ultimately too idealist. That is to say, it does not treat what Marx thought was unique about his materialism: the question of extinction emerging from the the entropy introduced by the deterioration of objects. Not creative creation but labor to keep entropy at bay. See part one to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

and if materialism is called so because it believes physical life has priority, then we are likely headed for a reduction of non-physical entities to physical life. Non-physical objects cannot but seem as less real, perhaps even as pure illusions. But materialism can dodge this option by committing instead to the following: *that everything is "natural" not because it is physical but because everything is subject to decay in one way or another*. On this model, we are able to find pleasure in Greek art because knowledge of Greek life was written about, taught in primary education, debated over, in such way that made it readily available for creative reuse when the grip of medieval assumptions finally faded and artists looked elsewhere. It was repeated, reproduced, circulated, and thus kept out of entropy's danger. Unless we equate materialism with physicalism, there is no need to grab onto one single "real" process that supposedly holds decay at bay (i.e., industrial production). Objects of all sorts might be said to decay in different ways, including physical life, and each might respond to different ways of holding entropy at bay.

Furthermore, an important conclusion from Marx's turn to economics is enlarging the concrete ways natural decay translates to general entropy. What might otherwise be mundane acts, as in buying groceries or getting a haircut, are incredibly crucial to fomenting those mechanisms that prevent the deterioration of public infrastructure, social institutions, and our own bodies. It does not take a long pause of daily activity and care for cars to rust, social institutions to ossify, and public spaces to be reclaimed by nature. But Marx is clear, in the *Communist Manifesto* for example, that such unavoidable need for constant care and reuse was unleashed under capitalism with the goal of never-ending profit through new commodities in a destabilizing way. Bourgeois society, he comments, "has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of

the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."[99] Though we ought to think from the standpoint of natural decay, such does not entail embracing production or technology full stop. In producing or consuming we generate further deterioration and foment entropy, as with environmental damage. Thus, materialism's turn to economics argues, as it were, that "nothing is free:" those mundane acts that help prolong our physical existence or keep our intellectual life from fading have costs elsewhere, which we must be ready to pay or prepared to face.[100]

Such would be one manner of depicting the thesis that life brings along more life than it can handle. Marx returns continuously in *Capital* and elsewhere to the idea that someone or something has to bear the costs of abundant production, which in capitalism repeatedly become outright crises. Here is a good example on crisis from the *Manifesto*:

> Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce.[101]

What later is explained in detail as capitalism's shortsighted focus on exchange, it illustrates the idea that for materialism there are costs for everything and everywhere. Capitalism does not connect that demand for Amazon's fast delivery generates deterioration elsewhere in worker's quality of life, environment degradation, or wiping off wealth in crises. It is also a situation not unique to capitalism but more generally the result of looking at the entropy natural decay foments. In dumping garbage in the trash can I do not negate its environmental and human costs

---

[99] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works Volume 6* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 489.
[100] By this I mean as in the U.S.S.R where the measurement of progress was at one point the quantity of steel they could produce, especially in comparison to the U.S. Such entails further deterioration of lives and the environment of what cannot seem to really be state capitalism.
[101] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Marx and Engels Collected Works Volume 6*, 490.

any more than medieval townspeople avoided entropy when they polluted rivers hoping trash would simply go away. That everything we do has a cost then means the likelihood of undetected instability in that existential way not discussed in Hegel's embrace of liberal economics.

All of this bring me to what is perhaps the most important question: in what way are we still doing metaphysics without ontology and discussing the accountability gap? I am not at all convinced that Marx's materialism can be summed up as physicalism. Neither atoms or natural laws convey really what Marx means by materialism. For any reference to contradictions "working themselves out" there are a number of others problematizing such positivism.[102] Given his suspicion of rational beginning-points and his historicism, it is not his goal at the end of the day to say that "economic laws" determine what is real, so that politics, thoughts, or freedom are mere appearances. Rather, I believe Marx embraces a seeming physicalism only in order to call attention to the philosophical idea of natural decay. His materialism has no basic particles as ontological building blocks, neither labor nor the mode of production.[103] It takes on capitalism, feudalism, value, or exploitation only to the extent that they tell us the ways we put metaphysical commitments to work by guarding against extinction. Value disappears as soon as no exchange of useful objects occurs and has different meaning in slaveholding than in capitalist societies. Labor is meaningful only in light of the specific ways we keep decay at bay, as in hired or indenture labor.

---

[102] This is situation is neatly presented in the following passage of the 1852 *Eighteen Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol. 11*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 103.

[103] In fact, in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx talks about production and labor only to immediately say that such categories, in themselves, are abstraction that need to be connected to other categories and read against their historical interpretation. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, introduction.

