Some Metaphysical Implications of Hegel’s Theology

Paul Redding

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Hegel makes claims about the relation of philosophy to religion that might raise concerns for those who want to locate his philosophy generally within the modern enlightenment tradition. For example, at the outset of his Lectures on Aesthetics he claims that philosophy “has no other object but God and so is essentially rational theology”.¹ What might seem to placate worries here is that Hegel of course differentiates between the forms of religious and philosophical cognition in which such a content is presented: while religion grasps this content in the form of imagistic or figurative representations [Vorstellungen], philosophy grasps it within conceptual thought, an attitude which might seem to align him with that found within the German enlightenment, for example, that found in Lessing and Kant. However, it seems undeniable that, in comparison to Kant, for example, Hegel employs forms of expression for the presentation of his own philosophical thought that are redolent with the type of imagistic and figurative locutions supposedly at home in religion. Moreover, the actual imagery employed seems to refer to the type of trinitarian version of Christianity that can seem antithetical to those forms of Christian thought that lent themselves to the sort of “demythologization” characteristic of the enlightenment attitude to religious doctrine. Such factors as these make it easy to portray Hegel’s philosophy as a type of irrationalist mysticism,² or at least as a disguised theology with a content from revealed religion, and thus aligning him more to the spirit of the Counter-Enlightenment than the Enlightenment.

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 101. Philosophy, along with art and religion, belongs to what he refers to as “Absolute Spirit”, and these three realms having this same content—God—“differ only in the forms in which they bring home to consciousness their object, the Absolute.” Ibid.
² For example, as in Glenn Alexander Magee, Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).
This may be an easy impression to get, but on examination it is, I believe, a misleading one. Hegel’s attitude to the relation of philosophy to religion may not be typical of the Enlightenment, but its apparent regressive features can be understood from another more favourable angle—we might say that of an enlightened critique of the enlightenment attitude to religion. From this alternative perspective we might start by taking the claim about God being the content of all philosophy as signaling some purportedly irreducible role played by the idea of God, not just in Hegel’s own philosophy, but in philosophy per se, even ones that deny, or are at least neutral on, the question of the existence of God. In the first part of this paper, I will quickly sketch what a case for the prima facie plausibility of such a claim might look like, and then turn to the significance this claim might have for philosophy, were it to be established. The thought here is that if it were thought that philosophy per se presupposed an idea of God, then, presumably, different philosophical orientations might be compared in terms of the relative adequacy of their ideas of God, and in the second part of the paper I try to give this thought some substance by comparing the way different ideas of God function within three central figures of the modern idealist tradition, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel himself.

Of course, on the reading I’m suggesting, what is meant by “adequacy” here, could only be a matter of adequacy in terms of the usual sorts of criteria employed in philosophy, such as that of conceptual coherence. From the viewpoint of philosophy, there could be no place for a right conception of God coming from outside philosophical thought itself, say from some particular religious creed or other. Of course one might still expect the particular ideas of God to be found in philosophy as having had their origin in particular religious traditions. As alluded to above, Hegel’s idea of God indeed has features of the God of the particular confession within which he was raised, a form of Lutheran Protestantism characteristic of the Swabian regions of southern Germany. But this is hardly surprising: from where else would one expect them to have come? Hegel of course portrays his own religion as the “consummate” religion, but the question I’m interested in here is that of the philosophical entitlement Hegel may claim in endorsing this idea of God. It is in relation to this question that I will examine the use to which he puts his idea of God in attempting to resolve problems within the thought of his idealist predecessors, Leibniz and Kant.
Leibniz, a Catholic-leaning Lutheran, had devoted considerable energy to defending Trinitarian Christianity against attacks coming from seventeenth-century Unitarians or “Socinians”, who appealed to what is standardly taken to be a more progressive or rationalistic idea of God, a conception of God untroubled by the apparent contradiction of the trinity doctrine. I will suggest that we can understand Hegel’s claim for the superiority of this trinitarian God when we see the way in which it can be used to address implicit problems within Leibniz’s own metaphysics, problems that had been made explicit in the views of Kant. Ultimately, were it possible to make a case for Hegel’s success here, his approach would, I will suggest, be of more than historical relevance. Not only can the problems in Leibniz and Kant addressed by Hegel be recognized within much contemporary philosophy, they can be seen to be bound up with similar ideas of God that Hegel wants to challenge and replace.

