

Spirit and Utopia: (German) Idealism as Political Theology

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In these philosophers [i.e. Kant, Fichte, and Schelling], revolution was lodged and expressed as if in the very form of their thought.

Hegel¹

Abstract

Can we understand (German) idealism as emancipatory today, after the new realist critique? In this paper, I argue that we can do so by identifying a *political theology of revolution and utopia* at the theoretical heart of German Idealism. First, idealism implies a certain revolutionary event at its foundation. Kant's Copernicanism is ingrained, methodologically and ontologically, into the idealist system itself. Secondly, this revolutionary origin remains a "non-place" for the idealist system, which thereby receives a utopian character. I define the utopian as the ideal gap, produced by and from within the real, between the non-place of the real as origin and its reduplication as the non-place of knowledge's closure, as well as the impulse, inherent in idealism, to attempt to close that gap and fully replace the old with the new. Based on this definition, I outline how the utopian functions in Kant, Fichte and Hegel. Furthermore, I suggest that idealism may be seen as a political-theological offshoot of realism, via the objective creation of a revolutionary condition. The origin of the ideal remains in the real, maintaining the utopian gap and the essentially critical character of idealism, both at the level of theory and as social critique.

Keywords: Kant, Fichte, Hegel, idealism, revolution, utopia

The goal of this paper is to revisit the political-theological concept of *utopia* as applicable to German Idealism today, after the new realist critique – "utopia" not merely as an "idealistic" political vision, but as a revolutionary condition inscribed within (German) idealist thought. I will attempt to identify the locus of the utopian at the level of the German Idealist *theory*, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for understanding German Idealism as a form of utopian and revolutionary thought – a thought *of* utopia and revolution. Ernst Bloch placed his concept of utopia in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition; Louis Marin found a "utopic" principle of the "neutral" in Kant; Daniel Whistler

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1 Hegel 1970, 20, p. 313.

importantly sees it inherent in Schelling's concept of abstraction.² For my consideration of the utopian, I will turn to what I see as a common problem in Kant, Fichte and Hegel – the problem of the origin (or production) of idealist thought as such. I also hope that this analysis might prove useful for understanding what “idealism” is or how it is produced, and why it is what it is – namely, I suggest, a utopian critique.

The goal of this paper is, in other words, to look, not for ways *out* of idealism, but for a new way *in*. I see the concept of utopia as precisely such an alternative point of entry. Since Quentin Meillassoux has taken the Kantian-Hegelian “correlationism” to be the paradigmatic case of anti-realism,³ I will follow his lead and, while not denying Meillassoux's indictment of correlationism or the related charges that some important Schellingian scholars make, attempt to identify the revolutionary and the utopian as two commitments and structural similarities, *beyond* correlationism, that German Idealism may entail. Along the way, I will suggest that idealism may be seen, onto- and anthropologically, as an anti-realist offshoot of realism *from within* realism, the creation of a revolutionary condition (a division between the old and the new) and a utopian impulse (towards a full transformation of the old) through which idealism itself receives a utopian character. It is thus precisely the “anti-” in German Idealism's “anti-realism” that will interest me here – and so I will turn to consider Kant together with the two, so to speak, most idealist of German Idealist philosophers, Fichte and Hegel. The essence of this “anti-” can, I will argue, be encapsulated in three terms: revolution, retrospectivity, and utopia.

1.

Since the entire German Idealism may be said to be engaged in the task of revisiting Kant, we would do well to begin by doing the same. As is well known, Kant's critical or transcendental idealism begins with a self-proclaimed revolutionary gesture known as the “Copernican turn,” involving a delineation of what we can and cannot know, and therefore a division between two perspectives, of knowledge and of the unknowable. As soon as a rational being begins to cognize the world, it is not the

2 Bloch 1986; Marin 1984; Whistler 2015. I am thankful to Daniel Whistler for pointing me to Marin's work.

3 Meillassoux 2008.

world as it may exist independently of us, or “an sich,”⁴ but the world as it appears to us that our mind explores, using the mind's own a priori categories to give it a rational form. No knowledge of the world that would forego the categories inherent in our mind and know the world as it is “an sich” is possible. Such is Kant's “correlationism,” as dubbed by Meillassoux. There has, of course, been a multitude of different readings of what exactly Kant means by the *Ding an sich*, but what matters here is the very existence of a certain world, point of view, set of inner qualities, or generally something which remains “outside” idealist knowledge and to which we have no cognitive access. The important point here is not that, if we were to know the in-itself, we would gain some new or “real” (kind of) knowledge – but the opposite: namely, that our (kind of) knowledge is itself something *new* compared to whatever or however things may be “in themselves” or independently of us. It is the *Ding an sich* as the ground of knowledge – the “unknown ground of phenomena” (A380),⁵ or the “true correlate of sensibility” (A30/B45) that is “unconditioned” (B xx) by sensibility – that I will call “the real” in Kant. The terms “ground” and “correlate of sensibility” point to Kant's (in)famous claim, debated among Kantian scholars, that our sensibility is directly affected by the thing in itself – a position he explicitly and firmly defended against Beck's and Fichte's criticism.⁶ Interesting in this regard is also Kant's talk of the transcendental object, the “inscrutable” ground of receptivity corresponding to the thing in itself, as the “basis of appearances” (A613/B641) that serves as a kind of indeterminate original guarantee of their unity (“the unity of the thought of a manifold in general,” A247/B304, or “the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition” as the “correlate of the unity of apperception”, A250). The transcendental object is essentially all that remains of the real strictly *within* idealism – an indeterminate ghost of the real, a haunting as well as a promise (of

4 Kant himself does believe such a reality exists, since the “conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears” sounds “absurd” to him (B xxvi). We will see, however, that the exact nature of this reality does not matter for identifying the “utopian” structure of idealism.