It is in this manner that materialism is metaphysics without ontology. Its basic metaphysical commitments are to thinking existence as a question over both determination and extinction but does not commit itself to any one way that might be interpreted. In this sense, materialism is indeed not "philosophy," as in traditional metaphysics. It actually sides with Hegel and leaves behind the idea that existence can be defined by spelling out definitions, as with the "thinking of things." Materialism does not want to reduce reason to formless matter. Like Hegel, it wants to speak of objectivity as a question of authority. But it approaches this, now *against* Hegel, by bringing out the connection between an accepted view of determinacy and the tools it furnishes to build an existential foothold. For Marx, metaphysics without ontology includes more than the "back and forth" between what we think we are saying and what we are really saying. It should also include what these presuppositions let us do to literally "keep things going" and how *that* enters into the picture of such "back and forth."

In quite a Schellingian way, materialism also parts ways with what Marx sees as a lingering element of this traditional metaphysical position in idealism: the emphasis on the question of determinacy as over against natural decay. It is true that the emphasis Marx places on economics is unique in the history of philosophy. It is also the case that it responds to a feeling that was in the air by the mid 1800s. Noticed by Schelling in his turn to the positive philosophy, the question of facticity then morphed into an interest in positivism with Comte, Darwin, and Durkheim. Romantic and idealist philosophies seemed oddly suited to capture the demographic shifts, economic industrialization, and developments in biology and physics. Like them, Marx was also drawn towards the questions of extinction or social stratification. But his approach was at the end of the day not really positivist. As Jonathan Sperber sums up, "Marx was well-

acquainted with the works of the positivists and was less than impressed with them."[104] Since materialism is not physicalism it does not embrace the idea that what it means to exist might be completely spelled out by empirical tools in biology or sociology.

Instead of that, materialism does consider facticity but treats it along the lines of German idealism's accountability gap. The issue is brought into the fold for Marx by splintering existence into both determinacy and decay. That is to say, by not treating one as the other materialism can touch upon questions of class, capital, or environmental survival, without embracing the metaphysical principle that "data" is ultimately real. They are approached in connection to the ways we keep decay at bay without committing to their absolute ontological reality. Indeed, I do not see any other path for materialism to avoid positivism or metaphysics dualism than by splitting existence into two. If not, then questions over facticity are collapsed into those about determinacy and we thus end up with the positivism defined by biological or physical determinism. Marx comes to the issue of facticity, like Schelling does, in order to say that the givenness of existence or the anxieties over extinction demonstrate that rational accounts can never add up to a complete picture of the world. The question of facticity is meant to *limit* any account from laying out anything like the world's eternal ontology.

But unlike Schelling, Marx conceived the question of facticity in a way that would connect it back to his Hegelian side: the idea of objectivity as authority. Facticity becomes rather a debate over what it takes for some account of the world to be authoritative. It sums up in so many words that giving accounts of whatever sort is not enough to explain authority. That would rather entail the "making it explicit" of metaphysical commitments *plus* what these do towards the issue of extinction. Here thus lies what materialism sees as idealism's ultimate roadblock: *it*

---

[104] Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx*, 402.

was unable to conceive facticity in terms of natural decay as central, not so much to the critique of all metaphysics, but to how we establish and revise what is objectively real. Idealism saw facticity either as problematizing the idea of objectivity or escaped it altogether by concentrating on a new sense of objectivity emerging from grappling with assumptions about who we think we are what we think is real.

Although the written words of *Capital* do seem altogether different than those the *Logic* or the "Freedom Essay," they have this in common: they reject traditional metaphysics as the "thinking of things" in exchange for theorizing reason as objective but never unquestionably exhausting what the world is like. With one foot in the second half of the 1800s, Marx had the other firmly within the first.

V. Conclusion

This chapter considered Marx's materialism from a new perspective. It argued that at the highest theoretical level Marx belongs with Hegel and Schelling to metaphysics without ontology. The chapter makes the case that Marx came to this view through a realignment of German idealism's philosophy. In his early writings, he splintered the question of existence into two, meaning questions over determinacy, the central topic of idealism, and those about extinction. This then led him in his middle period to conceive materialism as the metaphysical position within which building an "existential foothold" to guard against extinction contributes towards what is understood to be authoritatively real. Ultimately, I advanced the idea that Marx realigned idealism by thematizing "natural decay" as an umbrella concept for treating all aspects of extinction vis-à-vis reason's authority, which Hegel and Schelling could not quite see.

Materialism has had many faces and as many theoretical loose ends. In bringing it closer to Hegel and Schelling's radical rethinking of metaphysics I believe some of these might be addressed. As an interpretation of metaphysics without ontology, Marx's materialism retains its

critical and political character while not losing sight of the fact that metaphysical questions cannot simply be swept aside.

