

The 'New Hegel' and the Question of God

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Among recent developments in continental philosophy and religious thought, one of the most prominent has been a 'return to Hegel.' It has been exemplified in the work of Slavoj Žižek, Beatrice Longuenesse, Catherine Malabou and Rebecca Comay, as well as that of a younger generation of scholars, such as Vincent Lloyd and Marika Rose. Many of these thinkers draw on the work of Gillian Rose (in whom there has been a renewed interest), as do theologians Rowan Williams, Andrew Shanks and Joshua Davis. Without wishing to minimise the differences between these heterogeneous thinkers, it may nonetheless be said that their readings of Hegel partake of a 'family resemblance', and that they may collectively be characterised as constituting a 'new' reading of Hegel.

These reading may justifiably be characterised as 'new' in relation to 'older' readings against which they react and define themselves, and we may identify two in particular. First, there are the readings propounded by the postmodernists (but by no means only by them). These thinkers, Derrida, Levinas, Adorno, Deleuze and Bataille foremost among them, created or restored a 'metaphysical' Hegel who, in Robert Pippin's phrase, served as these philosophers' 'whipping boy,' an antithetical foil against which they defined themselves.¹ This was what has become known as the 'textbook' or 'cliché' Hegel, a caricature our 'new' readers believe to be far removed from what is warranted by Hegel's own texts. This is a Hegel who might indeed incorporate negativity and negation into his system, but for whom such negativity is always penultimate, always giving way to a higher unity, so that nothing is

¹ Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 4.

lost and nothing falls outside Hegel's all-consuming System. This is a Hegel too who represents the apogee of modernity's omniscient aspirations. His all-seeing System, crowned with the concept of Absolute Knowledge, seems to deliver modernity's totalising dream. It appears to be a 'God's eye view' recast in the terms of a secularised modernity, to which all is subordinated, and in light of which all is intelligible.

Secondly, there are the interpretations characterised by Žižek as the 'deflated' or non-metaphysical Hegel, and propounded by such thinkers as Robert Pippin, Robert Brandom, Terry Pinkard and, more recently, Thomas A. Lewis. These readings are, in many ways, the polar opposite of the metaphysical readings in that they 'deflate' Hegel's metaphysical pretensions, such that Hegel's thought, properly read and interpreted, is evacuated of metaphysics, and instead comes closer to a version of Kant's transcendental idealism or to a version of a social rationality pragmatism.²

For our 'new' readers of Hegel, both of these 'older' readings – the 'metaphysical' and 'deflationary' – are alike mistaken. Rather, they insist that the true significance – and, indeed, radicalism – of Hegel's thought lies in his attempt to find a way beyond both of these stances. Although, as we shall see, the 'New Hegel' thinkers identified at the outset are many and various and by no means expound a single vision, they would nonetheless agree with Žižek to the extent that he seeks to rescue Hegel from the charges that he purveys a 'totalising rationalism,' and that he enacts a philosophy of reconciliation that is unable to do justice to the particularities and contingencies of life. As Robert Pippin has observed in

² These are Adrian Johnston's terms. He has suggested that Pippin has himself moved between these different versions of a 'deflationary' reading of Hegel. See Adrian Johnston, 'Where to Start? Robert Pippin, Slavoj Žižek and the true Beginning(s) of Hegel's System', *Crisis and Critique* 1 (2014), p. 376.

relation to these two charges, 'Žižek's ambitious goal is to argue that the former characterization of Hegel attacks a straw man, and that, when this is realized in sufficient detail, the putative European break with Hegel in the criticisms of the likes of Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Deleuze, and the Freudians, will look very different, with significantly more overlap than gaps, and this will make available a historical diagnosis very different from the triumphalist one usually attributed to Hegel.'³ At the same time, our 'new' interpreters of Hegel want to resist the 'deflated' image of Hegel 'freed of ontological-metaphysical commitments, reduced to a general theory of discourse, of possibilities of argumentation.'⁴ To interpret Hegel in a 'deflated' as opposed to a metaphysical way is to remain caught in the dualism that Hegel was seeking to overcome. The challenge, for these readers, is to understand how Hegel is able to encompass the metaphysical and the non-metaphysical, the transcendent and the immanent, the necessary and the contingent, without relapsing back into the very dualism he sought to escape. Hegel's significance for these thinkers lies in his being able to account for these distinctions in a non-dualistic way.

But what does this 'new' reading of Hegel entail for the question of God? There have been many works considering Hegel's philosophy of religion and his conception of God over the last century. More recently, thinkers such as Peter Hodgson, Cyril O'Regan and William Desmond, to name just three, have all considered these questions in detail. But, as Thomas A. Lewis has observed, they assume interpretations of Hegel's *philosophy* that are, in important respects, significantly different from the interpretations that have appeared more recently.⁵ Lewis himself considers the question of God from the perspective of the 'non-

³ Robert Pippin, 'Back to Hegel?' *Mediations* 26.1-2 (Fall 2012-Spring 2013), p. 8.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 237.

⁵ Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 11 and n. 25. See also Thomas A. Lewis, 'Beyond the Totalitarian: Ethics

metaphysical' Hegel espoused by Pippin and Pinkard, in which line of interpretation Lewis locates himself. The question of what the 'new' interpretations of Hegel entail for God has been given much less sustained attention. It is nonetheless a question that is worth asking, not least because many aspects of the 'new' interpretation would, on the surface at least, seem to sit ill at ease with most orthodox conceptions of God. According to the 'new' interpreters, Hegel does indeed employ notions of necessity, unity, teleology and absolute knowledge, but, crucially, he radically reinterprets them in a way that stands in sharp disjunction to the way such notions are usually philosophically understood. We must therefore ask to what extent a similar operation is enacted in relation to Hegel's understanding of God. Given that Hegel does indeed commit himself to 'the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence', how exactly does Hegel understand this God, according to the 'new' interpreters? And how is this conception related to the God of Christian orthodoxy? Could it be the case, as it was for the notions of teleology and 'absolute knowledge', for instance, that Hegel radically reinterprets the concept of God so that it becomes something markedly different to what has conventionally been supposed?

