

Absolute Freedom in Anglophone Hegel Interpretation, and Its Implications for Technological Utopianism

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Hegel scholarship either defends a theological metaphysics in which history is a teleological unfolding of cosmic Geist; or, the evolution of Geist represents the absolutization of human subjectivity, which undergoes a Bildung that prescind from any reliance on metaphysical givens. The dilemma is between presenting Hegel as an absolute monist that is outmoded in light of modernity's skepticism towards a teleology of history; or, of reducing Hegel to the terms of modernity, as defending the absolute self-grounding of the human subject, in history without ontology. I argue that co-opting Hegel for modernity is a mistake. The post-Kantian interpretation of Hegel, that rejects any metaphysics of the absolute, leaves the human subject in a state of alienation that the dialectic process in Hegel is supposed to resolve. I argue that PKI's account of the self-grounding subject is too similar to absolute freedom that Hegel views as a dangerous fruit of the Enlightenment. Absolute freedom, having relegated God to deistic irrelevance, and stripped nature of any telos, seeks to make its own categories sovereign over those of reality.

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Intruduction

Modernity, at least in the West, has largely rejected teleological visions of historical change, that unite it to some eternal archetype. Modernity separates history from ontology, viewing social configurations as self-contained, with no intelligibility uniting them (Hammer, 2011). This disenchantment affects Hegel scholarship. Commentators avoid the theological metaphysics of a cosmic *Geist* expressing itself through the progress of history (Pippin, 2012). They extract aspects of Hegel emphasizing the historical situatedness of the human subject (Pippin, 2012). Contemporary Hegel scholarship is immanent rather than transcendent, developing an account of *Geist* limited to the historical, and avoiding any metaphysics that conflict with naturalism (Gardner, 2007).

For instance, Margolis, an American pragmatist influenced by Hegel: Hegel “historicized inquiry and cognition,” and “removed all presumptions of privileged competence from his account of what is given...” (Margolis, 2021, 106). There is no given, in the natural or supernatural order, that is independent of historicized human concepts. There is only the *Sittlichkeit*, i.e. the ethical order, defining value internally (Margolis, 2021). This is a kind of *soft* naturalism, which rejects any order transcending natural facts, but also tries to retain an irreducible account of normativity.

Yet, a historicized pluralism without ontology leads to agonized alienation that Hegel documents in the evolution of *Geist*. In historicized pluralism, the self, expressing itself within the discursive categories of its society, loses grounding in objective nature or the absolute, which would otherwise provide an explanans for the subject’s sense of significance. We generate a sense of significance within the *Sittlichkeit*, but reality in itself has no such order. Our sense of significance is a mere appearance, with no substance to compete with a world that is meaningless in itself. This generates a dialectical opposition between self-consciousness, and the non-normative vacuum. Socially constructed significance tends to collapse into the non-normative, since, without the absolute or a natural law, it has no ontological anchor (Gardner, 2007).

The erasure of any objective order beyond the *Sittlichkeit*, can generate an *absolute freedom*, in which human subjectivity tries to subsume everything under the categories of the *Sittlichkeit*, to populate a vacuum of meaning. In the 21st century, we face the prospect of a technological dystopia that seeks to reinvent nature, and to replace the transcendent with its own surveillance-driven omniscience. This prospect results from the denial of the given, i.e. a reality independent of social discourse. If we can generate significance from “whole cloth,” i.e. unconstrained by metaphysical givenness, then we vivify the “new man” of technological dystopias (Vieria, 2010). We ought not to interpret Hegel in a way that validates the darker angels of our epoch.

I will show the post-Kantian, non-metaphysical reading of Hegel (PKI), is an inverted version that absolutizes the finite human subject, at the expense of any objective natural or supernatural order. This inverts the dialectical process of *Geist* that makes the human subject

an expression of a transcendent cosmic Subject. PKI's inversion replaces *absolute knowledge* with *absolute freedom*. Rather than a union of the human subject with a transcendent absolute, that expresses itself through historical periods, historical periods, in PKI, become absolute. I will argue that reinterpreting absolute knowledge as a species of absolute freedom, abandons human subjectivity to unresolved alienation. The human subject, in PKI, faces an austere naturalism in which its sense of normativity is a mere phenomenological appearance, with no explanans in the world. The alienated human subject assumes the dangerous characteristics of absolute freedom, which Hegel diagnoses as a totalitarian impulse to rewrite reality (Hegel, 1977).

I first explain the metaphysical-religious interpretation of Hegel. In this interpretation, the human subject is not the final absolute. Instead, the final absolute is the union of the historical iterations of human subjectivity with cosmic *Geist*. "...History grasped in concept [*die begriffene Geschichte*] is the inner reality of absolute spirit" (Taylor, 1975, 216).

Second, I explain PKI, the non-metaphysical interpretation of Hegel. This interpretation highlights Hegel's idea of a *Sittlichkeit* representing the normative texture of a society, while dismissing the idea of an absolute *Geist* transcending society. The culmination of *Geist* in PKI is a society based on rational self-determination, without grounding in a metaphysical or natural order. "Absolute knowledge is the internal reflection on the social practices of a modern community that takes its authoritative standards to come only from *within the structure of the practices* it uses to legitimate...itself" (Pinkard, 1964, 262). Social practices of human society become God-like in their authority, deferring to nothing beyond themselves.