5 From here onwards, “A” and “B” reference the two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as is customary in Kant scholarship. “AA” references the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (Kant 1900ff.).

6 See e.g. Westphal 2004; Addison 2013.

reality).⁷ No less controversially, for Kant, the thing in itself *causally* brings about idealist knowledge, via a “causality that is not appearance, even though its effect is encountered in appearance” (B567). Both “ground” and “cause” suggest that, aside from being something new compared to the real, the ideal is a certain transformation of, and coming from within, the latter. As soon as we have begun to cognize them, things change (for us); the transformation produces newness, but this newness originates as an affect of the real.

Of course, Kant’s idealism cannot claim knowledge of how exactly the grounding or the causality function or originate; neither, shall we see, can Fichte’s or Hegel’s idealism, despite doing away with the thing in itself *sensu stricto*. This fact – that there is no satisfactory idealist answer to the question of origin as origin, or that such an answer can only be retrospective (so that, according to Kant, we can and must think, but not “really” know this origin) – belongs to the essence of Kantian idealism as a doctrine of the new. Kant’s hypothesis of a causality between the noumena and the phenomena is controversial because it transphenomenally applies a concept within critical idealism to something that precedes and grounds it while not being a part of what we can legitimately know. It is, in other words, a retrospective hypothesis, in which idealist thought must think the old (the real) using the conceptual apparatus belonging to the new (the ideal). Considered in this way, Kant’s hypothesis serves a vital function within idealism as an example of the approximatory character of our knowledge (which strives to know the thing in itself but cannot do so – the noumenon as *Grenzbegriff*, “limit-concept”⁸) and the closest we can come to appropriating the revolution of human knowledge (as the foundational event for idealist thought) to our ways of thinking.

As such, the thing in itself (and thus Kantian idealism) goes “beyond” correlationism in two directions at once. Namely, the real as the “limit-concept” works both ways: limiting our sensibility as the origin of idealist knowledge, it also limits how far this knowledge can go and

7 Cf. Grier 2004, p. 84, after referencing Kant on the manifold being “given prior to the synthesis of the understanding and independently of it” (B145-146): “At A110 Kant claims that this relation to an object is the necessary unity of consciousness and the synthesis of the manifold. The transcendental object, then, serves to account for the ability of thought ... to refer to something given to it from elsewhere (i.e., from “outside” thought). Indeed, in this very general and abstract sense, it may be viewed as the referent of such thought. In this way, the concept of the transcendental object acts to “confer upon all our empirical concepts in general relation to an object, that is, objective reality” (A 109-110).”

8 See e.g. A289/B345, or B307 on it as a “negative conception.”

where the mind has to stop in its progress. In a sort of reduplication, the unknown that affects our sensibility – the real as origin – re-appears as the unattainable closure of knowledge, creating a fundamental gap that “leaves open a space which we can fill neither through possible experience nor through pure understanding” (A289/B345). From the standpoint of idealist knowledge, the real is a “non-place”: we can retrospectively point to it (as a gap), we can think it as empty, but we cannot incorporate it fully into the newness that has broken away from it. Kant himself speaks of the noumenon as “empty for us,” so that “we” (i.e. we as embodying the ideal) “are unable to comprehend how such noumena can be possible” (A255). We can thus approximate the limit, but never reach it or close the gap.

It is this ideal *gap*, produced by and from within the real, between the non-place of the real as origin and its re-duplication as the non-place of knowledge’s closure, as well as the *impulse*, inherent in idealism, to attempt to close that gap and fully re-place the old with the new, that I would like to call *utopian*. Thus understood, the utopian has newness, or the revolutionary break of the ideal, as its objective condition. This is also a different way of looking at Jacobi’s critique of Kant’s transcendental idealism in *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism*, where Jacobi says of the thing in itself that we cannot enter Kantian idealism without it, and cannot remain within it if we accept it (“ohne jene Voraussetzung in das System nicht hineinkommen, and mit jener Voraussetzung darinnen nicht bleiben konnte”⁹).

Jacobi’s criticism perceptively identifies the core problematic at the heart of idealism; if we separate it from the specific textual problems with Kant’s concept of the thing in itself, we may regard as something *constitutive* of idealism. Namely, already in Kant and already in its underlying *theoretical* foundation, idealism defines itself through a dissatisfaction with the *status quo* of the real, seeing itself not as continuous but as proceeding from a radical break with the real in a utopian impulse pointing towards the second non-place, that of the system’s closure, also inconceivable if we want to “remain within the system.” To be sure, there are many “conservative” moments to be found in Kant’s further theoretical and practical elaboration of idealism (although one might argue those are inevitably needed to escape the permanent revolution and to structure the new), but this theoretical foundation remains and even becomes morally and politically radicalized

9 Jacobi 2004, p. 109.

in Kant's conception of "revolution" and "new man" in his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In the next sections of this paper, we will see the utopian re-appear in different variations, but always inextricable from the figure of the origin (of idealist thought).

2.