It would be a mistake to suppose that our 'new' readers of Hegel speak with one mind on these questions. For one thing, some of them give more attention to the question of God than do others. Thinkers like Beatrice Longuenesse, Judith Butler and Rebecca Comay give it scant attention, while others, such as Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou and Rowan Williams, have treated the question of God in Hegel at some considerable length. Even among those who do give the question extended treatment, there is by no means unanimity in their assessment. There are, in fact, some marked divergences on the question. Thus, some

and the Philosophy of Religion in Recent Hegel Scholarship,' *Religion Compass* 2 (2008), pp. 556-74.

of our ‘new Hegel’ readers, such as Rowan Williams and Andrew Shanks, understand Hegel as being broadly compatible with a theistic ontology and, indeed, read Hegel through the lens of such an ontology. In contrast, Slavoj Žižek and Catherine Malabou understand Hegel in terms of an ontology of immanence, even though they conceive of a continuing role for God and the transcendent, *within* and emerging out of such an immanent ontology.

What we see, therefore, is that the ‘new Hegel’ interpretation itself gives rise to *both* a theistic and atheistic reading of Hegel, even if these readings are themselves distinct from the traditional ‘left-wing’ (atheistic) and ‘right-wing’ (theistic) readings that were predicated on more philosophically ‘conventional’ readings of Hegel.⁶ It will therefore be worth giving some consideration to these theistic and atheistic readings of Hegel that emerge from within the ‘new Hegel’ interpretation itself. To this end, I shall first look briefly at the readings of Rowan Williams and Slavoj Žižek, as being representative of the theistic and atheistic positions, which both emerge from philosophical readings of Hegel that share much in common, even if they are not identical. I then want to argue that these contrasting conceptions should not be viewed as mutually exclusive alternatives between which we must choose. Neither should we view them as readings that should be overcome and superseded by a third conception. Rather, I want to suggest that both are necessary and should be held in tension. Furthermore, I want to argue this on specifically (new) Hegelian grounds. In other words, I shall conclude that a genuinely Hegelian conceiving of God will insist on the simultaneous necessity of *both* the theistic (Williams) and atheistic (Žižek) readings. I therefore want to suggest that a (new) Hegelian conceiving of God reveals once again the necessity of the logic of the *both ... and*.

⁶ For a classic discussion of this taxonomy, see Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967).

I

Rowan Williams's writings on Hegel in general and on Hegel's understanding of God in particular, are small in quantity, but rich and suggestive in quality. Like other 'new' Hegel interpreters, he sees the 'starting point' of Hegel's project as being the enactment of a self-reflexive contemplation or meditation on the character of thought itself. Much of Williams's reading of Hegel in this respect coincides with what others emphasise as being central to Hegel's thought. But he specifically wants to draw attention to the way in which such a reading of Hegel becomes impoverished if it is not orientated towards a theological point of reference in the way that Hegel himself orientated it. In a lengthy passage that is worth quoting in full, Williams shows how what Hegel speaks about philosophically is said religiously by the language of theology:

'Dialectic is what theology means by the power of *God*, just as *Verstand* is what theology means by the goodness of God. *Verstand* says "Everything can be thought", "nothing is beyond reconciliation", every percept makes sense in a distinctness, a uniqueness, that is in harmony with an overall environment. It is, as you might say, a doctrine of providence, in that it claims that there can be no such thing as unthinkable contingency. But ... thinking the particular in its harmonies, thinking how the particular makes sense, breaks the frame of reference in which we think the particular. God's goodness has to give way to God's power – but to a power which acts only in a kind of self-devastation. And, says Hegel, the "speculative" stage to which dialectic finally leads us is what religion has meant by the mystical, which is not, he insists, the fusion of subject and object but the concrete (historical?) unity or continuity or followability of what *Verstand* alone can only think

fragmentarily or episodically.’⁷ In other words, much of what is most distinctive and original about Hegel’s philosophy coincides with what has already been said by theology.

But this, in itself, of course, does not necessarily lead us to place Hegel’s thought within the context of a theistic ontology. It might also be compatible with some of the ‘immanentist’ readings, and the theological reference might also be ‘superseded’ if it is regarded as merely penultimate a piece of window-dressing that must finally give way to the higher truth of (a secular) philosophy. Williams explicitly denies these possible readings, saying that ‘it is precisely the grammar (including the paradoxes) of classical pre-Cartesian theology that shapes the actual structure of thinking about thinking. To think about thinking must, for Hegel, bring us finally to the point to which theology directs us, to a reality that is determined solely as self-relatedness: the grammar of the God of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas is the grammar of thought, and without the former the scope of the latter could not be apprehended.’⁸ So what Williams is suggesting here is that the grammar of theology is what *allows* or *enables* the truths of philosophy to appear; we would not be able to *perceive* the speculative truth of philosophy outside the light of the divine truth of theology.

Williams has a great deal more to say about why, according to Hegel, theology must speak of the simplicity of God, but why God must also be understood in terms of narrative and movement; and why, ultimately, God must also be understood in Trinitarian terms, with all that this implies for Incarnation and pneumatology. These truths are not merely contingent, whether in the sense of being ‘thrown up’ by the contingent development of the tradition nor in the sense of being ‘sheerly’ contingent on divine revelation or the divine will.

⁷ Rowan Williams, ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel’ in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (London: SCM Press, 2007), pp. 37-38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Rather, Hegel shows how they are, in a sense, necessary, if they are to reflect what it genuinely means for thought to think itself in community.

But while it might be possible to say all this, still the question remains as to whether one could make all these claims while still simultaneously that it is possible for religion to express pictorially what are *ultimately* philosophical truths. Even if the religious narratives are necessary, in the way Williams suggests, for philosophical truths to be perceived, once the latter have indeed been perceived, are the religious narratives thereby not understood in a new way that is distinct from their own self-understanding? More specifically, could it not be said that what for theology's own self-understanding was a 'transcendent' reality, we can now see, having attained the insights of philosophical truth, that what they gestured towards was, in fact, an 'immanent' reality?