Conclusion: Transcendental Ontology and Transcendental Materialism

> "How must the natural world itself be structured so that sapient subjects in all their distinctive peculiarities emerged from and continue to exist within this world?"
>
> -Adrian Johnston, *A Weak Nature Alone*

> "I believe neither the origin of life nor its possible or actual extinction should be put center stage in ontology."
>
> -Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*

Post-Kantian philosophy might be summed up as "metaphysics without ontology." That is the thesis I laid out above. It was partly drawn from the actual historical trajectory of Schelling, Hegel, and Marx, but more generally from a conceptual genealogy concerning the redirection away from metaphysics as the "thinking of things." My intention was very much to shed light on the ways Schelling, Hegel, and Marx came to terms with the implications of such monumental shift. My goal was, additionally, to consider closely some philosophical puzzles that emerged from this reevaluation of metaphysics with contemporary philosophy in mind. It is true that the story above encompasses little more than a historical slice from around the 1800s out of the then chaotic German states. But another sense, this all felt much like writing a "history of the future:" the imaginative contributions of this period as much as the dilemmas it stumbled upon seem to be with us today, alive and well.

Among contemporary approaches, those drawing on post-Kantian philosophy, two seem especially interesting. First is Markus Gabriel's "transcendental ontology," an approach largely shaped by German idealism's criticisms of reason as the "thinking of things." Gabriel agrees with idealism that going in this direction leads ultimately to the idea that the world has no logic. He then draws from this conclusion one major thesis: the world as such does not exist. At the core of traditional metaphysics, so Gabriel thinks, is the belief that its job is to paint a picture of the whole cosmos; to "say it all." Gabriel notes that such is not exclusive to modern or ancient metaphysics but alive and kicking in contemporary philosophy. Spinoza's *sub specie aeternitatis*, a commitment to God expressing the cosmos at once, assumes the "view from nowhere" and accepts that what exists does so by having a common substance. Mind and body are two attributes whose common root is God as substance. It would thus be in principle possible to gather all objects together, as with Lego pieces, into a single whole called "the world." In hence arguing against the existence of "the all" Gabriel simultaneously to undermines the belief that

existing objects have a single underlying definition that renders them able to be assembled into a whole, whether that be monads or atoms.

Gabriel's ontology is "transcendental" in the sense that he does not assume the world exists but seeks to rethink what it means to do ontology in the first place. From this it follows, Gabriel says, that we reconceive existence as essentially plural: "I claim not only that the world does not exist but also that everything exists except the world."[1] Rejecting the notion of the world leads soon enough to ontological pluralism since, in so many words, the absence of a single ordering metaphysical rule means things can in principle be otherwise. To be exact, things are actually *always* otherwise, not because we have not yet compiled all perspectives on things but because existence has no unifying principle. In Gabriel's words, "[t]here is simply no rule or world formula that describes everything. This is not contingent on the fact that we have not yet found it, but on the fact that it cannot exist at all."[2] For ontological pluralists literally every object exists, from subatomic particles, the hero Achilles, a spider's pain, or as Gabriel likes to say, unicorns. Now, this all might not exist in the same way, but without an overarching metaphysical principle to separate what is ultimately real from what is appearance, then the door is open for all things to be real in their own plural ways.

Indeed, this is what Gabriel himself says in *Fields of Sense* renders him a "realist:" "I am a fully-fledged ontological realist. As a matter of fact, in this book I will lay out a new realist ontology."[3] Since there is no general principle dictating what the world looks like, Gabriel is a "realist" in that his ontology has no way to *discount* anything from existing in the strongest sense possible, meaning as *really* objective. Put otherwise, without such metaphysical ordering principle

---

[1] Markus Gabriel, *Why the World*, 24.
[2] Markus Gabriel, *Why the World*, 28.
[3] Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 8-9.

to tell me that the physical world is ultimately what is real, I cannot then say that what defines the Rocky Mountains is their geology and not Townes Van Zandt's songs, to adapt Gabriel's Mount Vesuvius example. Both are just as real or objective, though in their own way. One as a matter of the physical sciences, the other as the content for lyrical music inspiration. Gabriel calls these contexts "fields of sense." It is a philosophical construct to describe the way an object such as the Rocky Mountains can combine seemingly oppositional definitions from both science and music. And such is the reason why Gabriel is not a subjectivist or constructivist. His ontology is based not on human individuals constructing reality out of limited experience or diverging cultures. That would still leave the door open in principle for there being one right way in which things are, though we have not discovered it.