(Kantian) idealism is thus revolutionary. Politically, the real is the *status quo* against which the ideal revolts. Moreover, this revolution has its objective "cause" or "ground" in the real; we may say it is the real that revolts *against itself*, producing a standpoint of newness that can only retrospectively point to the old, but leaves the real *as such* behind. The Copernican revolution is not only methodological, and not only a revolution in thought, but may be regarded as producing a revolutionary division between the old and the new within itself – at the very foundation of idealist epistemology, ontology, and even anthropology (with the human being as the primary case of the rational being to which the knowledge of the phenomenal world corresponds). I call this division "revolutionary" not only because of Kant's use of the term in the *Religionsschrift*, or because it sharply distinguishes the new from the old, but also because it is radical, discarding its origin (which *remains*) just as it proceeds from and transforms it, looking at the world from the standpoint of the new as the "end in itself." Newness in thought turns out to be a thought *of* newness. The real as "ground" or "cause" indicates that we must think this revolution as at once immanent (if considered immanently or prospectively from the standpoint of the real) and transcendent (if considered retrospectively from the standpoint of the ideal).

Unsurprisingly, we find the same retrospective indication of a revolutionary origin, and a similar utopian gap, in Kant's philosophy of history. Here, Kant starts from the new – the birth of knowledge, freedom, and morality – as a *fact*, as if man produced it "completely from within himself" (as if "der Mensch alles, was über die mechanische Anordnung seines tierischen Daseins geht, gänzlich aus sich selbst herausbringe"¹⁰). This is why the "beginning" of history can only be "presumable" or "conjectural" for Kant ("mutmaßlicher Anfang"). Objectively, it is as if humankind were propelled – in a sort of "thrust,"¹¹

10 AA 8:19.

11 AA 8:114.

"drive"¹² or "release"¹³ – to break from nature and the animal condition by some sort of external force or stimulus; this external ground, however, is, again, the real (or "nature"). On the one hand, "if one is not to be overenthusiastic in one's speculations, then one must begin with that which cannot be derived by human reason from preceding causes of nature: the existence of a human being"; on the other, "*nature* has made this beginning."¹⁴ Of course, just like with the thing in itself, we cannot from the idealist standpoint know how exactly the beginning of history happens. For idealism, the origin of history is essentially a self-positing, an I = I.¹⁵ Kant is driven to retrospectively postulate a divide between the old and the new, such as in his remark, in the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, that our "ground" is divided into two predispositions, the animal and the moral ("daß die Natur in uns zwei Anlagen zu zwei verschiedenen Zwecken, nämlich der Menschheit als Tiergattung und eben derselben als sittlicher Gattung gegründet habe"¹⁶). There is a division here, and the real cause of this division is "grounded" in and by nature.

This division manifests itself also, theologically, in Kant's interpretation of the Genesis and the Fall, as well as in the framework underlying his *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (except this time reduplicated or inverted towards the future). "Everything begins with evil," says Kant.¹⁷ The evil and the Fall are interpreted as the beginning of knowledge. The common criticism that Kant does not make evil intelligible to us, may also be seen as inherent in the revolutionary standpoint to which Kant adheres. In the *Conjectural Beginning*, Kant himself speaks of that division as "a gap" that idealist thought cannot "endeavor to fill"¹⁸ – a phrase that echoes the "open space" that "cannot be filled" from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, referenced earlier – as well as emphasizes the revolutionary character of reason by pointing out, here as well as elsewhere in Kant's practical philosophy,

12 AA 8:115.

13 AA 8:114.

14 AA 8:109-10.

15 Cf. Philonenko 1986, p. 152ff.

16 AA 8:117.

17 AA 15/2:615; cf. AA 8:115.

18 AA 8:110.

that reason is free to act “contrary to” natural urges. Further, again, Kant can only hypothesize about nature in his philosophy of history by proceeding from the standpoint of idealist theory and from how “we” can think nature from where we are now.

This sort of anti-naturalism is not to be understood literally, but as part of the same distinction between the standpoint of the old or the “an sich,” and the standpoint of the new or the ideal. From within idealist thought, the ideal can only be cognized as if it were a product of a revolutionary creation from nothing, even as we retrospectively *think* (but not know) its objective origin in the real. Kant’s disagreement with Herder also has its origin here. Herder, with his insistence on the cognizable real ground not just of the human body, but reason, *Humanität*, and freedom as well,¹⁹ is from idealism’s point of view a “dogmatist,” as Kant calls him,²⁰ adhering to the kind of natural status quo from which idealism revolted. Idealism, by contrast, is revolutionary, not cumulative. Kant criticizes Herder for making the principle of thought into an “effect” of “invisible nature”; however, idealism itself has its “ground” and “cause” in the real – it is just that it is a retrospective critique of the real and a utopian attempt at its full and radical transformation, not its endorsement *as such*. It is in this “as such” that the root of the disagreement between Kant and Herder lies.

In his theoretical philosophy, Kant identifies the real with the domain of things as they are by themselves; in his philosophy of history, with nature – but not nature as we cognize it. At the point of the origin, there is yet no “we”; “we” can only point to that origin by looking back at it. Only by virtue of our morality, says Kant, i.e. at the culmination of the ideal and looking back at the origin, can we (retrospectively) consider ourselves to be the end goal of nature.²¹

This move will be repeated in Fichte and Hegel, because for idealism, the origin is interesting not as origin, but only as a transformation of that origin as enacted by (idealist) thought. From the standpoint of the ideal, the origin is, literally, *nothing*. Herder indicts

19 “...von der Nahrung und Fortpflanzung der Gewächse stieg der Trieb zum Kunstwerk der Insekten, zur Haus- und Muttersorge der Vögel und Landtiere, endlich gar zu Menschen-ähnlichen Gedanken und zu eignen selbst erworbenen Fertigkeiten; bis sich zuletzt alles in der *Vernunftfähigkeit, Freiheit und Humanität* des Menschen vereinet” (Herder 1989, p. 166).