Although Williams doesn't directly and explicitly confront this challenge, we can glean, from his what he says more generally, the contours of his likely response. In particular, it is likely that he would want to question the dichotomy or dualism that is being presupposed here between 'transcendence' and 'immanence'. We get a sense of this when Williams says the 'basic structure of spirit is not dependent on, or a fact in, "the world": it is what it is, identity, otherness, reconciliation. Because this is what mental life is, we can't think it apart from thinking ourselves; to think it as *separate* is to fail in thinking-as-such.'⁹ We see from this, therefore, the extent to which Williams wants to move away from an exaggerated sense of the *separation* between God and the world. Indeed, he makes this point in the context of responding to theological critics who accuse Hegel of asserting an interdependence of God and the world, and therefore of neglecting God's self-sufficiency.

⁹ Ibid., p. 47. My emphasis.

Such a criticism, he suggests, is still working with a model of *separation*; it is said that God is *interdependent* precisely because it is assumed that there are two discrete and identifiable entities which can be in a relation of interdependence.

At the same time as wanting to question this exaggerated sense of separation between God and the world, Williams also wants to resist an undue *identification* of God and the world, of which Hegel is also sometimes accused. As Williams observes, God is not thought ‘if God appears as merely identical with the world’s process: this would leave the world with an unmediated identity, and God as non-subjective or pre-subjective reality, and therefore not in the strictest sense thinkable – i.e. God becomes inferior to the thinking mind, something that has to be connected with and reconciled with mind so as to be thought; and the idea of a *universal* “substance” that is pre-subjective is a nonsense in Hegel’s terms, since what is pre-subjective cannot be universal. Hegel’s repudiation of charges of atheism is profoundly serious.’¹⁰ So Williams is committed to treading a very fine and precarious line – and it may be said that he is being faithful to Hegel in doing so – in wanting to resist *both* an undue *separation* between God and the world and *also* an unwarranted *identification* of God with the world.¹¹ This perilously fine line is well articulated when Williams seeks to combine a sense of God’s *aseitas* or self-sufficiency with a proscription of thinking of God as an ‘object’ for thought, as somehow being ‘beyond’ thought: ‘“But”, we ask impatiently, “would there be a God if there were not a world?” And Hegel simply refuses us the vocabulary and conceptuality to put such a question intelligibly. Insofar as God is the ungrounded or self-grounded reality without which there is nothing thinkable (and therefore *nothing*, if we seriously understand who and what we are), we can indeed deploy the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 40-41.

¹¹ On this theme in Augustine’s thought, see Rowan Williams, ‘“Good for Nothing?” Augustine on Creation,’ *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), pp. 9-24.

traditional language of *aseitas*. Yet that reality is such that it refuses to be an object for thought, a life lived “beyond” us that we can yet talk about. God’s “exceeding” of thought cannot itself be thought or spoken’.¹²

In light of this very precarious tightrope walk, we may well wonder whether this kind of theology can really be described as one of ‘transcendence’ at all, at least in the commonly understood sense. To which it might be replied that it was precisely Hegel’s aim to trouble the traditional distinction between transcendence and immanence, and to think of Spirit in terms that transcend the traditional distinction between transcendence and immanence. It should also be pointed out that Williams does not necessarily commit himself to Hegelianism *tout court*. He has said that his aim in writing about Hegel ‘is not to endorse the Hegelian system in all its ambition and complexity’¹³; rather, his aim has been to pose questions to theologians in order that they may consider the adequacy of certain ways of doing theology, in the ongoing task of thinking about God. Nonetheless, what we can see from this brief discussion of Williams’s understanding of at least the compatibility of Hegelianism, properly understood, with the orthodox tradition, properly understood, is that the sense of God’s ontological transcendence, while retained, is one that at least troubles and questions any straightforward opposition between transcendence and immanence.

II

Slavoj Žižek’s return to God in the context of his wider return to Hegel is in some ways markedly distinct and in some ways surprisingly close to that of Williams. On the one hand, Žižek’s return to God takes place in the context of a rigorously atheistic ontology and, in this

¹² Williams, ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel’, p. 47.

¹³ Rowan Williams, ‘Hegel and the gods of postmodernity’ in *Wrestling with Angels*, p. 31.

sense, would seem to be far removed from Williams's own invocation of God. But on the other hand, Žižek's return to God serves to question any straightforward opposition between ontological transcendence and immanence. Indeed, Žižek's invocation of theology (which is, for him, in a certain sense, unavoidable) is a preeminent illustration of the way in which transcendence and immanence are *mutually implicated*. For him, an embracing of the thoroughgoing immanent character of reality entails not a repudiation of transcendence, but an embracing of it as inescapable feature of the immanent itself. Let us look in a little more detail at why this is the case for Žižek.

For Žižek, Hegel's radicalism lay not simply in the fact that he was a thinker of immanence (and materialism and contingency), but in the fact that he was also, uniquely, able to demonstrate how the transcendent is able to emerge out of the immanent itself. It is because Hegel bears witness to the unavoidability of transcendence (and a purposive teleology) that he has so often been misunderstood as being a purveyor of a mystical spiritualism and of a world history determined by the purposive guiding hand of the Absolute or Geist. But for Žižek, this is to miss Hegel's unique intervention, which is to show how 'transcendence' and 'teleology' are not simply illusory; they are (in a sense) 'real,' but they emerge out of the retrospective loops of the immanent, material and contingent themselves. This is because there is an inherent antagonism, split or inconsistency, which is constitutive of reality, and which means that the immanent, material and contingent are never fully themselves. Internally split, they retrospectively 'produce' the transcendent and teleological, which while not themselves fully ontologically constituted, nevertheless cannot simply be dismissed as being 'illusory' or 'unreal': "the point of Hegelian dialectical analysis is not

to reduce the chaotic flow of events to a deeper necessity, but to unearth the contingency of the rise of necessity itself—this is what it means to grasp things “in their becoming”.¹⁴