Philosophy and the Idea of God

I think it can be said that throughout much of its history, Western philosophy has accepted appeals to a monotheistically conceived god of one variety or another as having a legitimate role in philosophy. Consider, for example, the role played by Plato’s artificer in his Timeaus, or Aristotle’s prime mover in his Metaphysics. As for medieval philosophy, the idea that it was drenched in theological assumptions is hardly disputed, and relatively recently historians have turned to the theme of the persistence of this theological content into the early modern period. Despite the increasing secularization of philosophy from the 18th century, it’s still not difficult to find explicitly theological interpretations of central philosophical ideas well into our own time. To give just one example, the British philosopher Michael Dummett has stated that as a Catholic he is committed to the idea of an omniscient God and so, to


What I won’t be doing will be to go on to address the further question of the existence of God for Hegel, beyond pointing out that establishing the necessity of “the idea” of God will clearly have different consequences for an idealist than it has for proponents of other metaphysical orientations.
the existence of a world of things in themselves that would be the objects of the knowledge had by such a God. But as a philosopher, he notes, he is independently committed to the existence of things in themselves, and by inference to the existence of an omniscient God, without which, he thinks the notion of a world of things in themselves would be meaningless.5

The way in which Dummett conceives of getting to the existence of God from philosophical premises may not be common in contemporary analytic metaphysics, however, it takes only a little reflection on contemporary mainstream analytic philosophy to appreciate that ideas of God continue to play fundamental roles. One might, for example, note how commonly one encounters the metaphor of a “God’s-eye point of view” in appealing to the idea of objective knowledge, or the idea of omniscience within the sorts of thought experiments that are commonly used in the defense or critique of metaphysical theories. As an example of the latter, we might take Frank Jackson’s celebrated case of Mary, the fabulously talented neuroscientist who has grown up in an entirely black and white environment, and who consequently doesn’t know what it is like to see colours such as the colour red. In Jackson’s thought experiment, Mary knows all there is to be known about the science of optics and the neurophysiology of colour vision, and yet doesn’t know all there is to know about colour and its perception. Before leaving her black and white environment, she has something to learn, the phenomenal knowledge of what red, for example, looks like.6 The story of Mary here functions within an argument against a metaphysical theory, here that of physicalism, and the idea of Mary’s local omniscience—that is, omniscience about everything that bears on colour vision—is crucial. Were Mary’s knowledge of the relevant part of the physical world limited, the argument would simply not work. “It seems just obvious”, Jackson says of Mary, regarding her first colour experience, “that she will learn something about the world and our visual

5 “No one who believes in God can dismiss [the notion of things in themselves], however: the way things are in themselves must be the way in which God apprehends them. … But can the notion be explained or defended at all without appeal to God’s knowledge of the world, and hence by anyone who denies that God exists? In my opinion, it cannot: the price of denying that God exists is to relinquish the idea that there is such a thing as how reality is in itself.” Michael Dummett, The Nature and Future of Philosophy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p 44.

experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false”.

I don’t want to engage with Jackson’s story any further than to note the implicit appeal to *an idea of God* by way of an appeal to a standard *property* of God, that of the attribute of omniscience, even if this omniscience is limited to a particular realm—that of colour and colour vision. There is, after all, a qualitative difference between Mary and actual neuroscientists, who may be *very* knowledgeable, but hardly omniscient, about some topic. Jackson’s implicit appeal to this theological concept is not like Dummett’s, of course. Dummett appeals to an *actual* God to make meaningful a conception of the world to which he is philosophically committed. For Jackson, godly omniscience is invoked as a mere *logical possibility*. All that is needed for his argument is the idea of a *logically* possible world containing Mary. But I want nevertheless to take this example as instantiating the type of point Hegel makes. The logically possible omniscience Jackson appeals to is an attribute of a God qua object of a *rational* theology, and it is an idea, moreover, that has a long history. One finds it, for example, in both Galileo and Newton as an idealized model for the epistemic goal which makes the modern idea of the systematic growth of scientific knowledge intelligible.

One example hardly establishes a case, but hopefully what I have said might be enough to allow a general idea of how, on this interpretation, Hegel’s claim that all philosophy is, or at least contains, a “rational theology” might be plausibly pursued, and with this I want to now turn to a sketch of the role played by *the idea of God* in the respective approaches of first, Leibniz and Kant, and then, Hegel.