20 AA 8:54.

21 AA 8:114.

Kant’s “Beleidigung der Natur-Majestät,”²² but he misses the point, which is revolutionary. Idealism “deprecates” the natural *because* it sees it as part of, and complicit with, the old *status quo* of the real. We will see this in Hegel, too, who disregards nature as origin while praising nature as “idealized” by *Geist*. This is not a contradiction, but a consequence of the transformative character of the ideal. *If* idealism were to envisage nature as such on the side of the new and as part of the revolution, the attitude could be different. Is that perhaps what happens in Schelling?

The political aspect of Kant’s utopian idealism, manifest in the progress of human history as an “infinite process of gradual approximation” towards a “perpetual peace,”²³ becomes political-theological in the *Religionsschrift*. Here, the utopian re-appears, along with the themes of evil or the uncognizable “innateness” of the beginning, as the impulse towards a full reformation of the human being and community, and as the gap between infinite approximation and “revolution” in the creation of the “new man.” Far from being purely moral or theological, the utopian here is fundamentally political, insofar as Kant speaks of a “revolution in our mode of thought” that “will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person ... but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that end.”²⁴ Here, idealist thought of newness becomes explicitly a political theology of revolution. In Kant’s articulation of “revolution,” an important reversal takes place, inherent in the utopian, a transposal of the original revolution into the *future*. From the standpoint of the real, as we suggested, the ideal (i.e., for Kant, human thought, morality, and politics) is something new. However, from the standpoint of the ideal (i.e. from within the unfolding of the new), it is the closure of the original gap – the attainment of perfect knowledge and morality – which appears as the future “revolution.” There can be no “conservative” return to the origin from within idealism, and the original non-place’s transposition into the future makes the real function not as the old, but a new reality

22 Herder 1989, p. 335.

23 AA 8:386.

24 AA 6: 97-8. Space does not permit me to go into detail about the *Religionsschrift* here, but see e.g. Wood 1999, p. 314.

(of perfection or absoluteness).²⁵ The old is thus reduplicated as the *new* new; the full transformation desired by the ideal in a sense returns to the real (retrospectivity) in an attempt to incorporate the remainder and join idealism back with realism. This makes idealism itself utopian.

3.

The thing in itself in the narrow sense does, of course, go away in Fichte, but not the specific non-place that it occupied. The utopian in the sense outlined above, as the ideal gap between the old and the new real, remains. Fichte “never tired of insisting that ... the underlying ‘spirit’ of the Critical philosophy and the *Wissenschaftslehre* were one and the same”;²⁶ as a result, the problem of the origin of idealism as such is constitutive for the *Grundlage des gesammten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794/95), too. Despite popular opinion, the science of knowing does not involve only and merely a pure self-positing of the I, or what Jacobi called a “speculative egoism.”²⁷ Rather, Fichte takes up (and transforms) precisely the term “Ding an sich” when discussing the uncognizable origin of idealism and its connection to the real, which *remains* a “something” *at the limit* of the system.

“Das Ding an sich ist etwas für das Ich, und folglich *im* Ich, das doch *nicht im Ich* seyn soll: also etwas widersprechendes, das aber dennoch als Gegenstand einer nothwendigen Idee allem unseren Philosophiren zum Grunde gelegt werden muss, und von jeher, nur ohne dass man sich desselben und des in ihm liegenden Widerspruchs deutlich bewusst war, allem Philosophiren, und allen Handlungen des endlichen Geistes zu Grunde gelegen hat. Auf dieses Verhältniss des Dinges an sich zum Ich gründet sich der ganze Mechanismus des menschlichen und aller endlichen Geister.”²⁸

“The thing-in-itself is something for the self, and consequently in the self, though it ought *not* to be *in the self*: it is thus a contradiction, though as the object of a necessary idea it must be set at the foundation

25 In this point, this paper’s ‘theoretical’ definition of the utopian is in agreement with Bloch’s principle of hope, and his famous statement that “*the true genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end*, and it will only start to come about when society and existence become radical, i.e. take themselves by their own roots” (Bloch 1986, pp. 1375-6). Bloch takes these “roots” to be the non-alienated human; here, I take the origin to mean the utopian non-place conditioned by a revolution of the real.

26 Breazeale 2000, p. 172.

27 Jacobi 2004, p. 112. Cf. Arndt and Jaeschke 2012, p. 72.

28 Fichte 1965, p. 413.

of all our philosophizing, and has always lain at the root of all philosophy and all acts of the finite mind, save only that no one has been clearly aware of it, or of the contradiction contained therein. This relation of the thing-in-itself to the self forms the basis for the entire mechanism of the human and all other finite minds.”²⁹