Indeed, this logic applies not only to concepts of ‘transcendence’ and teleology, but also to the Absolute itself (and, by implication, to God). When Hegel insists that the Absolute is the ‘result of itself,’ Žižek understands this to mean that ‘there is no Absolute which externalizes or particularizes itself and then unites itself with its alienated Otherness: the Absolute emerges out of this process of alienation; that is, as the result of its own activity, the Absolute “is” nothing but its “return to itself”.’¹⁵ That this kind of logic applies also to God is suggested by Žižek when he quotes Hegel in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*: ‘it is in the finite consciousness that the process of knowing spirit’s essence takes place and that the divine self-consciousness thus arises. Out of the foaming ferment of finitude, spirit rises up fragrantly.’¹⁶ Žižek says that this applies especially to the Holy Spirit: ‘our awareness, the (self-) consciousness of finite humans, is its only actual site, i.e. the Holy Spirit also rises up “out of the foaming ferment of finitude” ... This is what Hegel has in mind here: although God is the substance of our entire (human) being, he is impotent without us, he acts only in and through us, he is posited through our activity as its presupposition.’¹⁷ What this means is that Spirit is ‘a *virtual* entity in the sense that its status is that of a subjective presupposition: it exists only insofar as subjects *act as if it exists*.’¹⁸ It is therefore in this sense that Žižek espouses an atheistic ontology. Far from being fully

¹⁴ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 575.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 233. Quoted in Slavoj Žižek, ‘A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity’ in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), p. 60.

¹⁷ Žižek, ‘A Modest Plea’, pp. 60-61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

ontologically constituted, the reality of God/Spirit is a virtual one that is constituted by the thought and activity of human subjects.

At the same time, however, Žižek is careful to distinguish his thought from what he characterises as ‘humanistic atheism’. There is a decisive difference here which means that Žižek’s position cannot be reduced to the Marxist-Feruebachian understanding of theism as simple subjective ‘projection.’ A move from the thesis of theism to the antithesis of atheism will always be insufficient. As he says, ‘it is not only that humanity becomes conscious of itself in the alienated figure of God, but: in human religion, God becomes conscious of himself. It is not enough to say that people (individuals) organize themselves in the Holy Spirit (Party, community of believers): in humanity a transsubjective “it” organizes itself. The finitude of humanity is maintained here: Christ is the excess which prohibits simple recognition of the collective Subject in Substance, the reduction of Spirit of objective/virtual entity (presup)posed by humanity.’¹⁹ This transsubjective ‘it’ is of critical importance to Žižek. It entails that we ‘are no longer the agent of the process, when “it organizes itself” in-through us’.²⁰ We can see, therefore, that the atheistic ontology of materialism to which Žižek is committed is not the inert, static, immanent materialism of secular modernity. Rather, materialism/humaiity itself contains an excess – a transcendence – that exceeds itself. This excess or transcendence is not dualistically other than, or set over and against the material/human, but rather is an intrinsic facet of the material/human as such. The implications of this can be seen when Žižek says that: ‘I don’t think one can translate theology into secular humanism. Not because of any secret, obscure reason but because there

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 75-76.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

must be a moment of thinking that it is not we who are acting, but a higher force that is acting through us. This element has to be maintained.’²¹

In other words, there is an excess to human subjectivity that is beyond its control, a transcendent excess that immanent humanistic atheism cannot countenance. The latter maintains a conception of subjectivity as *nominative*, a fixed notion of subjectivity as foundational, whereas Žižek wants in some ways to revive the theological understanding of subjectivity as *accusative*; to retain the sense of a ‘force’ or ‘power’ by which we are addressed and which acts through us. At the same time, this ‘force’ or ‘power’ does not constitute some kind of occult, hidden, transcendent realm. Rather, it is a necessary aspect of subjectivity as such. He goes on to say that at the Crucifixion, the Roman soldiers ‘thought they had destroyed everything in Christ, but that little bit of alien residue remained and started to organize itself into the community of believers. That is a crucial point. Again, what I’m saying here cannot be reduced to simplistic humanism. I think this is the legacy of Christianity – this legacy of God not as a big Other or guarantee but God as the ultimate ethical agency who puts the burden on us to organize ourselves.’²²

The repudiation of God as a big Other is, undoubtedly, a perpetuation of atheism. But this is not an atheism of absolute immanence – the atheism of secular modernity. Rather, it is an atheism that acknowledges the necessity of God as a transcendent ‘force’ or ‘power’ that is an effect of immanence itself. But although it is an effect of immanence, it is not simply

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, ‘A Meditation on Michelangelo’s *Christ on the Cross*’ in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek & Creston Davis (eds), *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), pp. 179-80.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

‘produced’ or ‘projected’ by humanity. As an ‘excess’, it is something that exceeds our grasp or control.

III

What are we to make, then, of the disagreement (if such it is) between Williams and Žižek on the question of God? In the foregoing brief characterisation, we have seen that Williams is committed to a theistic ontology of transcendence; he reads Hegel through this lens, and clearly sees a compatibility between Hegel’s thought and such an ontology. Žižek, on the other hand, is committed to a materialist or atheistic ontology of immanence; he, in turn, reads Hegel through this lens, and, again, sees a compatibility between Hegel’s thought and such an ontology. At the same time, we have also seen that the relationship between Williams’s and Žižek’s readings is something other than one of simple opposition.

Williams’s conception of God’s transcendence was more complicated than one which postulated a simple contrast between God’s transcendence and the world’s immanence.

There was a sense in which the transcendence of God and the immanence of the world were curiously hard to prise apart. So too Žižek’s conception of the world’s immanence was more complicated than one which simply asserted the truth of the world’s materialism, thereby eschewing all traces of divine transcendence. There was a sense in which the material world naturally and inevitably gives rise to a transcendence that can never be eradicated, a transcendence that is in some sense irreducible, even if not fully ontologically constituted.