This all seems to be similar to metaphysics without ontology. The world has no logic, which means no general principle exists for distinguishing what is real from what is not. This then leads us to the conclusion that what exists has no one single way in which it possibly does, such as reducing reality to subatomic events or monads. But there are also important differences. As Marcela Garcia writes,[4] if anything, Gabriel's philosophy is "ontology without metaphysics." I do not think the difference is merely superficial. In fact, it goes back to the heart of that eternal disagreement between Schelling and Hegel. On Gabriel's approach, the nonexistence of the world, that it is not a container-object of any kind, leads to an infinite pluralism of real objects. Since there is no metaphysical criterion to discount objects from existing, they all exist within their contexts. Now, this is an answer to the question Schelling struggled to tackle in his early philosophy. To put as a question, if reason is the source of all metaphysical distinctions, how are

[4] See Marcela Garcia, "Ontology Without Metaphysics, Existence Without a World" in *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, (2015): 146-152.

we still able to distinguish between reality and appearance? In Gabriel's Schellingian answer, we do this by positioning what exists within its own context. Poems about the Rocky Mountains are not less "real" than geological findings. But poetry is not geology and thus should not be appealed to when evaluating scientific issues. Similarly, science is not poetry and should not be used to explain why we write lyrics the way we do.

But the label "metaphysics without ontology" was intended to raise a Hegelian "red flag" about ontological pluralism. It concerns the following. Let us grant Gabriel that there are an infinite number of real objects and "fields of sense," such as Greek epic poetry, human rights, or molecular biology. But with that in mind, why do only some become authoritatively objective and in clearly particular ways? Greek epic belongs to the "field of sense" of literature and it is as real as the Peloponnesian War was. But epic poetry is also generally in line with larger Greek metaphysical commitments to world purposiveness that then help separate what is real from what is not. There was slavery in the Ancient world "intended" by nature as such and no individual freedoms or much interest in subjective interiority. Though there is no such a thing as "Ancient worldview" since as Gabriel argues totalizing always leaves something out, there are deep metaphysical principles that do seem to move across and coordinate countless fields of sense.

As Hegel sees things, this issue needs to be taken seriously and should not be left as wide-open as philosophies with basis in Schelling's pluralism do. Exactly this is what metaphysics without ontology answers. It says that although the world has no eternal logic, it does *gain* or *loses* one depending on what deep metaphysical commitments we hold. It is true, as Gabriel says, that the world as a totality of definable things does not exist properly speaking, and that in principle an infinity of fields of sense cannot be totalized. Be that as it may, it seems to me that, as Hegel believes, unthematized metaphysical distinctions do add up to something like "the world" by determining rules across a number of fields of sense. They do coalesce into a dominating rule for

what is real and what appearance. In my opinion, then, *though the world does not exist, it does persist.* Metaphysical thinking comes up empty, as Gabriel notes, but only in the sense that it cannot locate any eternal catalogue of ontological categories.[5] Thinking about the world *does*, I am convinced, gives us insight into unthematized metaphysical presuppositions, which although not the world's logic, are authoritative at some point in time and inform ontological thinking of what exists. The eternal "Hegel-Schelling" debate continues under new terms, now as an argument between ontological pluralism and objectivity as matter of authority.

Besides Gabriel's Schellingian ontology, there is Adrian Johnston's "transcendental materialism." His influences are numerous, though he does draw substantially from Žižek's Lacanian approach to idealism and Marx. Quite unique in Johnston's philosophy is the goal to substantially reconsider nature, the self, and reason instead of constructing yet another critique of culture, reason, or capitalism. Along the lines of Catherine Malabou's project on brain "plasticity," Johnston is drawn to rethink what objectivity would be like if we reject essential particles or natural processes as building blocks for physicalism as the one eternal reality. Gabriel and Johnston hence find themselves in agreement on this point. But they part ways soon enough because Johnston understands objectivity as "empirical reality," meaning the natural world. For Gabriel, we reexamine what is real by scrutinizing metaphysics' totalizing expectations, while for Johnson we reevaluate the natural sciences' reductive physicalist ontology. Johnston wants to talk about ecosystems, organisms, rock formations, but without having to accept an ontology that only has room for natural eternal laws, genetic material, or brain waves.

In *A Weak Nature Alone*, Johnston sums up his approach as such: "[t]ranscendental materialism with its anti-reductive theory of subjectivity as immanently transcendent(al) vis-à-vis

---

[5] See Markus Gabriel, *Why the World*, chapter three.

physical, chemical, and organic nature requires a certain naturalist ontology."[6] From his emphasis on "subjectivity," what seems to ultimately drive Johnston's preoccupation with nature is the following: so long as we do not consider what it is to be natural as a *philosophical* and not just scientific subject, we are bound to reach for dualism (e.g. culture/nature) or embrace some form of reductionism, even eliminativism. It is this angle of approaching the sciences that makes his ontology "transcendental." It asks us to consider what it means to be natural without appealing to metaphysical substances such as atoms, waves, or genetic codes. Similar to Gabriel, to reevaluate what is real requires we drop the commitment to "substance," namely an ultimate way in which things are. Said otherwise, Johnston embraces transcendental philosophy in that it rejects the "thinking of things," or the commitment to the world possessing a set logic. In his language, we should think "a dialectical naturalism of nature that is itself self-denaturalizing."[7]