Essentially, Fichte thereby identifies the foundation of the relationship between the real and the ideal in idealism. What he calls the contradictory approximates what I call the utopian (at least as origin), and what he calls the thing in itself is the formal point of entry into “the non-subjective origin of the existence of appearances.”³⁰ It is “formal” insofar as it can point to the fact of the origin in the real, but not to the “how,” since the “how” is unknowable by the ideal. Not only is the “Non-I” posited by the I, but also the other way around – the I gets the *first* “Anstoß,” impetus or impulse, from the Non-I, resulting in a “Wechsel” between the Non-I and the I that constitutes the “ultimate ground,” uncognizable from within the *Wissenschaftslehre*, so that “the ultimate ground of all consciousness is an interaction of the I with itself via a Non-I considered in its various aspects” (“*der letzte Grund alles Bewußtseyns ist eine Wechselwirkung des Ich mit sich selbst vermittelt eines von verschiedenen Seiten zu betrachtenden Nicht-Ich*”³¹). The real *remains* “in the I” as something that “ought *not* to be in the I,” something belonging to the old and not to the new, thereby making it the goal of the ideal to fully this remainder of the real. We see here the same utopian impulse we saw in Kant, driving the idealist knowledge forward towards something that defines its limit. Fichte himself acknowledges this kind of constitutive ambivalence of his (and all true, non-“dogmatic”) idealism by calling it a “Real-Idealismus” or “Ideal-Realismus.”³² The first impulse thus again comes *from within* the non-place of the real, defining idealism as a utopian repulsion, via the *Anstoß*, of the ideal against and by the real. As a result, contra Jacobi, even the “most decisive idealism” (“*kräftigster Idealismus*”) does not need to endorse “speculative egoism” (“*spekulativer Egoismus*”),³³ as that would deprive it of the utopian character that drives it towards the new.

29 Fichte 1982, p. 249.

30 Kuhne 2007, p. 164.

31 Fichte 1965, p. 413.

32 Fichte 1965, p. 412.

33 Jacobi 2004, p. 112.

In a historical as well as an explicitly political-theological context, the utopian impulse re-appears in Fichte's *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, where the division between the old and the new takes the form of the unknowable beginning of history. In Lecture IX, Fichte speaks of a "normal people" at the origin of history, contrasting it with "historical" peoples, so that the beginning of history proper consists for Fichte in a diasporic dispersal of the "normal people" and its *mélange* with the "barbarians" that surround it – a *mélange* which gives birth to history: "The Normal People must therefore, by some occurrence or other, have been driven away from their habitations ... and must have been dispersed over the seats of Barbarism. Now for the first time could the process of the free development of the Human Race begin; and with it, History, the record of the Unexpected and the New, which accompanies such a process. ...now, for the first time, could History, properly so called, have a beginning."³⁴

History thus, as the ideal "record of the new," has in Fichte the same kind of revolutionary beginning it had in Kant – and just as the "Ding an sich" in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the non-place of "normalcy" remains in the intermixture of the diasporic *mélange* as something that does not properly belong but remains there, a productivity driving spirit towards the utopian closure of knowledge and history. The political aspect of this closure is envisaged by Fichte as an expressly utopian future – the final "age" or "epoch" of humankind – in which "true science" and "true religion" are fully realized and actual. In a familiar move, the old real re-surfaces as the new: the break with the "normalcy" of the origin as the *normative* newness at history's end. Importantly, nature returns here, too, as part of the "true religion" and therefore as belonging to the new; this new nature is, of course, not merely a return of the old – it has rather been transformed and "developed," so that "what is the Law of Nature to other" is to the true religion "the development of the seemingly dead carrier of the original life" ("die Entwicklung des als ertötet erscheinenden Trägers des ersten Lebens"),³⁵ i.e. a transformative return of the origin. The point of the utopian is, further, not whether or not such a future is possible in the form that Fichte gives it, but that the present, as the actuality of the utopian gap, is the constant generation "of the unexpected and the new" precisely thanks to its (ever actual)

34 Fichte 1848, p. 138.

35 Fichte 1848, p. 248 (translation altered).

revolutionary condition. It is the incessant *practice* of newness that finds its culmination in Fichte's political-theological vision of a future society.

Fichte's characteristic of the ideal as the production "of the unexpected and the new," as well as his rethinking of the "Ding an sich," point also to another aspect of idealism's theory of knowledge that goes beyond correlationism. Meillassoux is correct to point out that idealism "supplants the *adequation* between the representations ... and the thing itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity";³⁶ both Kant and Fichte show, moreover, that it is the real that provides the impulse for not conforming to the in-itself. Newness must go *against* the way things are, arriving at a correlationism only because, for the German idealists, we are the agent and "effect" of this transformation (as "caused" or "grounded" in the real). That is also why, as Meillassoux critically points out, for Kant scientific truth belongs to "a scientific community."³⁷ The original condition or, in Fichte's terms, the "ultimate ground" of idealism is thus not correlationism, but the fact of the revolutionary production of newness from within the in-itself. In place of the merely adequate, idealism puts the utopian.

4.³⁸

Hegel characterizes spirit, *inter alia*, as an activity of "ideality," *Idealität*, or "idealization", *Idealisierung*.³⁹ In Hegel, we find the actual beginning of *Geist*, or the ideal, as the new contrasted with the old, right at the start of his *Philosophy of Spirit*, in what he calls the "anthropology" – his doctrine of "the soul," encompassing sensation, individuality, and the unconscious. Anthropologically, the definition of spirit as idealization is, according to Hegel, one of the most significant,⁴⁰ so that the entire logic of the anthropology, from the "natural soul" to the "actual soul" and the transition to consciousness, turns out to be a logic of the ideal. As a logical-philosophical systematization of the realm of the pre-conscious, Hegel's anthropology may be regarded as taking up the challenge of

36 Meillassoux 2008, pp. 4-5.

37 Meillassoux 2008, pp. 15.

38 This section recapitulates some of the arguments found in a more fleshed-out form in Chepurin 2015, where I argue for the importance of Hegel's anthropology to his *Naturphilosophie*.