Third, I critique this deflationary account of *Geist*. The development of *Geist* is supposed to resolve the tensions between self-consciousness and nature, by presenting nature as infused by *Geist*, and so corresponding to the normativity of self-consciousness (Hegel, 1977). I argue, since PKI insists on the absolutization of the human subject to the exclusion of ontological givenness, it does not resolve the tension between the normativity of self-consciousness and an a-normative independent reality. Self-consciousness, reliant on its self-institution of norms, cannot sustain its normative phenomenology, in a hostile naturalistic world without cosmic *Geist*. The absolutized human subject of PKI, which develops norms internally, excludes nature and the supernatural absolute, like the absolute freedom that Hegel identifies as the fruit of the deeds of the Enlightenment (Hegel, 1977). Absolute freedom arises because PKI tries to ground normativity strictly in the *Sittlichkeit*, in a way the dispenses with any ontological ground. This creates a sense of peril that drives freedom to universalize itself.

The Metaphysical View: Cosmic *Geist*

The metaphysical view of Hegel presents him as endorsing a teleological conception of history, which expresses Absolute Spirit in time. We can find a basis for the culmination of this metaphysical-religious view in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on "absolute knowing" (Hegel, 1977, sect. 788). In the stage, an eternal Spirit of the universe manifests itself

as animating all historical developments in time. "...Self-consciousness has equally superseded this externalization and objectivity too, and taken it back into itself so that it is in communion with itself in its otherness as such" (Hegel, 1977, sect. 788). The apparent otherness, of cosmic Spirit and historical contingency, manifests itself as a unity (Hegel, 1977). This union of time and eternity represents a challenge to the modern disintegration of time from any teleological order. Hammer writes, "the dominant position [of modernity] ...is that history possesses no archetype whatsoever" (Hammer, 2011, 140). In modernity, historical self-determination replaces an overarching *Geist*.

Charles Taylor interprets Hegel's philosophy as presenting a series of oppositional realities, that in the end find unity in a cosmic Spirit. This dynamic, of initial opposition, and later unity, is an important preliminary to the presentation of PKI, which does not resolve the opposing parts of the evolution of *Geist*. History exhibits a "rational unfolding of purpose" that tends towards the union of seeming opposites (Taylor, 1975, 76). There is an opposition between humanity's normative subjectivity, and nature, which appears to lack purpose and so is merely blind matter, without a sense of value (Taylor, 1975). The human subject finds no purchase for its sense of value, in a nature that appears indifferent. "This Reason remains a restless searching and in its very searching declares that the satisfaction of finding is a sheer impossibility" (Hegel, 1977, sect. 239). The metaphysical-religious interpretation is a form of absolute idealism, that is able to synthesize normative subjectivity, and nature, because it claims that nature is a product of a cosmic *Geist*. This cosmic *Geist*, infusing the natural order with normativity, provides an ontological ground for the normativity of the human subject. *Geist* pre-exists nature, and so is able to meet human subjectivity, and resonate with its sense of value, so as to resolve alienation.

Hegel idealizes the world of the ancient Greeks, in which self-consciousness seamlessly expressed itself through nature and society, rather than as an antagonistic negative (Hegel, 1977). But, the development of self-consciousness leads to rupture. Taylor writes, "Man is thus inescapably at odds with himself...The exigencies of thinking carry him in opposition to life, to the spontaneous and natural in him..." (Taylor, 1975, 84). This rupture, of self-consciousness and being, is the rupture that plagues the naturalist, i.e., if all of reality is nature, then how can we explain the presence of the normative characteristics of consciousness (Gardner, 2007)? But the idealist can remedy this rupture, by positing that Spirit informs nature as an ontological ground. Normativity of human consciousness does not have to institute itself in a vacuum consisting only of natural facts, but instead finds resonance with a pre-existing normativity of a cosmic *Geist*. Hegel writes, "Spirit, just because it is the goal of nature, is prior to it..." (Hegel, 1970, sect. 376).

The general dichotomy between *substance* and *spirit* expresses the dialectical opposition between self-consciousness and the order external to it. Substance encompasses whatever is independent of self-consciousness, a brute given that is not subject to the freedom of self-consciousness. The development of *Geist* pushes through this opposition between spirit and

substance, bringing an ultimate union. The negativity of self-consciousness, in virtue of which it is *not* substance, unites with “immediate simplicity” of substance, and culminates in “self-restoring sameness” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 18). In the metaphysical-religious interpretation, there is a unity of self-consciousness and substance, since substance expresses the normativity of cosmic *Geist*. The normativity of self-consciousness does not encounter a vacuum of value-indifferent natural facts.

Geist unites the domains of substance, and of self-consciousness. “...Substance is essentially Subject” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 25). *Geist* unites the givenness of being in itself, that is unreflective, to what relates itself to itself, i.e. self-consciousness (Hegel, 1977). This final stage of unity is absolute knowledge, in which the comprehension of self-consciousness permeates fully the givenness of being. “...Self-consciousness enriches itself till it has wrested from consciousness the entire substance....” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 801). Absolute knowledge is not a liberation of self-consciousness from being, but a full integration. Taylor writes, “Absolute knowledge is the full understanding that substance must become subject, the subject must go beyond itself, become divided, be over against itself...in order to return to unity with itself” (Taylor, 1975, 214).

Progress to absolute knowledge, in the metaphysical-religious interpretation, does not involve the *abolition* of spirit, or of substance. Spirit returns to unity with itself, only after having recognized its otherness from substance. The return to itself is not an isolating withdrawal, but a synthesis. *Aufhebung*, or sublation, is a unification in the dialectical process that does not abolish the identity of the opposite (Taylor, 1975). We will see the importance of sublation when discussing the dialectical process in PKI, which appears to abolish, rather than differentially unite with, any givenness independent of human subjectivity. The naturalism of PKI entails that human subjectivity can maintain value only *in spite* of value-indifferent nature.