**Theology and Metaphysics in pre-Hegelian Idealism**

The eighteenth-century European enlightenment clearly represented a major challenge to the generally theistic flavour of much earlier philosophy. As I have alluded to

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7 Ibid., p. 105.
earlier, in Germany the enlightenment attitude to religion was generally to portray religion as presenting important truths, in particular moral truths, in some indirect, metaphorical or generally figurative way. Such an attitude is present in G. E. Lessing, for example, who, drawing on Leibniz’s philosophy, had portrayed the revealed content of Christianity to be literally false, but as providing, as one commentator puts it, a “partial, perspectival adumbration of this ultimate truth”—that is, the truth presented philosophically in Leibniz’s monadological metaphysics.8 Humans as “limited gods” [eingeschrängte Götter], as Lessing portrayed them,9 are versions of Leibniz’s finite monads able to cognize from their particular “points of view” what God could grasp from an infinity of such points of view. But Lessing had added the dimension of an historical education for the human species, now portraying Christian myths as contain truths, but truths in a form appropriate for the species at a phase of their development—that is, located at “a particular, historically determined point of view”.10 It is not hard to see, however, the problem lurking for this account of metaphysics—if metaphysical knowledge is conceived as God’s knowledge, how is it available to us finite knowers, and so how are we to access the standard against which religion is to be compared? Kant was famously to make this problem explicit. For him, we finite human cognizers are simply incapable of the type of knowledge of things in themselves that Leibniz’s monadology was meant to instantiate. But it is clear that while Leibniz had a problem with the idea of any telos of human knowledge, he nevertheless had a powerful account of the human capacity to move from more to less perspectival cognitions, an idea that is found in Hegel as well as in many contemporary forms of philosophical thought.

In one of Leibniz’s favorite images from the Christian Platonist tradition, humans are “mirrors of God” such that each reflects the entire universe as known by God, but in an imperfect way. However, humans can perfect their imperfect

representations in a process in which initially *clear but confused* ideas are rendered progressively *clear and distinct*. Leibniz’s understanding of this notion radically departs from the approach of Descartes. In a well-known passage from the *Discourse on Metaphysics* Leibniz states that “when I can recognize one thing among others without being able to say what its differences or properties consist in, my knowledge is confused. … But when I can explain the evidence I am using, the knowledge is distinct. An assayer’s knowledge is like this; he can distinguish true from false gold by means of certain tests or marks which make up the definition of gold”. But even the assayer’s clear and distinct knowledge of gold might be only *relatively* distinct because the component ideas entering into his definition of gold may themselves be confused. So, “distinct knowledge has different levels, because the notions which enter into the definition usually require definition themselves, and are known only confusedly”. There would thus seem to be a clear parallel between Leibniz’s assayer and Jackson’s neuroscientific Mary here. Mary is like the assayer, we may say, in that what she knows of colour goes *beyond* the clear but confused knowledge that the rest of us neuroscientific illiterates have when we recognize and so distinguish particular colours, but can’t explain their differences. The twist in Jackson’s story is that prior to leaving her black and white room, Mary has only clear and distinct ideas about colour; what she lacks are clear and confused ones.

Leibniz is vague, however, as to the telos of this process of the perfectibility of human knowledge. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, he had defined an *adequate* idea as one in which “everything which enters into a definition or an item of distinct knowledge is known distinctly, right down to the primary notions” and had defined *intuitive knowledge* as had when “my mind simultaneously and distinctly understands

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11 Leibniz thus frees the idea of clear and distinct ideas from the ambiguity it has in Descartes, replacing Descartes’ modelling of the apprehension of a clear and distinct idea on the mind’s phenomenological acquaintance with the particular contents of sensation. On this see, Graciela De Pierris, “A Fundamental Ambiguity in the Cartesian Theory of Ideas: Descartes and Leibniz on Intellectual Apprehension”, *Manuscrito: Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, Jl-D 2007, 30(2), 383-422.

all the primary ingredients of a notion”. However, he notes, “this is very rare: *most* human knowledge is only confused or *suppositive*. In the later *Monadology*, however, the limitations of human knowledge are more strongly pressed: *only God* can have an *adequate or perfect* idea from which all confusion has been removed. We can only achieve clear and distinct knowledge in discrete areas—islets of distinct ideas, as it were—within a sea of confusion. But this now establishes a tension within the idea of the relation of human to divine knowledge—that is, in relation to an *entirely distinct* idea of the world that God, as omniscient, represents—and so the idea of the very possibility of metaphysical knowledge itself. How *can we* be possibly entitled to the account presented in his own *Monadology* if we are somehow ultimately bound to our finite perspectives? If, as God’s creatures, we are *necessarily* limited to confused ideas, how *are we* to know what the world might be like for God?°