To my mind, the dilemma Johnston underscores boils down to conceiving objectivity as authority. To be exact, it comes down to asking just how we could speak authoritatively about being natural but without binding ourselves to a reductive ontology. In order to "denaturalize" nature, that is, we need an account of existence that is really objective, meaning more than phenomenological experience, but not drawn from the committed to the world as having a set logic. In fact, Johnston points to Hegel's comments that there is to nature a certain "weakness," the "*Ohnmacht der Natur*," in that empirical facts seem unable to be easily be totalized under a single metaphysical rule. Empirical events do not just simply "flow" from natural laws or unfold seamlessly out of an eternal norm that is then embodied in animal and plant species. To my eyes, considering these notes, what Johnston is at the end of the day searching for is the accountability

---

[6] Adrian Johnston, *A Weak Nature*, 3.
[7] Adrian Johnston, *A Weak Nature*, 3.

gap. Which is to say, he thinks he can establish the authority of the sciences not in spite but rather *because* there is no such a thing as the world's logic. By rejecting anything like the world's logic we open a door for asking why reductivism is real, and from there, to wondering further about what it would take for anything to be considered real.

Elsewhere, in *Adventures of Transcendental Materialism*, Johnston disputes Gabriel's approach to ontology, concluding the following: "Gabriel's transcendental ontology, from my perspective, is a realism about transcendental subjectivity in such a fashion as to be simultaneously an anti-realism about empirical reality."[8] Quite interestingly, this amount to an accusation that Gabriel is a "subjective idealist." Johnston's borrows from the "Schelling-Fichte" debate to argue that "fields of sense" touch on empirical reality only so as to find out what objects belong in what field. For example, as one such fields, "geology" describes rocks and their formations, thus telling us what objects appear in such field. But for Johnson this would seem to introduce what is but a Platonic distinction: while the question of what objects belong in what field *is* a philosophical question, the objects themselves are not philosophically interesting. They are scientific or artistic subjects treated under the fields of "geology" or "poetry." Johnson sees in Gabriel's ontology an unacceptable distinction splitting reality into what is philosophically relevant and what is not. As was the case with Schelling's rejoinder to Fichte, only the "ideal" conceptual apparatus of the self seems to matter at all.

Now, to what extent is Johnston's picture accurate? It would not be difficult for Gabriel to issue a rejoinder. He could point out that what Johnston calls "empirical reality" is a distinction meant to get us to reflect about nature's ontology and not abstract questions of existence. But

---

[8] Johnston, *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 26.

such is a *metaphysical* distinction that Johnston needs to justify. If we grant Gabriel this point, we would then be led to the conclusion that in discussing those abstract questions we *are* debating what renders objects "determined" at all, and thus presumably what it means to be "empirical." In other words, we are back to discussing fields of sense and the objects that appear in them. Therefore, *pace* Johnston, studies of microbial life and plate-tectonic movement happen *within* fields of sense, not really at the level of ontology qua ontology.[9] For ontology proper what matters is to establish what these fields are all about and lay out the ways objects belong to numbers of them simultaneously, such as mountains being physical, poetic, or economic objects.

In point of fact, in *Fields of Sense* Gabriel critically calls "zoontology" those very attempts to connect ontology with human anthropology. At the forefront of Gabriel's mind is the belief that we are just not so important so as to be placed at the center of what it means to exist. Unless we tacitly embrace subjectivism or relativism, there is no reason why human experience is somehow more valuable than the events involving some rock on some planet in the Andromeda galaxy. Here is one of his most telling passages:

> Yet, ontology should not be a particular study of human existence, but primarily a study of existence full stop. Ontology should neither primarily, let alone exclusively, be designed to give an account of how intelligent life through a long chain of evolutionary intermediaries eventually emerged from inanimate matter. It should also not primarily address how intelligent life fits into an allegedly in itself meaningless universe….The desire to know what 'existence' is should not be conceptually driven by the desire to understand ourselves.[10]

---

[9] Gabriel's point here is nuanced. He is not saying that ontology should not ask questions, such as, is neuroscience right to think the mind equals the brain? Like Johnston, Malabou, and others rethinking nature from a post-Kantian angle, philosophy can indeed take up as questions the sciences' metaphysical assumptions about the brain. But, and this is key, such are questions of ontology vis-à-vis a particular field of sense, not ontology per se. We need to establish what fields of sense are, or alternatively, what metaphysical commitments we are operating under so that we may then critique neuroscience for using a reductive physicalist approach. This would not amount to something like the criticism of "evaluating the instruments of knowledge before we ask questions," which is an objection Johnston makes in chapter three of *A New German Idealism.* Instead, it is a properly Hegelian point, telling us that the assumptions from which we start determine the conclusions we reach.