In the final synthesis of substance and spirit in the metaphysical-religious interpretation, finite human subjectivity finds itself the vehicle of infinite *Geist*. The freedom of the human subject operates within a “given,” a context which pre-exists its freedom. The freedom of the infinite *Geist*, on the contrary, is fully self-determining, since there is no reality that constrains its freedom (Taylor, 1975). Finite and infinite *Geist* are able to unite because the former is not absolute. I show later how PKI attributes full self-determination to *finite* subjectivity, transferring a God-like freedom to human self-consciousness.

The absolute idealism of the metaphysical-religious interpretation explains the normativity of the human subject, by establishing the reality of the natural order as already normative, i.e. *Geist* infuses it. Absolute idealism does not face the problem of accounting for normativity in a naturalistic metaphysics, devoid of *Geist*, in which normativity appears as an unprecedented anomaly. Gardner writes that the “naturalist began with a conception of the natural order shaped by natural science, and then tried to expand it to include value; he did not work from a prior, rich conception of nature, to the reality of value” (Gardner, 2007, 35). PKI tries to account for

the normativity of the human subject in a naturalistic framework that does not anticipate this normativity, generating alienation. Normativity in PKI is a self-positing, original concept, emerging in a world that does not anticipate it.

Geist In the Enlightenment. *Geist*, in the metaphysical-religious interpretation, not only underlies general oppositions in metaphysics, between self-consciousness and substance, but also drives the interaction of these oppositions in historical periods. All philosophical expressions of particular periods of history are part of a single philosophy, that of cosmic *Geist* (Taylor, 1975).

I focus on the Enlightenment, because its liberated subjectivity is similar to the self-positing *Geist* of PKI. Rather than evolving into a stable unity of subjectivity and externality, the Enlightenment develops into the Terror, a period of *absolute freedom* in which self-consciousness, prescinding from externality, seeks the brutal death of the individual. Devoid of significance except a freedom without content, absolute freedom inflicts a death of the individual that is “the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 590). I will show that PKI’s presentation of absolute knowledge is too similar to the absolute freedom consequent to the Enlightenment. Here, I describe how the Enlightenment generates alienation leading to absolute freedom, with the ultimate goal of showing that this alienation also characterizes the subject in PKI.

In the Enlightenment, pure insight opposes faith, i.e. ratiocination replaces the acceptance of a divine authority. Rational self-consciousness replaces the “naïve consciousness of absolute Being” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 554). Enlightenment rationality appoints itself its own content, rather than accepting an external given of faith. “As pure insight it [rationality] is devoid of all content; the process of its realization consists in its making itself its content...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 548).

Pure insight generates a universe devoid of spiritual significance. Rather than viewing the world as the product of supernatural *Logos*, the Enlightenment views it as mechanistic stuff, having no normative significance. Human beings become the most significant reality in the universe, usurping the role of arbiter of value from God. God in the Enlightenment is a mere *Être supreme*, a distant creator with no involvement in temporality. The irrelevant *Être supreme* cannot infuse a normative order into the material universe. “It [faith] has been expelled from its kingdom...since the waking consciousness...has vindicated earth’s ownership...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 573). In the Enlightenment, “all external reality is objectified, deprived of spiritual significance and seen as a world of sensible material things spread out before a universal scientific consciousness” (Taylor, 1975, 179). Instead of promoting an objective order, based on divine *Logos* instilling normative significance, the Enlightenment promotes the “self-will and self-fulfillment” of individual subjects (Hegel, 1975, sect. 572).

Two vacuums characterize the Enlightenment: a predicateless Absolute of a deistic God who has no involvement in time, and a mechanistic matter that has no teleological structure (Hegel, 1977). Rather than deferring to a *telos* in reality, Enlightenment rationality views it as a resource

we can use. “Nothing has its *raison d’être* in itself. Hence this is the ideology of utility...” (Taylor, 1975, 527). Normativity, in a world devoid of normative significance, becomes self-positing, not a response to an antecedent given.

The utilitarianism that replaces intrinsic significance, generates a chaotic plurality of accounts of the significance of reality. Competing interests of many individuals generate a multiplicity of interpretations. The infinite malleability of matter, lacking intrinsic intelligibility, clashes with the purposive aspirations of self-consciousness. A “bad infinite” arises, in which there is an infinitude of relative significances with no unifying intelligibility (Taylor, 1975, 181). We cannot be *bei uns* with a universe with an unintelligible infinity of potential uses. This unintelligible infinity evokes the suspicion that *our* meaning, is not necessarily *the* meaning, of things. “There must be a final order of things which all partial goals serve...” (Taylor, 1975, 181). The drive for objective order is the plight of the alienated subject in naturalism, which finds its normativity without resonance in a value-indifferent nature.

The metaphysical-religious interpretation highlights the instability of the Enlightenment, since its rejection of faith creates a vacuum of meaning, only to replace it with a chaos of relative meanings. The Enlightenment generates a “vanity of self-consciousness,” in which it aggrandizes its own sense of significance without deferring to a transcendent significance in reality (Hegel, 1977, sect. 581). Vain self-consciousness struggles to find a ground for its normativity, in the austere Enlightenment metaphysics without intrinsic normative structure.

Cosmic *Geist* manifests itself as the underlying principle of both self-consciousness and nature, so self-consciousness no longer encounters a vacuum that clashes with its own sense of significance. The normativity of the subject is an explanandum of the pre-existent *Geist*. Gardner writes, “Spirit emerges from nature...but it does so because and only because Spirit was...there all along...” (Gardner, 2007,38). Cosmic *Geist* of the metaphysical-religious interpretation remedies the alienation between the value-creating subject, and the value-indifference of reality.