Kant’s response to Leibniz’s dilemma was simple in that he replaced the vague *quantitative* difference between human and divine knowledge with a *principled* one between distinct *forms* of knowledge. Kant thus portrays God as a being capable of the *rational intuition* of things in themselves, while we humans have to rely on our being *causally* effected by objects of the world, the resulting sensations produced in us being somehow incorporated into *representational structures* to which we have contributed the *forms*. Without these representational forms contributed *by us*, we can have *no* knowledge at all; but the fact that *we* are the source of the *forms* of what is

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid, first emphasis added.

15 “Because, in organizing the whole, God has regard to every part, and specifically to every monad; and since a monad is representative in its nature, nothing could restrict it to representing only a part of things. But it is of course true that this representation of the details of the whole universe is confused, and can only be distinct with respect to a small part of things, namely those which are either closest or larges in relation to each monad. Otherwise every monad would be divine, … They all reach confusedly to infinity, to everything; but they are limited and differentiated by their level of distinct perception.” G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology*, § 60, in *Philosophical Texts*, p. 276.

16 Leibniz’s later writings seem to admit of contradictory “corporeal” and “idealist” readings of the *Monadology*—an ambiguity might be seen as reflecting this problem. For a defence of the traditional “idealist” reading of Leibniz see Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), and for a thorough-going critique, see Pauline Phemister, *Leibniz and the Natural World: Activity, Passivity and Corporeal Substances in Leibniz’s Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).
known means that what we know is never the world as it is “in itself”. Leibniz had distinguished the knowledge of the world as phenomena, achievable in science, from the deeper level of metaphysical knowledge underlying and explaining the phenomena, but Kant now limits our theoretical knowledge to the former, understood as the systematically organized knowledge of appearances.

In short, Kant clarified what had been vague and ambiguous in Leibniz’s approach, concerning the relation of human to divine knowledge. But the resulting skepticism over the status of metaphysical knowledge of things in themselves must now have consequences for the familiar Lessingian attitude to the relation of religious myth to philosophy. Once Lessing’s construal of religion as a partial and perspectival figurative representation of the world in itself, which reflects the limitations of our spatial and temporal location in the world has been deprived of its philosophical contrast—a knowledge of things in themselves—what is there to prevent it from being simply accepted as the best we can achieve?¹⁷

Kant’s skeptical epistemology of metaphysical knowledge can be seen as having opened up a space for novel experiments in this regard, as seen for example in early romantics, but it is clear that the space opened was also one within which overtly counter-Enlightenment dogmatic reassertions of religious dogma could also flourish. Kant’s own response to the failure of the traditional metaphysical project, however, was distinctive. It was to consist in boldly relocating the metaphysical project itself within the domain of practical rather than theoretical reason, and treating religious content as a figurative presentation of this, non-representationally conceived knowledge.

For Kant, if it is impossible for us to determine our beliefs entirely rationally without any empirical input, it is nevertheless possible for each of us as finite rational beings to determine our wills in this way. We can know how we ought to act from reason, and can be motivated to act in such ways from reason, even though we can never be assured by some theoretical perspective of how it is we can do this.
Distinctly moral knowledge of how to act is formulated in the linguistic form of the imperative, not that of the declarative, giving Kant an alternative to the idea of metaphysical knowledge as representation of the world. As a consequence, Kant could now reinterpret the generally Lessingian model of religious myth as an indirect form of knowledge, and as such as subordinate to conceptual knowledge, albeit conceived as practical rather than theoretical knowledge. Kant was able, we might say, to square the Lessingian circle, demythologizing religion without the need to contrast it with a positive metaphysical content that literalizes its figurative claims. Hegel’s thought, I suggest, starts off in a similar place, but rapidly veers in a different direction.

**Hegel on representation**

Like Kant, Hegel discusses religion as involving a type of symbolic presentation of truths that in philosophy are expressed purely conceptually. While the form of this content in religion is Vorstellung, “representation”, in philosophy it attains the form of thought. But while it might be thought that this distinction comes down to something like a distinction between “figurative” and “literal” truths, this is not the case. Representation is, Hegel says in the 1827 Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion “a consciousness of something that one has before oneself as something objective”, and

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17 There had been, after all, a long tradition within Christian theology of appeals to analogy and other figurative forms of thought in the attempt to characterize religious knowledge itself.