39 See e.g. §381Z. or Hegel 1994, p. 30. References to Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* are given via references to the relevant paragraph, with an additon of "A." for an *Anmerkung* or "Z." for a *Zusatz* where required.

40 §403A.

illuminating precisely the *Wechselwirkung* between the real and the ideal, the mind and the Non-I, of which Fichte spoke.⁴¹ However, as the very term “idealization” implies, this *Wechselwirkung* is in Hegel decidedly one-sided – it’s all about spirit and how it transforms itself and nature, and not about nature as such, this “as such” remaining, again, beyond the confines of the system proper.

Just like in Kant and Fichte, the figure of the origin appears at the beginning of the Hegelian *Geist* via a revolutionary condition. The anthropology follows the development of the individual human soul right from its birth. This birth is defined by Hegel as an “absolute negativity”⁴² and a “*saltus*”⁴³ – an emergence that takes place *within* nature but immediately goes *beyond* it, a leap from *Natur* to *Geist*, to the “immediate spirit”⁴⁴ that “must be grasped as spirit” and not as nature.⁴⁵ Spirit, says Hegel in his lectures on the philosophy of history, can only begin “from spirit.”⁴⁶ We see here the idealist move, in which, right from its moment of birth and even while still apparently “captivated”⁴⁷ by nature, spirit is already defined by its opposition to the latter. What Hegel calls the “natural soul” deals precisely with this non-real “captivity,” the remainder of “natural influences and changes” in the soul that do not properly belong to it, just as it was with the Non-I’s remainder that we saw in Fichte. As the first form of the ideal, the “natural soul” has already left the nature as such “behind”; its origin in the real now “lies behind” it, says Hegel.⁴⁸ To further emphasize the ideal as the new compared to the real, Hegel describes the event of the soul’s birth as a “play of the absolute spirit with itself,” in which the absolute directly “posits” the individual soul⁴⁹ in a sort of *creatio ex nihilo* (as seen from within the system).

41 Cf. Greene 1972 on Hegel’s anthropology as an anti-Cartesian exploration of the realm of the pre-conscious from within (Kantian) idealism.

42 §§381-382.

43 Hegel 1994, p. 52.

44 §387; Hegel 1994, p. 31.

45 Hegel 1994, p. 11. Cf. Hegel 1994, pp. 3, 20, 30.

46 Cited in Stederoth 2001, p. 106.

47 §387Z.; cf. §385Z.

48 §§391, 391Z.

49 Hegel 1994, p. 31.

What follows after that in the anthropology – and what defines its logic and structure – is an examination of how and where the soul proceeds in the wake of its “absolute” break from nature. Characteristically, the ideal immediately starts to *transform* the world that surrounds it, disregarding its independence as something irrelevant (which is manifest for Hegel even in such basic interaction of the soul with the world as the first cry of the human child or the way the child denies the “an sich” of the external world by breaking its toys and generally anything it comes across⁵⁰). Hegel’s theory of this transformation constitutes his account of sensation, *Empfindung*, understood by him not as receptivity, but as a *structured transformation* of both the soul *and* the world that surrounds it. In §401, Hegel defines it as a cycle of *Verleiblichung* and *Erinnerung*. On the one hand, the soul can reach out to and “idealize” a particular “immediate” (i.e. given or natural) sensation, “make it internal” (“innerlich gemacht”⁵¹), place it inside itself (*Erinnerung*) as another building block of its inner world.⁵² On the other, the soul can reach inside its *Fürsichsein* for a particular feeling – a memory of or a reaction to a sensation⁵³ – that it then enacts externally (*Verleiblichung*). “Pure corporeality is not sensation; it must *erinnern* itself, and vice versa, the purely inner must *verleiblichen* itself.”⁵⁴ That which comes from within the soul, claims Hegel, must be *verleiblicht* in order for the soul to “discover” it (“in order to be sensed, this content must be *verleiblicht*”⁵⁵) – it must become part of the surrounding world, influencing and transforming it.

In *Verleiblichung* and *Erinnerung*, says Hegel, the “natural” is “idealized” towards the “posited totality of its [i.e. the soul’s] *particular world*”⁵⁶ that includes its “inner” as well as, crucially, its “outer” world. This is why Hegel defines the soul’s activity of “idealization” not only

50 See e.g. Hegel 1994, p. 53.

51 §401.

52 Hegel plays here on the German word *Erinnerung* (usually translated as “recollection”), breaking it down into *Er-innerung*, “internalization.” In this *Er-innerung*, the particular sensation in question is negated so that, according to the way Hegel wants us to understand negation in the note to §403, it is “virtually preserved *even if it does not exist*” (emphasis mine).

53 Hegel 1994, p. 84.

54 Hegel 1994, p. 86. Cf. Hegel 1994, p. 131.

55 Hegel 1994, p. 84.

56 §403A.

as knowledge, but also as “appropriation” or “assimilation” of the world to spirit (“Idealisierung oder *Assimilation*”⁵⁷). This is not merely a “metaphorical” assimilation; it is, on the contrary, the soul’s body and its material power that allows it to appropriate and transform its surroundings. The soul defines its “individuality” by the “totality,” *Totalität*, of the things it touches or digests, the things it “fills” itself with (*Erfüllung* made actual, “posited” as a process of “subjectivity”⁵⁸). The soul does not simply consume what is given; it is always in the process of the “positing of nature as its [i.e. *Geist*’s] own world,” as Hegel characterizes it in §384.