Only when the Enlightenment subject stops making itself the arbiter of value, but instead surrenders to a higher, absolute subject, can it resolve the crisis of alienation born of relativistic interpretations. “Men have to accept that there is a significant reality outside of them, and in return they can feel fully *bei sich* [at home] insofar as they...see themselves as vehicles of absolute subject” (Taylor, 1975, 182).

I show, however, that, whereas the metaphysical-religious interpretation ends alienation by bringing human self-consciousness under the givenness of cosmic *Geist*, PKI presents self-consciousness as achieving independence from any given. PKI interprets the final realization of Spirit in an immanent way, as occurring in the *human* subject, which prescind from any external givenness. Absolute knowledge, Pinkard writes, “is absolute in its being entirely self-mediating” (Pinkard, 1994, 262). This self-positing of normativity, in a naturalistic framework without cosmic *Geist*, is a fragile anomaly. Normativity, in an austere naturalism that is value-

indifferent, can at best be a phenomenological viewpoint with no explanans in reality. The alienation, between the normativity of the subject and a natural domain that provides no ground for normativity, generates absolute freedom.

Absolute Freedom. PKI presents human subjectivity as prescinding from the given, and absolutizing itself. There is no synthesis with substance, i.e. reality external to the subject. We see the absolutized human subject in the Enlightenment, which rejects the given of faith, and makes pure insight its exclusive content. The liberated subject of the Enlightenment confronts a naturalistic world that does not provide a home for its sense of value. The instability of this alienation leads to absolute freedom. In order to fill the vacuum of relativistic meaning, in a world devoid of intrinsic *telos*, the Enlightenment subject tries to make its own categories universal. Absolute freedom “is self-consciousness which grasps the fact that its certainty of itself is the essence...of the real as well as of the supersensible world,” i.e. absolute freedom tries to replace any natural or supernatural order (Hegel, 1977, sect. 584). Absolute freedom’s attempt at universalization is an attempt to prevent soft naturalism from becoming hard naturalism, i.e. preventing its sense of normativity from reduction to concrete physical facts.

Absolute freedom is dangerous, since it tries to subsume all independent reality into one cohesive whole. “...Each individual consciousness raises itself out of its allotted sphere...but grasps itself as the Notion of will.... [and] therefore, can only realize itself in a work which is a work of the whole” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 585). Absolute freedom appoints itself the universal Notion, not a relative perspective, and so attempts a totalitarian takeover of society.

Absolute freedom is the outcome of the vacuum of significance characterizing the Enlightenment. Without an intrinsic *telos* or a divine *Logos*, the normativity of the subject finds itself in an alien world. To remedy this alienation, and to avoid the loss of normativity to mere natural facts, the subject tries to violently impose itself on reality. Absolute freedom is the cruel totalitarianism of the Terror, arising when Enlightenment has to “taste the fruits of its deeds.” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 580).

The metaphysical-religious interpretation remedies this destructive absolutization of the subject. Instead of absolutizing itself, the subject surrenders to the higher Subject of cosmic *Geist*, which provides a ground for the normativity of the human subject. The human subject no longer has to try to self-posit its own value, but finds resonance in the fabric of reality. The metaphysical-religious interpretation corrects the error of the Enlightenment, which “tries to make man’s subjectivity alone dominant instead of participating in the dominance of the absolute subject” (Taylor, 1975, 182).

PKI: History Without Ontology

PKI is post-Kantian in that it dispenses with any ontological vision surpassing Kantian epistemological restrictions. A spiritual monism, claiming that historical stages are the unfolding of a cosmic *Geist*, is ontology about reality in itself that Kant rejects in his critical philosophy. Kant replaces ontology with the analytic of the understanding (Kant, 1998). The

metaphysics of spiritual monism makes claims about things *in general*, i.e. about the absolute structure of reality independent of human experience.

A corollary to the rejection of metaphysics in PKI is a preeminence given to human autonomy. Having rejected metaphysics, the human subject cannot ground its moral judgment on a metaphysical given independent of itself, e.g. commands of God or natural law. The full realization of self-consciousness, in PKI, occurs when the human subject becomes its own basis of authority. Pinkard writes,

we have come to understand that the only things that could count for us as authoritative have to do with our understanding ourselves as historical, social beings. In the modern account, there can be no room for...‘matching up’ our practices with ‘natural laws’ or ‘Platonic forms’... (Pinkard, 1994, 265)

The historical configuration of society determines its own values, rather than accepting them from an authority beyond history. The relevant word here is *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical order. Human subjects self-generate authority within a *Sittlichkeit*, not as vehicles of a transcendent *Geist*. “Spirit is the ethical life of a nation in so far as it is the immediate truth—the individual that is a world” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 441). The individual occupies a particular social space, from which it issues norms relative to the social space. In PKI, normativity emerging from the *Sittlichkeit* encounters no authority higher than itself. Normativity arises in a naturalistic framework, aligned with natural science, that is value-neutral, lacking cosmic *Geist*. PKI tries to somehow expand this natural order to include normativity, through the notion of the *Sittlichkeit*, even though these norms have no ontological anchor in the fabric of reality. PKI generates a soft naturalism, that retains both naturalism and an account of normativity, as self-instituted in an a-normative vacuum.

Margolis presents Hegel as endorsing this construction of value within a social order, without ontological ground in a cosmic *Geist*. “Hegel may be rightly thought to have anticipated Wittgenstein in holding that the ground of knowledge is not a proposition...of any kind but a *form of life*” (Margolis, 2021, 285). Truth is not a correspondence of a proposition to absolute reality, but is relative to a form of life. “...Knowledge no longer requires foundations or a source of certainty; it requires just what moral and political objectivity require—namely, a constructive grounding in historical life” (Margolis, 2021, 285). We do not seek some *Ding an sich* independent of the sociocultural norms of the *Sittlichkeit*.