18 Thus portraying religious representation as in a generally symbolic mode, Kant could portray Jesus as a type of moral “prototype” in whom we could recognize the morality of which we ourselves capable. That is, what we recognize in Jesus when we figuratively represent him as the “son of God” is a prototype that “is nowhere to be sought except in our reason”. Immanuel Kant, “Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason”, in Religion and Rational Theology, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996), p. 106. (Original German in Kants Gesammelte Schriften (Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900-), vol6, p. 64. Hereafter, pagination to the German original will be given in the form, 6:64.)

in his discussion of theoretical spirit in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit from around the same time he notes that “the content of representation is given, it is something immediately found [Vorgefundenes]. … In representation there is a sensible, immediate givenness, and the element of freedom, namely, that this content is my representation. ... However I have not made the content. The content possesses an element of immediacy, givenness, of not being posited through my freedom”.

For Hegel, representation as such is not at all a cognitive mode that is exclusive to religious thought, it is simply the form that a cognitive content takes in everyday life, the prototype of which is the way in which some thinkable content is made present as sensible and immediate in perception, in which we understand some thinkable content as simply given and, as it were, forced upon us. It is this prototypically perceptual content that is captured in the “images” that Hegel thinks of as the principle mode of representational content and as “taken from immediate intuition”. Religion is representational because a divine content can be made present for thought by, as it were, piggy-backing in a figurative or metaphorical way on this everyday type of representational vehicle. When some perceptual content is reproduced in images, Hegel says in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, “we are directly conscious that they are only images but that they have a significance distinct from that which the image as such primitively expresses—that the image is something symbolic or allegorical and that we have before us something twofold, first the immediate and then what is meant by it its inner meaning”. “Thus”, he goes on, “there are many forms in religion about which we know that they are only metaphors”.

Religion uses the vehicles of everyday representational contents in order to present its truths, and this very fact reveals that the distinction between the literal and the figurative is one made within the mode of representation. A photograph of a

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22 Ibid., p. 145–6 (3:293).
gleaming new car can represent that particular car, or more generally, the model exemplified by that particular car, or, figuratively, abstract entities like wealth or a lavish lifestyle. But it can express these more general meanings because in the first place it can represent that car itself: as Freud famously noted, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. In short, the distinction between literal and figurative is one that works within “representation”, rather than between representation and thought. But if the philosophical conceptual reinscription of religious content cannot be thought of as the transition from figurative to literal meaning, how should it be conceived? The clue to this is to be found, I suggest, in the type of movement that Leibniz thinks of in terms of making clear and confused ideas clear and distinct.

In the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Hegel says that thought “dissolves the form of the simple, in which the content is found in representation, in such a way that distinct determinations within this simple reality are grasped and exhibited so that it is known as something inwardly manifold”. This theme of thought’s taking apart of the apparently simple givennesses of representation is similarly found in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit. “I have a representation of something; this means that I do not yet know the object in its specificity. Definition requires that I state the species, the universal, and also state the determinacy, the essential determination. In so doing, I have gone beyond the form of representation to the determination of the concept”. Moving from a simple experience or representation of something to a form of thought involving its conceptual articulation in terms of a definition involving a universal and its relevant differentiae is just what Leibniz thinks of in terms of making a clear but confused idea clear and distinct. In more contemporary terms, it is what Jackson means by the transition from the perspectivally limited experiential knowledge of coloured things to a scientific understanding of them. Like Kant, Hegel thinks of perceptual experience as implicitly structured by concepts, and it is this implicit conceptuality of experience that is made explicit when I make a judgment on the basis of experience, and express this judgment in words. But this is to bring the perceptual content into the “space of reasons”, that is, to give it a logical form that enables the judgment to be inserted into

23 Ibid., p. 152 (3:299).
a chain of reasoning—an inference. But this must mean a loss, since the singular terms that purportedly would pick out the phenomenal properties of whatever it is I’m perceiving have no place in such a thinkable content. When I raise to thought that which appears as this, here, now, I have left the perspectival singularity it has as experienced, behind. As with Leibniz, for Hegel the movement from representation to thought is a movement towards the type of knowledge that is traditionally attributed to God. Kant had responded to the ambiguity of Leibniz on the relation of human to divine knowledge by drawing a boundary between these two possible forms of knowledge. Hegel’s response, I suggest, is by way of a criticism of the implicit idea of God that Kant accepts in making this very demarcation.