The *Wechselwirkung* of sensation therefore does not leave nature “as it is.” What *Geist* starts to cognize as the “external world” at the end of the anthropology and the transition to the phenomenology, is not nature as origin, but as already “assimilated” by spirit. This is further confirmed by Hegel’s pointing out, in his lectures, that the condition for the philosophy of nature is for spirit to approach nature “geistig liebend,”⁵⁹ i.e., “in a spiritually loving way” or “with spiritual love.” Philosophical knowledge of nature proceeds from within the ideal, not nature “as such,” and is therefore retrospective. If we turn again to Hegel’s philosophy of subjective spirit in the *Philosophie des Geistes*, we will see that knowledge of the external world originates for him in the phenomenology, which follows the anthropology. Hence, by the time spirit can *think* nature, this nature is already transformed. Prior to the transition from the anthropology to the phenomenology, no philosophical knowledge of nature is possible. Like all idealist philosophy, philosophy of nature is for Hegel retrospective – it retrospectively traces how nature leads up to spirit from the standpoint of spirit itself. After suggesting that any true philosophy of nature must approach nature “geistig liebend,” Hegel remarks that “the highest foundation of such a study of nature lies *within* the human.”⁶⁰ Even if we assume that nature can be idealized fully, this idealization will fail to be simply identical with nature-as-origin, because any such identity must necessarily first go through us as the ideal.

57 §381Z.; emphasis mine.

58 §403.

59 Hegel 2007, p. 3.

60 Hegel 2002, p. 6.

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Hegel thus, too, is not concerned with knowledge of the origin as it is. Philosophy, and therefore knowledge, of the real must necessarily go through the ideal, thereby becoming retrospective, so that the system in a sense unfolds from spirit back to nature. The *Philosophy of Nature*’s place within the *Encyclopedia* is a sign of this idealist retrospectivity, and not of a continuous evolutionary progression from *Natur* to *Geist* – hence also its ambivalence as both a *critique* of nature and a demonstration of how it may “point to”⁶¹ spirit (from within spirit). Spirit marks the “utopic stage” (Louis Marin) between the non-place of the real, from which the ideal revolts in a “play of the absolute spirit with itself” (the “saltus” which is the birth of a human soul), and this play’s re-duplication as the absolute spirit “proper” at the system’s closure. In this play, the absolute is defined as being something new – a new beginning – compared to the real. Hegel aims to break with the thing in itself completely, even more so than Fichte, and he does so *within* the system, but precisely because idealism is utopian as predicated on a revolutionary condition, it needs the origin as something that remains.

The political theology of revolution and utopia inscribed in Hegel’s philosophy of spirit also entails the political in the classical sense – in the sense of the community. In the anthropology, every birth of a human soul is a “*saltus*.” Thus, every such birth is a revolution, and since, anthropologically, *Geist* “has its actual truth only as *singularity* (*Einzelheit*)”⁶² and the soul is the first form of *Geist*, spirit as such has its first actual existence precisely as an anthropological multiplicity of embodied individualities, all born from within the real in a constant re-enactment of the revolutionary *saltus*. (At the same time, every new birth is a new break with the real, therefore requiring the real, so that the non-place is re-enacted, too.) The utopian impulse becomes thereby not only the general progress of idealist knowledge and history – it becomes ontoanthropologically embodied as *Geist*, with every individual in the community as an actor on this utopian stage. In Hegel’s anthropology, “we” are the absolute and “we” are the utopian. Every single event of revolution is incomplete, and the utopian is that which bridges the event and its full enactment; consequently, utopia may serve as another name for *Geist*. This may be called the ontological “practice” of the utopian (or

61 See e.g. §381Z.

62 §391.

the absolute), which follows from its “theory.”

If we take the anthropological origin seriously – and throughout the anthropology, Hegel seems confident that his theory of the individual is supposed to flow naturally into his theory of *Gemeinwesen*, grounding the latter – then we will have to accept that, in Hegel, the seemingly stable community and social institutions rest on a volatile, revolutionary anthropological foundation. Here, however, is where the mature Hegel’s “conservatism” comes into play. If Fichte is happy with history being the production of “the unexpected and the new,” and with philosophically imagining completely new forms of science, life, and society as the closure of the utopian gap, Hegel is not. The utopian structure of idealist theory remains, but its temporality is altered: in contrast to Fichte and Kant, for Hegel the future is already here in a fundamentally actual sense – in the anthropological sense of being re-embodied in every new *saltus*, together forming a cohering, progressive ethical whole that he calls “das Werk der Welt.”⁶³ Hegel does not need to think the “new man,” as Kant does, because for him every soul *is* the “new man.” As a result, Hegel’s social theory, and his concept of *Sittlichkeit*, are a re-configuration and a re-affirmation of forms of life that are already there.