PKI challenges the “myth of the given,” i.e. the belief that there is some content, external to our conceptual structures, serving as a ground for knowledge. The myth of the given informs accounts of knowledge grounded in sense data, i.e. input that comes from outside the network of conceptual normativity. Raw sensations, the myth of the given insists, serve as an entry-point for the objective world, that is not relative to the discursive network of significance of the social space. Givenness is a myth, because knowledge arises only within the conceptual space. Conceptuality goes “all the way down,” instead of connecting to the non-conceptual (Sellars,

1997, 14). Knowledge does not evolve from things acting on us, but from our *taking things as something* (Watkins, 2012).

For PKI, normative authority does not derive from a non-epistemic given, e.g. a transcendent God or an objective natural law independent of discursive historical configurations. Normativity arises in a naturalistic world stripped of cosmic *Geist* and intrinsic order. Absolute knowledge is absolute, for PKI, insofar as norms are internal to the social space, not in the sense of a metaphysical synthesis with a cosmic order inscribed into reality. Prior realizations of *Geist*, before knowledge becomes absolute, rely on an external given (Pinkard, 1994). In natural science, for instance, we build knowledge by observing natural phenomena *given* to observation. "...Modern natural science must accommodate itself to the world; it cannot determine it..." (Pinkard, 1994, 262).

PKI shifts the locus of significance to human autonomy, away from an antecedent cosmic order. The union of the absolute, nature, and the human subject, in the metaphysical-religious interpretation, through the antecedent reality of cosmic normativity, becomes the abolition of nature and the absolute, in PKI, making room for the absolutization of the finite subject. Soft naturalism, since it is a form of naturalism, requires that normativity have only a phenomenological significance for a subject, but no ontological basis that would conflict with naturalism. Margolis writes, "The world of absolute and infinite *Geist* is, finally, the presumptuous daring of a contingent creature transformed into a being that invents its own realm of freedom...!" (Margolis, 2021, 285). The culmination of *Geist* is not a metaphysical merger of time and eternity, but the absolutization of a moment in time.

PKI posits a groundlessness, in which human subjectivity can choose nihilism, or self-ground its values. There is no option for reliance on an antecedently normative, metaphysical given. Normativity is self-instituting, in a naturalistic framework that is a-normative. Self-institution of value permits soft naturalism, because it does not require any metaphysics distinct from naturalism (Gardner, 2007). "If the modern project were to avoid the slide into nihilism, it needed an account of itself that showed that the loss of the intelligibility of there being a natural or 'given' hierarchy of ends could be transformed...into a *self-grounded* set of ends" (Pinkard, 1994, 270).

In Pippin, we see the same absolutization of the finite, contingent subject. Pippin's Hegel pursues Kant's project of centralizing the finite human subject at the expense of a metaphysical absolute. Hegel's idealism radicalizes Kant's, by abolishing the distinction between concepts and intuitions. Instead of cognition that receives pure extra-conceptual intuition, Hegel's idealism establishes concepts as informing even intuitions, so that the conceptual structure of the subject is absolute. "Hegel departs...from Kant...with the denial that a firm distinction can ever usefully be drawn between intuitional and conceptual elements..." (Pippin, 1989, 9). Since conceptual structures encounter nothing independent, they enjoy absolute self-determination. The absolutized subject has the freedom of cosmic *Geist* in the metaphysical-religious

interpretation, which self-determines its own vocation, instead of receiving it as given (Taylor, 1975).

But, absolute knowledge in PKI is too similar to absolute *freedom*. Absolute freedom is a dangerous stage in the development of *Geist*, in which, rather than a reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) with nature and the absolute that shares the normativity of the subject, self-consciousness tries to abolish both, in a project of self-universalization (Hegel, 1977, sect. 584). PKI lacks theoretical resources for stable identity for the absolute or the domain of nature, that would differentiate it from the abolitionary project of absolute freedom. For PKI, there can be no metaphysics of things in general, or givenness that is independent of conceptual structures. The choice is between nihilism or self-grounding. PKI presupposes the austere metaphysics of naturalism, that denies a spiritual order of normativity (Gardner, 2007). Yet, Hegel's development of *Geist* aims at *Aufhebung*, rather than abolition of what is extra-subjective. "This [*Aufhebung*] is Hegel's term for the dialectical transition in which a lower stage is both annulled and preserved in a higher one" (Taylor, 1975, 119).

PKI and Absolute Freedom

PKI shifts the locus of absolute knowledge, away from a cosmic *Geist*, to human subjectivity. PKI attributes a God-like status to "a fully self-determining culture" (Hammer, 2011, 74). Instead of a theological voluntarism, in which God's will determine authoritative norms, we have a historical voluntarism (Hammer, 2011). PKI is not an intellectualist account of authority, in which society intellectually discerns some independent order of value, with which it attempts to align itself (Pink, 2011). "...It was crucial for the modern project to show that...self-grounding goes all the way down, that there is not some 'object of consciousness' that we must simply take as 'given'..." (Pinkard, 1994, 270). PKI adopts the austere metaphysics of soft naturalism, which posits normativity in a natural world that is originally devoid of it, and so there is no intellectually graspable normative order in the fabric of reality (Gardner, 2007). PKI grounds normativity in the self-instituting subject. Normativity is a construction of the subject in a world that is value-indifferent, a voluntaristic product of the will of the subject, not an objective structure perceived by the intellect.