If it is the case, therefore, that Williams’s transcendent and theistic reading of Hegel blurs and disturbs the nature of its own distinction from immanence; and if it is also the case that Žižek’s immanent and atheistic reading of Hegel blurs and disturbs the nature of its own distinction from transcendence, then we can observe certain corollaries. For one thing, we

can see how different the disagreement between Williams and Žižek is from the old disagreement between the ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ readings of Hegel. The latter disagreement was constituted by a mutually exclusive relationship between the disputants, in a way that the former is not. But this, in turn, gives rise to a second important corollary. If the disagreement between Williams and Žižek is not as mutually exclusive as might at first appear, we are led to ask whether the positions they present us with embody straightforward either-or options between which one must choose. To what extent might the difference between Williams and Žižek be understood as another instance of what Žižek himself calls the ‘parallax’? Could it be that the difference between them is simply one of a change of perspective, as a result of which the field of vision is radically altered? As Žižek himself has insisted, when confronted with differences of this kind, the point is not to endorse one at the expense of the other, but to reflect on the nature of the shift of perspective itself. That such a reflection might be warranted is suggested when we reflect that Hegel himself might be seen as attempting to reflect on the ultimate unity of transcendence and immanence.

In what follows, therefore, I shall attempt to reflect on what it might mean to think about God *beyond* the difference between transcendence and immanence, informed by some key Hegelian insights, and by the reflections of some of the ‘new Hegel’ interpreters we have already mentioned. In doing so, it is important to note that I am not attempting to develop an account of God that ‘really’ lies behind the accounts developed by Williams and Žižek. I am not, in other words, articulating what I take to be a more ‘clear-sighted’ vision than their more opaque ones. Rather, my account might perhaps be regarded as one that ‘mediates’ the accounts of Williams and Žižek, but without abolishing or ‘overcoming’ them. There is a sense, therefore, in which I want to preserve their accounts, and perhaps also move between

them, thus both preserving the ‘parallax’ relationship between them, and also obviating the necessity of ultimately choosing between them.

We can begin by quoting Williams again, who gives a succinct account of the motivating thrust that lies at the heart of Hegel’s thought. He says that ‘the structure of Hegel’s dialectic is meant to challenge the all-sufficiency of the polarity of simple identity and simple difference. Reflection does not work with such symmetries, it requires the plain opposition of positive and negative (presence and absence) to be left behind. What is thinkable is so precisely because thinking is not content with the abstraction of mutual exclusivities, but struggles to conceive a structured wholeness nuanced enough to contain what appeared to be contradictories.’²³ This desire for a unified wholeness that repeatedly escapes us might be regarded as the motor of the movement of the dialectic. Furthermore, if reflection desires a structured wholeness that can transcend the opposition between positive and negative, presence and absence, so too it seeks to transcend the opposition between transcendence and immanence, between the infinite and the finite. Not only does this have implications for our (immanent, finite) *conception* of God (transcendent, infinite), but it also clearly has implications for how we understand the *relationship* between human subjectivity (immanent, finite) and God (transcendent, infinite).

Catherine Malabou has emphasised the importance of the latter relationship for Hegel, a relationship which, she says, has been repeatedly neglected or actively dissociated by theologians. She says that ‘neither the subjectivity of a revealed God nor the modern philosophical notion of the subject can be seen in isolation. Yet the theologians persist in

²³ Williams, ‘Hegel and the gods of postmodernity,’ p. 29-30.

disassociating them.’²⁴ She says that the close affinity between divine and human subjectivity can be seen vividly in Hegel’s exposition of the ‘Death of God’, which he casts in both a theological (divine) and philosophical (human) mode: ‘On the one hand, the Death of God, the event of the Crucifixion, represents one moment within the absolute Idea; on the other hand, the Death of God appears as the truth of human subjectivity, a subjectivity that constitutes the “absolute principle of modern philosophy”. In at least one essential aspect, the Hegelian concept of the Death of God is linked with the consideration of a certain condition or state of philosophy ..., namely, that established and realized in the ideas of the Enlightenment: “The feeling that God himself is dead ... is the sentiment on which the religion of modern times rests.” The suffering of God and the suffering of human subjectivity deprived of God must be analysed as the recto and verso of the same event.’²⁵ She goes on to say that there is a fundamental link between divine *kenosis* and the tendency of modern reason to post an inaccessible beyond; between the Passion of God the Son who ‘dies in the pain of negativity’ and the human feeling that we can know nothing of God.

What this fundamental link is meant to convey is the way in which divine subjectivity and human subjectivity are ‘mutually informing and constructing’. Malabou says that ‘the divine sacrifice finds its ultimate conceptual expression in the *Aufklärung*’s philosophical categories. Reciprocally, modern philosophy would not have its own *subject* if God’s sacrifice had not occurred. The expose of such of structural solidarity between the speculative content of *Revealed Religion* and the philosophical categories apparently excluded from such a content represents an aspect of Hegel’s thought at its most original and

²⁴ Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, tr. Lisabeth During (London: Routledge, 2005 [1996]), p. 103.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

most difficult.’²⁶ What we see from this, among other things, is that to emphasise unduly the *separation* between the divine subject and the human subject is a mistake. This, in fact, returns us to the point we earlier saw to have been made by Williams, when he cautioned against an undue separation between God and the world. In this respect, Malabou quotes a critical passage from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*:

‘God is this: not merely to be *in* himself, but to be just as essentially *for* himself. That God is spirit consists in this: that he is not only the essence that maintains itself in thought but also the essence that appears, the essence that endows itself with revelation and objectivity ... Although we consider the idea of God this way in the philosophy of religion, we at the same time also have before us the mode of God’s representation. God represents only himself and does so only to himself ... This is the aspect of the being-there (*Dasein*) of the absolute.’²⁷ Commenting on this passage, Malabou says that what appears here ‘is that consciousness only represents God because *God re-presents himself*; consciousness is only at a distance from God because God distances himself from himself.’²⁸ If Malabou is right to emphasise this structural homology of the divine and human in Hegel’s thought, then we would expect there to be other consequent similarities, and these can certainly be perceived.