The revolutionary is the multitudal, but Hegel only needs this multitude as a *sittliche* whole, perhaps because he is wary of its revolutionary potential. In the *Philosophy of Spirit*, he endorses the spirit of newness because he requires the productivity granted by the utopian impulse, only to then attempt to reign it in because only in this way, as put under control, that he sees it being *productive* instead of *destructive*. The destructive aspect of this revolution is sharply criticized by Hegel in the anthropology – for instance, in his analysis of “youth” and “adolescence” as something which the “mature man” must grow out of.⁶⁴ The adolescent embodies in Hegel the revolutionary taken to the extreme: not content with opposing itself to the natural *status quo*, the adolescent by extension opposes himself to the *status quo of society* (“goes against the world”). The adolescent is the point at which the ideal becomes too “idealistic,” and as such it is, of course, derided by Hegel. Further, the same destructivity re-appears in the anthropology in the guise of madness, the third and most dangerous type of which, “frenzy” or “mania” (*Wahnsinn*), bears an uncanny structural similarity

63 Hegel 1994, p. 55; §391Z.

64 Hegel 1994, p. 55; §396Z.

to adolescence: just like the adolescent, the madman is driven to enact his abstract anti-social idea by means of destroying the social.⁶⁵ Hegel prefers to normalize or exclude the anti-social, and that is why he is so keen to downplay the individual’s contribution to the “Werk der Welt,” insisting on the latter’s predominantly “objective” character (“the self-executing work of the world”⁶⁶) as a sort of invisible hand for which only the sum total of the anthropological vectors matters.

Aside from the notions of “maturity” and the “healthy” (non-mad) soul, this conservative aspect of Hegel’s idealism takes the anthropological form of “habit,” *Gewohnheit*, which is a social and, so to speak, a “counter-revolutionary” form. It is the task of habit to make sure idealization functions properly and the individual does not stray too far from the norm. Every activity of *Geist* rests for Hegel on what he calls the “mechanism” of habit,⁶⁷ and every individual is thus formed by both self-discipline and that enacted by others (the family, society, etc.). Habit in Hegel controls the activity and the content of the soul alike, encompassing, further, “all kinds and stages of the activity of spirit.”⁶⁸ Since every individuality is founded on a revolutionary nothing (non-place), it has no stable foundation within the system and must thus be shaped, through individuation and habit, in such a way as to direct it towards the above-mentioned “Werk der Welt” as its *own* “subjective” goal. This contact with nothing resurfaces in the anthropology in the notion of *Geist*’s “solitude,”⁶⁹ and its important social dimension also comes to the fore in Hegel’s concept of “conscience” (*Gewissen*), described in the *Philosophy of Right* as one’s “deepest internal solitude vis-à-vis oneself,” in which everything “disappears.”⁷⁰

Despite these (very preliminary) misgivings about the fate of the anthropological revolution in Hegel’s concept of the social, it needs to be emphasized that *Geist* remains for him indispensably utopian. It is, furthermore, *because* of (and against) this utopian and revolutionary dimension that Hegel feels the need to introduce the counter-

65 §408Z.

66 Hegel 1994, p. 55.

67 §410A.

68 §410Z.

69 See e.g. §392Z., §394Z.

70 Hegel 1970, 7, p. 253.

revolutionary dimension of the individual and the social. Still, some of today's more radical readings of Hegel's political thought⁷¹ show that at some points Hegel's politics can, at least partially, be subverted from within. In other words, the revolutionary foundation defines the beginning and progression of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, as well as re-appears at crucial moments, even if sometimes only as a concern. It is perhaps starting from this fact, taken together with Hegel's anthropological analysis, that his political philosophy may be further subverted or radicalized.

In German Idealism, the utopian connects the end and the beginning – both the end of the old (the real) with the beginning of the new (the ideal), and the beginning of the new with the fully enacted newness (the new real as the non-place of the ideal's closure). As a result, what idealism generates in its revolution, is not knowledge of the old as such, but of newness inherent in or proceeding from the old (the thing in itself, the natural as such, or the real). It explores the old not to know it as such, but to fully transform it. The utopian is, for reason, a non-place – but it is also the whole history of reason. All teleology of history and spirit in Kant, Fichte or Hegel leads up to the standpoint of the present or the future because it is the point it proceeds from, and not as a depotentiation, but on the contrary, a further idealist potentiation. The origin of the ideal, however, *remains* in the real, which maintains the utopian gap (in order for the ideal itself not to become the “dogmatic” *status quo*) and thus the essentially critical (anti-dogmatic) character of the ideal, both at the level of theory and as possible social critique. Idealism creates a locus or stage for a critique,⁷² which lies between the real and the revolution as fully actualized. The utopian as the *real condition* guarantees that this condition remains relevant at all time, as long as we remain within this ideal gap, so that the utopian work of spirit is not yet done. The point of this political theology in German Idealism is by itself not correlationist; rather, while the ideal does take for Kant, Fichte, and Hegel the historical form of human thought and progress, its definition consists in transforming the old from the standpoint of the new as a result of a revolt of the real *against itself*, as an affect or effect of the real.

71 Such as e.g. the works of Slavoj Žižek or Frank Ruda.

72 In this, the concept of the utopian presented in this paper comes close to Louis Marin's analysis of the “utopic stage” in Thomas More's *Utopia*, although I do not share Marin's claim that the utopian is not itself the object of a critique (“is itself not criticized,” Marin 1984, p. 196). Making the utopian immune to critique seems to preclude any re-production, or return, of the revolutionary origin. Marin's claim may be conditioned by the fact that he gets to *define* utopia as already a “totality” (ibid., p. 195).

Perhaps this is also the point where Schelling's thought of nature is crucially aligned with the German Idealist project. To return to Jacobi's criticism, idealism cannot be a *full* correlationism without becoming solipsism. In order not to become solipsism, it must be a utopian offshoot of realism, which means that idealism *must* be revolutionary in order to be viable. Idealism works in the implicit assumption that there is something within the real that can objectively lead to a revolutionary impetus, that the real cannot exist without revolutionizing itself. Understood in this manner as a political-theological theory, idealism does not make the real secondary – it makes it primary, but in a different, radical way.

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