But, as Gardner clarifies, the anomalous normativity in soft naturalism is in peril of collapsing into hard naturalism. Without a cosmic *Geist* imparting normative intelligibility to the world, normativity can have grounds only through social construction. But the soft naturalist cannot insist that socially constructed value has an ontological root in reality, lest she stray from naturalistic commitments. Without ontological foundation, normativity becomes a mere appearance or phenomenological perspective taken by a subject. The hard naturalist can dismiss this perspective, as the mere phantom of organized matter that happens to have developed an anomalously normative psychology. Normativity that figures in a *perspective* of a subject, does not make any claims about normativity *is*, with which a hard naturalistic might disagree.

The soft naturalism of PKI confronts, in its defense of normativity, a natural world that sustains no norms, and so saps any norms that might arise. PKI grounds significance entirely within the social space, without establishing any resonance between the normativity of the social space and the normativity of objective being. Hegel, however, in the final chapter of *PhG* on absolute knowing, suggests that contingent social spaces are expressions of Spirit, not self-grounding. “The self-knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself... This sacrifice is the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit in the form of *free contingent happening*...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 808). *Geist* “sacrifices” itself to infuse these contingencies, and so *Geist* transcends them. The contingencies are not self-grounding, which would include no sacrifice, since nothing sacrifices itself by remaining itself.

The fact that normativity in the soft naturalism of PKI, which denies givenness or absolute foundation, teeters on the precipice of reduction, generates a desperation of the subject. Desperation issues in absolute freedom, which finds itself in a naturalistic world shorn of significance by the Enlightenment, with its mechanistic matter and irrelevant deistic God. Like the subject in PKI, absolute freedom tries to make its own values, the values of the entire world, to remedy the vacuum. “... The individual consciousness conceives the object as having no other essence than self-consciousness itself...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 584).

Hegel insisted that we read the morning paper as a kind of prayer, because contingent events are externalizations of cosmic *Geist* (Hegel, 1974). But PKI separates the *Sittlichkeit* from ontology. This generates unresolved alienation between normativity and a normatively vacuous ontology, and ultimately the destructiveness of absolute freedom.

PKI and Unresolved Alienation. The actualization of *Geist* within history is supposed to resolve an alienation, between self-consciousness, nature, and the absolute. Alienation arises from the fact that time has no connection to eternity, but is merely a vacuous transience (Hammer, 2011). Once we realize that self-consciousness and nature are expressions of the absolute, we no longer view meaning-seeking self-consciousness as opposed to a nature that is just meaningless contingency (Hegel, 1977).

The self-grounding social space and absolute subjectivity of PKI, cannot resolve the alienation that absolute knowing in Hegel is supposed to resolve. Having dismissed a cosmic *Geist* as the origin of nature, and accepted a naturalistic framework, PKI insists that normativity is self-instituting, a liberation from nature. Nature, for PKI, is alien to normativity, since there is no cosmic *Geist* to infuse it with intelligible order. Gardner writes, “the deflationary reading asks us to think of the self-positing of normativity as *conceptually original*...,” with no prior explanans in nature (Gardner, 2007, 40). If self-consciousness is to be self-mediating, it must prescind from any normativity in nature. There is an alienation between self-instituted normativity and a-normative nature in PKI.

Self-consciousness ruptures an original immersion in nature, setting up the opposition between itself and nature. There is an antithesis between self-consciousness and *life*, or natural

biological processes: "...this Notion sunders itself into the antithesis of self-consciousness and life: the former is the unity for which the infinite unity of the differences is; the latter, however, is only this unity itself, so that it is not at the same time for itself" (Hegel, 1977, sect. 168). Nature is unity that is not self-aware (for itself), whereas self-consciousness is aware of its union of infinite subtleties in self-aware *Erfahrung*. This bifurcation is that of the self-constructing *Sittlichkeit*, that finds no corresponding normative given to which it can anchor its values in a naturalistic world.

The metaphysical-religious interpretation remedies this alienation by establishing nature as an expression of cosmic *Geist*. "Man separates from nature in the course of realizing his vocation as a rational being. But it is just this vocation fully realized...which shows him to himself as the *vehicle of Geist* and thus reconciles the opposition" (Taylor, 1975, 118). This unification of nature and self-consciousness through cosmic *Geist* agrees with Hegel's assertions that the rational is the real/actual (Hegel, 1991). Rationality permeates being. The rationality permeating being indicates a non-naturalistic metaphysics that provides a fitting framework for normativity in human discourse, i.e. human normative discourse is not something unprecedented.

But, in PKI, the alienation between the self-aware unity of the subject, and the blind unity of nature, lacks resolution. PKI theorists are clear that absolute knowledge involves the self-determination of the social space, which is internal, not corresponding to some independent order. The framework of PKI is a naturalism that denies any normative significance to nature, i.e. there is no infusion by a divine *Logos*. Normativity is self-instituting, and is not an explanandum of the natural. There is no continuity between nature and self-generated normativity of the social space (Gardner, 2007). In Pinkard, the alternative to self-grounding is nihilism (Pinkard, 1994). Self-grounding replaces the collapse of intelligibility that is given, so there cannot be unity of the rational and the actual. The contingency of the social space is absolute, in a vacuum of significance, not an expression of the archetypal *Geist*. If we construct values from whole cloth, perhaps they are only illusions of a particularly sophisticated assembly of matter that is, at bottom, value-neutral.

If significance is internal to the social space, is it *real* significance? Nature is a blind unity in PKI, not a self-aware one, which cannot ground any significance or normativity. Nature is "austere," since it dismisses the cosmic *Geist*. Human history, in PKI, ends in division, not unity. There is the social space that grounds its own significance, and neutral reality beyond that social space, which provides no givenness to which the social space might appeal.