[10] Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 37. The debate Gabriel thematizes with this passage is that between ontological pluralism and normative authority. For Hegel we cannot really speak about what is real without talking about

In what almost seems a reply to Johnston, Gabriel wants to strictly separate questions about existence from those about the human place vis-à-vis the cosmos. To some extent, I do believe Gabriel has a point. We probably do not want to confuse the question of being "natural" for a human-centered ontology or ontological relativism. Fields of sense are not spheres of human meaning within which humans remain "trapped" from discussing what is real. They are what it means to exist as such, meaning the ontological pluralism of reality itself. It would not be wrong to ask, as Johnston and Malabou do, how consciousness emerges from inanimate matter. But Gabriel's point is that this question cannot then become *the* question of the study of existence.

I do think, though, Johnson is on the right track on another sense. The quest for a "denaturalized nature," although driven by trying to account for consciousness, is not only a matter of "understanding ourselves." Johnston is reluctant to accept that the Rocky Mountains are treated philosophically by pointing to the fields of sense in which they belong. He is wary to accept *that* as an answer for what "being natural" means. Such seems to be what he has in mind when noting that "my materialist leanings incline me to see 'fields of sense' as arising from embodied minded beings in ways at least partially explicable in natural-scientific (especially biological) terms."[11] However, Gabriel's fields of sense are numerous and can delineate the Rocky Mountains in any scientific aspect Johnston wants. But "being natural" seems to have a different flavor for Johnston, one the move to define objects by placing them where they belong does not capture well enough. If "embodied" fields of sense are not a call for returning to a quasi-

---

historically situated communities and the evolving norms that govern sociality. This is why for Hegel "philosophy is its own time apprehended in thought." Gabriel might see this as zootonology, but for Hegel reason as a matter of normative authority has little to do with cultural relativism or "human" knowledge. It is about the way thought itself, ontology proper, is objective at all.

[11] Adrian Johnston, *Adventures*, 26.

Spinozistic substance out of which consciousness arises, then the issue is to explain what about embodiment is lost in Gabriel's approach.

Thus, the question at hand is: what, if anything, is really missing? It seems to me the only possible answer would be that which is not about "belonging" anywhere; which is to say not about determinacy. With the remark that fields of sense should be seen as "embodied," I believe Johnston is getting at what I called above "natural decay." Fields of sense can tell us everything about organic life, physical nature, cultural life, all of which we as sentient life simultaneously are. But natural decay does *not* concern new objects or fields of sense that then help us understand new characteristics of objects. Rather, it is about observing mammals, microbes, or the Rocky Mountains, as objects that are subject to disintegration and entropy. Organic life arranges itself, its chemical and molecular processes, so as to slow its own decay. Physical objects, such as mountains, simply fade away. For our part, we humans not only arrange ourselves to delay decay but are in turned arranged by our own circuits of production, exchange, technology and the dreads of possible extinction. To use contemporary examples, we hoard toilet paper, watch in fear as food supply lines are disrupted, or ventilator and test chemical supplies dry up. We realize that injecting trillions of dollars into the economy is not just an economic or political event but one intended to slow the rapid disintegration of existence as lived by us humans.

I believe such is what Johnston could argue is entailed by "being natural." I am not convinced that fields of sense can in principle touch on this aspect of existence. They take up the question of existence always as a matter of being determined as "such and such" in the way traditional metaphysics has done since Aristotle. And I am also not convinced by the move to patrol boundaries in academic disciplines, neatly fitting ontological questions here, whereas political, scientific, and social ones, are over there. If there was a second component to the post-Kantian criticisms of reason as the "thinking of things," besides rejecting the construct of the

world's ontology, it was to blur the lines among academic fields and philosophical questions. Not unlike the idealist displacement of the thing-like language of "mental faculties," whatever actual distinctions there might be between ontology, history, science, or normative authority, that is something we cannot assume but have to ask about once again, as post-Kantianism once did.