In her account of the emergence of subjectivity in Hegel’s *Anthropology*, which goes through many twists and turns, Malabou points out that ‘subjectivity originates in the possibility of self-solicitation, its own power to address itself: the “Self” is the instance which

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 119 [translation modified], quoted in Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, p. 112.

²⁸ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, p. 112.

guarantees the unity of the relation of the same to the other.’²⁹ She says that this unification of identity and alterity immediately causes its own dissolution, and that the strength of Hegel’s analysis is that it is able to produce a synthesis, both in the presence of a unifying form and in its absence. What this means is that Hegel ‘raises simultaneously the possibility of co-existence in real form (as in the co-existence of identity and difference; the constitution of the soul as a “Self”), and the impossibility of such co-existence (as in morbid or sick states of the soul where identity and difference can remain only in an irreducible tension). This strange synthesis of synthesis and non-synthesis is more originary than the simple synthesis of the “Self”; in fact, it precedes the “I”.’³⁰ This notion of a synthesis between synthesis and non-synthesis, intriguing and suggestive as it is, is characteristic of Hegel’s thought, as we see him also speak of a unity of unity and difference, and the transcendence of the distinction between transcendence and immanence, and the unconditioned infinite that precedes the distinction between finite and infinite. It is to the distinctive nature of these formulae in Hegel’s thought that we must now turn.

As Thomas A. Lewis reminds us, the terms ‘God’, ‘spirit’ and ‘Absolute’ are synonymous for Hegel, the specific word used being dependent on the context in question (religion, philosophy and generic, respectively). This is because philosophy and religion have a common ‘object’, although they are distinguished by the forms in which they are cognized – representation (*Vorstellung*) in the case of religion and self-determining concepts of thought (*Denken*) for philosophy.³¹ That is to say, the absolute is spirit, the authoritative

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

³¹ Lewis, *Religion, Modernity and Politics in Hegel*, p. 115.

‘object’ of all religion and philosophy; God is the representational expression of what philosophy grasps as spirit.³²

In order to understand what Hegel means by these terms, several commentators have suggested that it is necessary to go back to Kant’s ‘transcendental unity of apperception,’ with which it is closely linked. This has been well formulated by Beatrice Longuenesse, when she says that it ‘is not a psychological or empirical notion. Rather, what it describes is the unifying activity, whatever its empirical realization may be, that makes it possible for all representations to be, eventually, accompanied by the proposition “I think.” In other words, for Kant all cognition, and more generally, all thought, is grounded on a unifying project expressed in the mere proposition “I think.” This project is not that of a particular, empirically determined individual subject, but is engrained in the very nature of thought.’³³ Longuenesse goes on to say that Hegel thought that Kant was right to have identified the necessity of this unifying function - what Hegel calls the ‘*concept*’ - but that he was mistaken in conceiving of it as an *external* relation between a consciousness and its object. Kant does not see that it is a function immanent to thought itself. Indeed, this can only be seen when the standpoint of ‘absolute reflection’ has been reached. At this point, it is seen that ‘the reflection of consciousness on its object is the reflection of consciousness on itself and its own rational forms, and that these rational forms are not those of individual consciousness, but of Spirit [God], a *We* [God] whose knowing culminates in absolute knowing.’³⁴

³² Ibid., p. 126.

³³ Beatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics*, tr. Nicole J. Simek (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 28.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 32. My insertions.

If this is so, then we can see how closely connected are Hegel's notions of 'concept', 'Spirit', 'God' and the 'Absolute'. The 'We' that Longuenesse refers to here is not the collective term for the totality of particular knowing subjects, just as the transcendental unity of apperception is more than the mere empirical unity of representations. It *precedes* and *makes possible* particular knowing subjects; at the same time, however, it does not come from anywhere *external*, but from the immanent process of thought itself. Given the close connection that Longuenesse makes here between this 'We' and Spirit/God, we can see that this reinforces the sense of close interconnection between divine and human subjectivity, that we saw Malabou to insist upon. Indeed, Malabou goes so far as to say that for Hegel 'God is conceptualized as transcendental imagination', that he conceives the 'identity of God and transcendental imagination.'³⁵

We thus begin to see what is so distinctive about Hegel's conception of the Absolute or God, and Longuenesse's invocation of the work of Jules Vuillemin makes this particularly explicit. Vuillemin has pointed out that Kant's 'thing in itself' had a twofold character: on the one hand, it is a regulative idea, and on the other, it is the real, albeit unknowable, source of reality. He shows how this duality repeatedly threatens to introduce an Absolute as the real source of knowledge and morality *over against* the constitutive role of transcendental subjectivity.³⁶ Rather than allowing for this *separation*, Hegel, in contrast, insists on their co-belonging: 'he wants *both* to restore the unconditioned – the Absolute – as the privileged concern of philosophy, *and* to give a completely new dimension to constitutive

³⁵ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, pp. 126, 127.

³⁶ See Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique*, pp. 22-23. She here draws on and quotes Jules Vuillemin, *L'Heritage kantien et la revolution copernicienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p. 10.

subjectivity.’³⁷ And, we might add, he wants to show how the two mutually create and sustain each other.

In light of all this, then, certain corollaries follow. First, having insisted that the unconditioned absolute is not set *over against* transcendental subjectivity, but is rather in a co-constitutive relationship with it, we can see how Hegel answers the Kantian question regarding the truth of appearances. Longuenesse says that Hegel answers this question by telling us that ‘the truth of the appearance is that it is a synthesis of a thought unity and a multiplicity. And this synthesis is possible only because unity and multiplicity are constituted by one and the same thought process. This is the “very thing,” the true unconditioned. What is “truly unconditioned” is that there is being, and that being only *appears – erscheint* – as the unity of determinations constituted by the thought process through which it appears.’³⁸