This state of alienation generates the nihilistic destructiveness of absolute freedom. Absolute freedom tries to make its own content universal, having rejected the *telos* of independent reality. "Absolute freedom has thus removed the antithesis between the universal and the individual will" (Hegel, 1977, sect. 594). In the vacuum of significance created by the Enlightenment (the a-normative naturalism of PKI), absolute freedom tries to universalize its own sense of

significance. The self-grounding subject in PKI, which relies on its own freedom to avoid nihilism, faces an identical plight.

Absolute freedom's drive to universality self-implodes, since it must work through an individual. "...For the universal will is only an actual will in a self..." (Hegel, 1977, sect. 589). A particular self cannot be the vehicle of universalization. The non-universal contingency of the social space aspires to solidify its transitoriness in a nihilistic universe, but cannot, because the contingent social space cannot constitute the real. The normativity of the social space, without ontological anchor, succumbs to hard naturalism.

The normativity of self-consciousness, in PKI, can only futilely insist that its normativity is a fact, though there is no ground for this in a naturalistic framework. Or, this normativity can present itself as a mere representation in *gestig* (normative terms) which is a mere idle wish with no ontological ground (Gardner, 2007, 34). Without a cosmic *Geist* informing nature with normativity, self-consciousness faces an intolerable collapse of its normativity in an alien world. This collapse generates the desperate attempt of absolute freedom to impose its own normativity on reality.

The Hegel of Margolis posits only socially generated meaning, and dismisses the idea of a transcendent absolute external to the social space. "We need only replace an outmoded conceptual fixity with the discursive fluencies of encultured self-discovery" (Margolis, 2021, 278). The social space in PKI becomes an entity similar to the God of Christian theology, since it answers to no authority beyond itself (Hammer, 2011). But the social space is contingent, and cannot be God. The social space, in a naturalistic world devoid of *Geist*, cannot absolutize its values, but can only futilely fight against the slide back into value-indifferent hard naturalism. A contingent social space is a particular, not a universal.

The fragility of the social space in a naturalistic framework that offers no givenness on which to ground values, mirrors absolute freedom's response to the Enlightenment. Hammer (2011) notes that a central characteristic of the Enlightenment is *Bildung*, or a formation, in which the self-determining subject sheds its own substance. The subject sheds the contextual given that is pre-rational, what it inherits from the body, nature, tradition, and the past.

This *Bildung*, towards the absolutization of the human subject away from its substance, generates unstable alienation. It leads to a vacuum of meaning that a destructive absolute freedom tries to fill. This *Bildung* is not, in substance, distinguishable from the self-grounding freedom of PKI in naturalistic groundlessness. The self-grounding freedom of PKI also sheds any reliance on a given external to its self-determination. PKI embraces the normativity of the *Sittlichkeit*, without any matching ontology. Pippin reduces *Geist* to a "collective, socially self-realizing subject" (Pippin, 1989, 170). *Geist* is immanent, not relying on some transcendent law, like the subject undergoing the *Bildung*.

This centralization of the subject also occurs in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment upholds the spontaneity of apperception, i.e. the subject's awareness of him/herself governing

reception of all experience, as epistemically privileged, over any extrinsic given, i.e. tradition, the past, divine law, etc. Similarly, Pippin's interpretation of Hegel, as a continuation of Kant's idealism, dispenses with metaphysics received by the subject, and focuses on how *a priori* structures of the subject constitute experience. The Hegelian subject, for Pippin, accepts no given apart from its pervasive conceptual structure. For Pippin, Hegel is the culmination of Kant, who *ought* to have concluded that "what counts as given in experience is also determined by conceptual conditions, by the 'spontaneity' of the subject" (Pippin, 1989, 29).

The Enlightenment generates an alienation, between the spontaneity of self-consciousness, and the natural and supernatural deposit which this spontaneity rejects. The Enlightenment strips reality of its intelligible order, and so the normativity of self-consciousness encounters no correspondence in reality. In PKI, also, thought and being are distinct, since being, in the framework of naturalism, lacks intrinsic normativity. For Pippin, Hegel's idealism culminates in the realization that experience is not something the subject receives, but instead creates, and so the subject is free. The absolute subject, for PKI, is not a cosmic *Geist*, but a human subject facing no constraints of "finite intuitional forms" coming from outside its conceptual structure (Pippin, 1989, 9). The human subject constitutes its own normativity, without anchoring it in an extra-conceptual given, and so we see the same dichotomy between the normativity of thought, and the a-teleological mechanistic reality, characteristic of the Enlightenment.

In Pinkard, absolute knowledge is "absolutely *self*-mediating" (Pinkard, 1994, 262). But, once we remove any ontological basis, the normativity self-mediated by the subject becomes a mere dubious perspective. The reduction of *Geist* to constructed normativity, with no absolute foundation, falls prey to hard naturalism, which debunks normativity as just another natural fact. Gardner objects that "the ontological order cannot be allowed to be indifferent to what we think" (Gardner, 2007, 36). Without some correspondence to normativity in the ontological order, our subjective significance amounts to a mere appearance, at bottom identical to hard natural facts.

Absolute knowledge in Hegel is supposed to be a final union of subject and substance, a stage at which the inwardness of self-consciousness unites with externality of substance. Absolute knowledge is not absolutely *self*-mediating, because it unites with the metaphysical given. Hegel writes: "...Since the moment has the form of the Notion, it unites the objective form of Truth and of the knowing Self in immediate unity" (Hegel, 1977, sect. 805). PKI, though, presents self-consciousness as excluding substance independent of self-mediation. The subject of PKI has to liberate itself from an "objective form of Truth" that has no normative significance with which the subject might resonate.