Be that as it may, here thus lie some of the evidence for why post-Kantian philosophy was from the start a "history of the future:" its most fundamentals debates are still ours to solve. In a New Yorker Magazine article, Joe Pinsker cites a public health expert commenting on how to explain demographic circumstances to make sense of the patterns in deaths brought about by the covid-19 pandemic. The expert notes three "causes" to account for. The first is the "medical cause," the covid-19 disease produced by the SARS covid-2 virus. The "*actual* cause," however, would be prior medical history, such as smoking, diabetes, or hypertension. But then, he adds, there is a further third cause, the "*actual actual* cause," which is to say in Pinsker words, "the bigger, society-wide forces that shaped those habits and behaviors."[12]

Post-Kantian philosophy was intended from the start as a study of these "actual actuals." Whether it be metaphysics or practical philosophy, the goal from the beginning was to fundamentally and radically reconsider what goes on in understanding something as "real." Though much has changed since then, the creativity and unbounded imagination of this period means we are likely to return again and again to what is but a past still to end.

---

[12]Joe Pinsker, "The Pandemic Will Cleave America in Two," April 10, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/04/two-pandemics-us-coronavirus-inequality/609622/.

Bibliography

Bibliography

Althusser, Louis. 2005. *For Marx.* Translated by Ben Bewster. London: Verso.

Althusser, Louis, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Mecharey, Jacques Ranciere. 2016. *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition.* Translated by David Fernbach Ben Brewster. London: Verso.

Aristotle. 1984. *The Complete Works of Aristotle Volume Two.* Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bach, Edward. 1994. *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology.* Albany: SUNY Press.

Balibar, Etienne. 2007. *The Philosophy of Marx.* London: Verso.

Beiser, Frederick. 2008. *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781-1801.* Cambrdige: Harvard University Press.

Bernstein, Jay. 2003. "Love and Law: Hegel's critique of Morality." *Social Research* 393-432.

Bowie, Andrew. 1993. *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy.* New York: Rutledge.

Bowman, Brady. 2015. *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Breazeale, Daniel, Rockmore, Tom, ed. 2010. *Fichte, German Idealism, and Early Romanticism: Fichte-Studien-Supplementa.* New York: Rodopi.

Brudney, Daniel. 1998. *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy.* Cambridge : Harvard University Press.

Carlson, David, ed. 2005. *Hegel's Theory of the Subject.* New York: Palgrave MacMillian.

Chitty, Andrew. 2013. "Recognitio and Property in the Hegel and the Early Marx." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 685-697.

Cohen, G.E. 1978. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dahlstrom, Daniel and Michael Bauer, ed. 1999. *The Emergence of German Idealism.* Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press.

Deligiorgi, Katerina, ed. 2006. *Hegel: New Directions.* Chesham: Acumen.

Derrida, Jacques. 1993. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International,.* Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Nwe York: Routledge.

Dussel, Enrique. 2002. "The Trouble with Ricardian Marxism: Comments on 'The Four Drafts of Capital: Towards a New Interpretation of the Dialectical Thought of Marx' ." *Rethinking Marxism* 114–22,.

Förster, Eckart and Yitzhak Melamed, ed. 2012. *Spinoza and German Idealism.* Cambridge: Cabridge University Press.

Frank, Manfred. 1989. "Schelling's Critique of Hegel and the Beginning of Marxian Dialectics." *Idealistic Studies* 3 (19): 251-268.

Franks, Paul. 2005. *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Gabriel, Markus. 2015. *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

—. 2011. *Transcendental Ontology: Essays on German Idealism.* London: Bloomsbury.

—. 2013. *Why the World Does Not Exist.* Translated by Gregory Moss. Malden: Polity.

Garcia, Marcela. 2016. "Energeia vs Ethelencheia: Schelling on Metaphysics Lambda and the Problem of the Pure Daß." *Topicos: Revista de Filosofia* 113-137.

Garcia, Marcela. 2018. "How to Think Actuality? Schelling, Aristotle, and the Problem of the Pure Daß." *Kabiri: Journal of the North American Schelling Society* 37-46.