Longuenesse attempts to illuminate this understanding of the ‘truly unconditioned’ with reference to Kant’s explanation of the root of the fourth Antinomy. In the fourth Antinomy, two arguments are made, one for and one against the existence of a necessary being, and both of them are derived from the same grounds. Longuenesse recasts Kant’s analysis in Hegelian terminology: she says that both the arguments for and against the existence of a necessary being are two ways of defining the same thing, namely, the ‘series of all conditions’. Furthermore, they both have the same ground of proof, namely, reason’s demand of the unconditioned: ‘This demand is expressed on the one hand by the a priori affirmation of the completion of the series of conditions: the *totality* of the series is posited as

³⁷ Longuenesse, *Hegel’s Critique*, p. 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

the *condition* of the series itself [i.e. the argument for a necessary being]. On the other, the demand for the unconditioned is expressed in the rule that commands not to arbitrarily close the empirical search for the conditions: the inexhaustible *empirical series* is posited as the *condition* of its own totalization [i.e. the argument against a necessary being].³⁹ Rendering this in more still more explicitly Hegelian terms, she says that looked at one way, totality (which Hegel calls *ground*) can be understood to be the condition or prerequisite of the empirical series (which Hegel call *condition*). Looked at another way, the empirical series can be seen to be the condition or prerequisite of totality. In other words, ground (totality) and condition (the empirical series) determine each other mutually, and rational unity is what grounds both sides of the antinomy.

This is, in effect, an exposition of what Hegel means by the unconditioned. When this is realized the implications are considerable. As Longuenesse says, ‘the Hegelian unconditioned is not, as one might too hastily think, the expression of Hegel’s unilateral adoption of the thesis of the Kantian Antinomies in the name of a triumphant rationalism. Rather, Hegel’s “unconditioned” is the very structure within which the antinomy appears, *about which* both sides of the antinomy are true ... So although it is true, on the one hand, that the conditions are, as empirical existence, *Dasein*, open to an infinite regress, it is also true, on the other hand, that the world and things in the world are thought as a completed unity. The same function prevails on both sides and the same thing is thought under the two guises.’⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., p. 107. My insertions.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

The implications of this for Hegel's understanding of God are considerable. If God is the religious rendering of the absolutely unconditioned, we can see that God is that which precedes and makes possible the antinomy between totality and the empirical series of particular conditions. And we can also see that God is that *about which both sides of the antinomy are true*. If this is the case, we can cast the difference between Rowan Williams and Slavoj Žižek's thinking on God in this light. That is to say, Williams's emphasis on the transcendence of God might be seen as a way of looking at God (the absolutely unconditioned) from a perspective that prioritises totality as the condition for the empirical series of conditions. On the other hand, Žižek's emphasis on the way in which transcendence of God is an *effect* of immanent material reality might be seen as a way of looking at God (the absolutely unconditioned) from a perspective that prioritises the empirical series of conditions as the condition for the totality. We can therefore see the very specific way in which 'both sides of the antinomy are true', and we are thereby relieved of the need to affirm one at the expense of the other, and, indeed, there is a sense in which both characterisations are *necessary*.

If it is the case, as we have said, that the Absolute, or God, is not *set apart* and *independent* of the thought that thinks it, but is rather *implicated* in and, in a certain sense, *constituted* by such thought, then there is a second corollary worth explicating. Earlier in her study, Longuenesse draws attention to two characterisations of the Absolute that appear to stand in tension: 'The Absolute is a *result*: it is the result of the complete movement of thought, at the end of which thought is capable of reflecting the object as its own product and to reflect itself in this object. The Absolute is *subject*: it is by the movement of the subject, the unity of the "I think" as constitutive of its object, that the Absolute is constituted as

agreement of the subject and the object.’⁴¹ It is worth also noting the way in which Longuenesse follows this claim with a clarification of what Hegel means by the ‘I think’ here; it is ‘not the thought of a finite subject. It expresses the unity of a process that has its own necessity over and above the particular individual circumstances of empirical subjects.’⁴² In other words, the ‘I think’ might be better rendered here by the ‘We’ in the specific sense in which we earlier characterised it.

But what are we to make of this double sense of the Absolute, as both result and subject? Insofar as the Absolute, or God, is a result to be achieved, the result of the complete movement of thought, there is a sense in which it is ‘to come’, a sense in which it is *not yet* achieved. Insofar as this is the case, therefore, we may say that there is a sense in which God is ‘hidden’, *implied* but not yet *known* by the process of thought itself. On the other hand, insofar as the Absolute or God is subject, is *being constituted* and therefore *revealed* in the process of thought itself, then there is another sense in which God is *known* through a certain *revelation* that comes through the movement of thought itself. This ‘revelation’ is what ‘absolute knowledge’ *is*, and it may perhaps be considered as a modern rendering of ‘natural theology.’

This sense of doubleness, this sense that the Absolute or God is simultaneously both revealed and hidden is perhaps connected to Catherine Malabou’s central theme, which animates her entire study of Hegel. This theme is that if the *voir venir*, which her translator renders as ‘to see (what is) coming’ so as to convey the sense carried by the French original, which means ‘at the same time to anticipate while not knowing what comes.’⁴³ As Malabou

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27. My emphases.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴³ Lisabeth During, ‘Preliminary Remarks’ in Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, p. xlix.

herself puts it, it ‘denotes at once the visibility and invisibility of whatever comes. The future is not the absolutely invisible, a subject of pure transcendence objecting to any anticipation at all, to any knowledge, to any speech. Nor is the future the absolutely visible, an object clearly and absolutely foreseen. It frustrates any anticipation by its precipitation, its power to surprise.’⁴⁴

If we remind ourselves yet again of the recto and verso relationship between God and the Absolute, then all that we have been saying about the doubleness of the Absolute might be applied equally to God. Thus, God is likewise both hidden and revealed, both known and unknown, and this doubleness lies also at the heart of the orthodox theological tradition. For orthodox theology, God is not absolutely other, a sheer unknown, an inaccessible beyond. But neither is God simply ‘given,’ transparent, an object to be grasped in a single moment. God is revealed, but still hidden in this being made known, whether this ‘appearing’ be in the form of revelation or of natural theology, both of which are retained, if reconceived, by Hegel. In which case, we can see that Hegel’s theology is perhaps not as far away from orthodox theology as is sometimes supposed. Indeed, in the ways we have been suggesting, he is perhaps closer to the orthodoxy of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas than is most modern theology in its various manifestations.