I contend that PKI swaps absolute freedom for absolute knowledge. The self-mediation of the freedom of the human subject replaces the union of the subject with the metaphysical given. Absolute freedom emerges from the Enlightenment's enthronement of the human subject, that excludes any external *telos*. Since the Enlightenment erases a transcendent order constraining

the subject, the subject sees itself as the ultimate sovereign of the identity of objects. Absolute freedom is “self-consciousness which grasps the fact that its certainty of itself is the essence...of the real as well as of the supersensible world...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 584).

The political manifestation of absolute freedom is the Terror, in which there was a murderous effort to universalize the principles of the French revolution. Absolute freedom swallows up individuality in a general will. “The world is for it [absolute freedom] simply its own will, and this is a general will” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 584). Absolute freedom arises from the despair of a normative self-consciousness, that finds no ontological anchor for its sense of value in a naturalistic world.

Absolute freedom is self-grounding; in the way absolute knowledge is in PKI. “This undivided Substance of absolute freedom ascends the throne of the world *without any power being able to resist it*” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 585). Absolute freedom does away with the “two worlds,” i.e. the supernatural and the natural domains. All that remains “is the immanent movement of universal self-consciousness...” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 587).

This destruction of two worlds is akin to the rejection of the metaphysical given, that interferes with the self-grounding of the will, in PKI. Pinkard defines philosophy, the discipline of absolute knowledge, as “the reflection on what the community as a whole has come to take as authoritative for its evaluation of those practices in terms of an appeal to standards of rationality that themselves historically have been developed *within the history* of that community’s account of itself” (Pinkard, 1994, 262). Absolute knowledge is immanent, for PKI, within a particular historical configuration, not a union with an external/transcendent order of the two worlds.

For Pippin, Hegelian idealism unmoors the subject from any external given, making the subject’s structure of significance groundless, creative, and self-interpreting (Pippin, 1989). Hegel writes, of absolute freedom, “This movement is thus the interaction of consciousness with itself in which it lets nothing break loose to become a *free object* standing over against it” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 588). This rejection of a “free object” is too similar to the rejection by PKI of any givenness independent of conceptual spontaneity (Pippin, 1989).

Self-consciousness in PKI liberates itself from nature, but Hegel maintains that Spirit is the goal of nature. “Nature has become other to itself in order to recognize itself as Idea...Spirit is the goal of nature” (Hegel, 1970, sect. 376). Yet, PKI rejects this idealistic infusion of Spirit in nature, opting instead for an austere naturalism, and a normativity of the subject that is strictly a social construction. PKI sustains normativity as a mere phenomenology the subject, that lacks any explanation in surrounding nature. PKI insists that “we should think...not that our normativity emerges out of nature...on the basis of any ontological grounds, but that it comes forth as a historical, normative-developmental achievement...” (Gardner, 2007, 37). This phenomenology, without ontology, is too flimsy, since we can always explain the phenomenology of value in a way that reduces it naturalistic facts. The phenomenology is not

real, irreducible value, but its subjective appearance. The appearance of value can be a naturalistic phenomenon. This flimsiness of the phenomenology of value generates the desperate attempt by absolute freedom to impose phenomenology on the world absolute freedom, in order to preserve its sense of normativity from reabsorption by nature.

PKI cannot unite its normativity with nature, because there is no *Geist* infusing nature in PKI. Like absolute freedom, PKI maintains its normativity in a world devoid of independent *telos*. Both absolute freedom, and PKI, do not represent an *Aufhebung* with nature, because they generate normativity *in spite* of nature. Absolute freedom tries to impose its normativity on nature, making it subservient to itself. In absolute freedom, “essence and actuality are consciousness’s knowledge of itself” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 584). PKI, in its rejection of any givenness and its absolutization of the self-grounding subject, also fails to respect an identity external to itself. Construction of normativity, in a vacuum, is precisely the reality of absolute freedom.

The fact that absolute freedom does not achieve *Aufhebung*, but attempts an abolition, accounts for its danger. Absolute freedom is at war with being, trying to subsume all of it under its own categories. But absolute freedom can only work through an individual. There is no such thing as an “actual universal self-consciousness,” since consciousness belongs to individuals, not universals (Hegel, 1977, sect. 589). This paradox, of an aspiration to universality acting through particulars, self-implodes. “Universal freedom, therefore, can produce neither a positive work nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the fury of destruction” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 589).

PKI degenerates into absolute freedom, because it also cannot find a union between its normativity with nature. The soft naturalism of PKI, in which it tries to retain normativity in an austere naturalistic metaphysics, generates a condition in which the human subject cannot account for its own normative phenomenology. The subject tries then to rescue its own phenomenology, by universalizing it. But Hegel warns that an absolute freedom that accepts no givenness external to itself, generates a totalitarian nightmare. “The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore death” (Hegel, 1977, sect. 590).

Modern technology has given the specter of absolute freedom new hope in overcoming the “two worlds,” i.e. natural or supernatural barriers to its decisions. Technological elites have developed systems of mass surveillance and mass propaganda, that impart the ability to rewrite human nature. Through technology, absolute freedom has the ability to generate the “new man” of utopian ideologies. PKI, similarly, views the realization of *Geist* as the subject’s liberation from nature: “It is Hegel’s insight that *Geist*, normativity aware of itself as such, is ‘a self-instituted liberation from nature’” (Pinkard, 2005, 19).

Conclusion

I have critiqued post-Kantian interpretations of Hegel, which reject the theological metaphysics of the union of cosmic *Geist* and temporality. PKI absolutizes the subject, by rejecting any

givenness outside the subject, which grounds its own sense of what is authoritative. PKI is too similar to absolute freedom to be an adequate interpretation of Hegel. Absolute freedom arises from an alienation between self-consciousness and external being, and tries to solve it by abolishing being. This notion of the abolition of being is a dangerous temptation in a time of unprecedented technological prowess, paired with utopian ideologies.

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