Garcia, Marcela. 2015. "Ontology Without Metaphysics, Existence Without a World." *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 146-152.
Habermas, Jürgen. 2012. *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response.* Malden: Polity Press.
Halla, Kim, and Steven Hoeltzel, ed. 2014. *Kant, Fichte, and the Legacy of Transcendental Idealism.* Lahnam: Lexinton Books.
Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Harris, H. S. and George Di Giovanni, ed. n.d. *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
Harris, H. S. 1983. *Hegel's Development: Night Thoughts.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
—. 1972. *Hegel's Development: Towards the Sunlight.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Harvey, David. 2010. *A Companion to Marx's Capital Vol. 1.* London: Verso.
Hegel, G. W. F. 1948. *Early Theological Writings.* Translated by T. M. and Richard Kroner Knox. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
—. 1991. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right.* Edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
—. 2010. *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline: Part I: Logic.* Translated by Klaus and Daniel Dalhstrom Brinkmann. Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press.
—. 1977. *Faith and Knowledge.* Translated by Walter and H.S. Harris Cerf. Albany: SUNY Press.
—. 1971. *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Part III of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences.* Translated by William Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
—. 1977. *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy.* Translated by H.S. Harris. Albany: SUNY Press.
—. 2018. *The Phenomenology of Spirit.* Translated by Terry Pinkard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
—. 2010. *The Science of Logic.* Edited by George di Giovanni. Translated by George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Heinrich, Michael. 2004. *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital.* Translated by Alexander Locascio. Nw York: Monthly Review Press.
Hogrebe, Wolfgram. 1989. *Prädikation und Gensis: Metaphysik als Fundamentalheuristik im Ausgang von Schellings 'Die Weltalter'.* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
Houlgate, Stephen and Michael Baur, ed. 2011. *A Companion to Hegel.* Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
Houlgate, Stephen. 2006. *The Opening of Hegel's Science of Logic: From Being to Infinity* . West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
Hyppolite, Jean. 1969. *Studies on Marx and Hegel.* Translated by John O'Neil. New York: Harper and Row.
Johnston, Adrian. 2018. *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Zizek, and Dialectical Materialism.* New York: Columbia University Press.
—. 2014. *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Longuenesse, Beatrice. 2007. *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume One.* Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.
—. 1973. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy.* Translated by Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguins Books.
—. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works.* Vol. 29. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
—. 1975. *Marx and Engels Collected Works.* Vol. 1. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, Karl, and Engels Friedrich. 1975. *Marx and Engels Collected Works.* Vol. 3. New York: International Publishers.
—. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works.* Vol. 4. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
—. 2010. *Marx and Engels Collected Works.* Vol. 11. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
McGrath, S. J. 2012. *The Dark Ground of Spirit.* New York: Routledge.
Musto, Marcelo, ed. 2008. *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Late.* London: Routledge.
Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2020. *Antinomie.* February 27. Accessed May 12, 2020. https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/02/27/eccezione-virale/.
Nassar, Dalia. 2013. *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in early German Romantic Philosophy.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Negri, Antonio. 1991. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons From the Grundrisse.* Edited by Michael Ryan, Maurizio Viano Harry Cleaver. New York: Autonomedia.
Ng, Karen. 2009. "Hegel's Logic of Actuality." *The Review of Metaphysics* 139-172.
—. 2020. *Hegel's Concept of Life: Self-Consciousness, Freedom, Logic.* Oxford : Oxford University Press.
Norman, Judith, and Welchman Alistar, . 2004. *The New Schelling.* London: Continuum.
Ostaric, Lara, ed. 2014. *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Pinkard, Terry. 2002. *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
—. 2000. *Hegel: A Biography.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Pinkard, Terry. 1979. "The Logic of Hegel's Logic." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 417-435.
Pinsker, Joe. 2020. "The Pandemic Will Cleave America in Two." *The New Yorker.* April 10. Accessed May 17, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/04/two-pandemics-us-coronavirus-inequality/609622/.
Pippin, Robert. 2013. *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modenism.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Pippin, Robert. 2012-2013. "Back to Hegel?" *Meditations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group* 7-28.
—. 1989. *Hegel's Idealism and the Satisfaction of Self-Consciouness.* Cambrdige: Cambridge University Press.
—. 2019. *Hegel's Realm of Shadows.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Schelling, F. W. J. 2007. *Historical-Critical Introduction to Mythology.* Translated by Mason Richey and Markus Zisselberg. Albany: SUNY University Press.
—. 2006. *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom.* Translated by Jeff Love and Johannas Schmidt. Albany: SUNY Press.
—. 1856-61. *Sämmtliche Werke Abteilung 1.* Edited by August Schelling. Vol. Band X. Augsburg.
—. 2000. *The Ages of the World.* Translated by Jason Wirth. Albany: SUNY Press.
—. 2007. *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy.* Translated by Bruce Matthews. Albany: SUNY Press.
—. 1980. *The Unconditioned in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays (1794-1796.* London: Buckness University Press.
Schmidt, Alfred. 2014. *The Concept of Nature in Marx.* Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Verso.
Snow, Dale. 1996. *Schelling and the End of Idealism.* Albany: SUNY Press.
Sperber, Jonnathan. 2013. *Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
Taylor, Charles. 1975. *Hegel.* Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press.

Vater, Michael, and David wood, ed. 2012. *The Philosophical Rupture Between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondenc.* Translated by Michael Vater and David Wood. Albany: SUNY Press.

Wright, Kathleen. 1983. "Identity of Identity and Non-Identity." *Idealistic Studies* 13 (1): 11-32.

Zambrana, Rocio. 2012. "Hegel's Logic of Finitude." *Continental Philosophy Review* 45 (2): 273-284.

—. 2012. *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj. 2014. *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism.* London: Verso.

—. 1997. *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World.* Translated by Judith Norman. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press.