At the same time, however, it would be just as misleading to obscure the differences between Hegel’s God and the God of theological orthodoxy as it would be to exaggerate them. The implications for conceiving of God in the way gestured towards above are perhaps more radical in relation to orthodox conceptions than might at first appear. Indeed, some of the objections that might be levelled at a Hegelian understanding of God from an orthodox

⁴⁴ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, p. 184.

theological perspective, have already been anticipated, as we have seen, by Rowan Williams. To what extent can God still be said to be ‘transcendent’ in a clear, unambiguous, uncompromised way in the context of this ‘new Hegelian’ understanding? If God’s transcendence is in some sense ‘contaminated’ by immanence in the ways we have been suggesting, is this not to betray one of the central convictions of inherited orthodox thought? And to what extent can God’s independent self-sufficiency - his *aseitas* – still be maintained if it is in some sense ‘contaminated’ by being ‘constituted’ by the process of thought itself? Williams shows how language of God’s *aseitas* can still be employed within an Hegelian context, although he is aware that what this means is different from what many theologians have taken it to mean. For such theologians, if God is no longer purely self-sufficient, independent and self-sustaining, have we not betrayed yet another of the underpinning convictions of theological orthodoxy?

What is at stake here is the question of what it means to speak of the ‘transcendence’ or ‘eminence’ of God. Is God’s ‘eminence’ best preserved by insisting on the *aseitas* of God in the sense of God’s being self-sufficient, independent and self-sustaining? Or does such an understanding in fact limit God and compromise God’s ‘eminence’ by making God in some sense ‘conditioned’ in relation to that which God is not? Hegel and many of his ‘new’ interpreters suspect that the latter is in fact the case. As we have noted, Malabou speaks of a ‘strange synthesis of synthesis and non-synthesis’ that is ‘more originary than the simple synthesis of the “Self”; in fact it precedes the “I”.’⁴⁵ Given the structural closeness we have already noted between human and divine subjectivity, we might be justified in saying likewise that a genuine divine transcendence - an originary divine transcendence - is that which precedes and makes possible the distinction between transcendence and immanence, a

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

distinction which is itself posited or projected from a finite or immanent standpoint. In other words, the conventional understanding of transcendence is *conditioned* – each term of the binary structure is conditioned by the other, and the structure itself is posited from a position of immanence. As Lewis has put this, ‘Such an absolute would be limited by the world that stands over against it and therefore not absolute.’⁴⁶ A genuinely unconditioned transcendence is that which precedes and makes possible the very (finite) distinction between transcendence and immanence.

In other words, the mistake that has been made by much traditional theology has been to equate God with a transcendence that is conditioned by, set over against, separate and independent from the realm of immanence. For to think God in this way is not to think God at all; it is not to conceive of God as ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought.’ This is because it is possible to think of ‘something’ still greater, still more eminent, namely, that which exceeds and makes possible this very distinction between transcendence and immanence. Only this is the truly transcendent and unconditioned God, the truly transcendent because unconditioned Absolute. This unconditioned God or Absolute is not set apart from, or over against, or independent of, the finite and immanent world. On the contrary, it manifests itself in this finite and immanent world, and this world is constituted by the process of the self-manifestation of this divine Absolute. It manifests itself in this finite world, with its own posited distinction between transcendence and immanence, and therefore *appears as* both transcendence and immanence. And, according to Hegel, this is precisely what is revealed in the doctrine of the Trinity: that God appears as transcendent (Father) and as immanent (Son) and as the mediated co-belonging of both (Holy Spirit). And what is peculiarly distinctive about this divine doctrine is that all three moments are *internal* to God

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Religion, Modernity and Politics in Hegel*, p. 73.

himself. God therefore appears to be transcendent (as Williams bears witness) and immanent (as Žižek bears witness), and what this understanding reveals is the necessity of their co-belonging, their mutual implication, their ‘parallax’ relationship.

We therefore begin to see why the repudiation of the divine *aseitas* – as it has been traditionally understood – is not to compromise God’s eminence, but to respect it. Malabou has pointed out that ‘Philosophers who see a diminishment of God (yet God without his incline, would be no more than an abstract and impoverished concept) in the necessity of this decline (involved as much in the essence of the Aristotelian *theos* [Gk] as that of the God of Revelation) are missing the profound originality of Hegel’s thought. To introduce a negativity in God which puts him into motion and makes possible his flexing, is undoubtedly the highest possible way of imagining his eminence, the condition and dimension of his fall. Hegel is a thinker for whom the movement of falling is not a degeneration in the ordinary sense of the word, but a term of expiration – something which falls due. It is a matter of taking the future into account, a future which erupts when it “comes from” and explodes while falling.’⁴⁷

What, then, are we to say about the implications of the recent turn or return to Hegel for our thinking about God? We have seen that the ‘new’ reading of Hegel, developed by the thinkers identified at the outset of this paper, is distinctive in relation to other readings of Hegel. We should therefore expect this reading of Hegel to have distinctive implications for the question of God, in contrast to other and previous readings. We have found, however, considerable divergence as to what these implications are. I have suggested that they range from Rowan Williams’s transcendent theistic ontology at one end of the spectrum to Slavoj

⁴⁷ Malabou, *Future of Hegel*, p. 188.

Žižek's immanent atheistic ontology at the other, all the while emerging from readings of Hegel that otherwise have much in common. I have not tried to make a case for one of these conceptions over the other. Rather, I have gestured towards a 'new' Hegelian understanding of God that encompasses both, that sees both as necessary, rather than as alternatives between which we must choose. I have not argued that Williams's and Žižek's understandings must be 'overcome' and 'superseded' in favour of the one I have been commending. Rather, I have suggested that they are both exemplifications and manifestations of the conception of God I have been gesturing towards, perhaps being articulations of the same 'thing', albeit viewed from different 'parallax' perspectives.