**The idea of God in Kant and Hegel**

In the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* on the “transcendental ideal” or “transcendental prototype”, Kant portrays the “idea of God” as generated from a type of inferential thinking whose form is captured by the disjunctive syllogism. In theoretical reason, “ideas”, that is, concepts regulating inferential thought processes, are limited to this regulative function, and deprived of any knowledge-forming or predicative function. Under the influence of the transcendental illusion, however, these “ideas” are taken as representing some kind of supersensible thing. Here, the idea organizing the rational relations among all determinate objects captured by the disjunctive syllogism is taken as designating a “highest being” which provides the ground of all finite things. More specifically, the “ideal” of God results from the “realization”, “hypostatization” and “personalization” of this properly formal set of relations holding among all completely conceptually determined objects. It is easy to recognize various candidate Gods in Kant’s description. Simply realizing the idea, as in Kant’s idea of the omnitudo realitatis, would result in something like Spinoza’s God; but further personalizing and hypostatizing it would result in something like the traditional Christian trinitarian conception of God, with its multiple “persons”. But

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26 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A583/B611 n.

27 The Nicene Creed had settled on an account of the trinity as three hypostases in one ousia.
for Kant such *sensibilized ideas* of God can play no epistemic role at all. As he points out later in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, the doctrine of the trinity when taken literally “has no practical relevance at all … Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference.” It is only when we read a *moral meaning* into this article of faith that it would contain an intelligible belief that “refers to our moral vocation”. Thus in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the trinity is seen as symbolizing the various relations within which an individual stands to the moral law which it simultaneously legislates and obeys, and the same interpretative approach holds true of the associated doctrine of the incarnation. Were we to think of the Deity as “dwelling incarnate’ in a real human being and working as a second nature in him, then we can draw nothing practical from this mystery: since we cannot require ourselves to rival a God, we cannot take him as an example”. It is *only* by taking Jesus “as the Idea of Humanity in its full moral perfection, present in God from eternity and beloved by him”, rather than as an actual man who *is* God, that we could take his life as embodying moral examples we could follow.

Hegel likewise thinks of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as employing figurative forms of thought, but for him the significance of this content so presented could not be more different. Hegel is critical of the idea of reducing the significance of Jesus to the status of anything like a moral exemplar: rather, the significance of the doctrine of Jesus as the second person of the trinity resides in the fact that the divine assumes human form and, thereby, suffers and dies. ““God has died, God is dead”, Hegel famously declares in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* from 1831, and goes on “this is the most frightful of all thoughts”. Jesus’ death signifies God’s death, and is, of course, a representation. A more conceptual way of expressing this is to be found in Hegel’s further expansion of the idea in the claim “that everything eternal and true does not exist, that negation itself is found in

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31 Ibid.
Four years earlier, quoting the words “God himself is dead” from the Lutheran hymn of Johannes Rest, Hegel interprets these words as expressing “an awareness that the human, the finite, the fragile, the weak, the negative are themselves a moment of the divine, that they are within God himself, that finitude, negativity, otherness are not outside of God and do not, as otherness, hinder unity with God. Otherness, the negative, is known to be moment of the divine nature itself. This involves the highest idea of spirit.”

The shape of Hegel’s interpretation of the “Vorstellung” of Christ’s death must flow over into his attitude to the third person of the trinity, the Holy Spirit. If we understand the short, worldly life and death of Christ as representing a short, worldly life and death of God himself, then the more protracted worldly life of the Holy Spirit within the community of believers, that is, with the community within which the memory of Christ is kept alive, must equally signify the actual presence of God in this human community. It is with the notion of spirit, of course, that Hegel’s theology meets up with what we might call his philosophical anthropology, an anthropology in which his account of subjective spirit is articulated with a more Herderian or perhaps Wittgensteinian idea that human psychological life is dependent upon existence within a community’s normative practices—its “objective spirit”—practices at the centre of which stand patterns of mutual recognition articulating that communal life. A multiplicity of issues to do with the implications of Hegel’s theology for his metaphysics would open were we to try to bring together Hegel’s recognitive account of spirit with the topic of absolute spirit—far too many to even raise, let alone pursue, here. Recent explorations of the theme of recognition has proved fruitful for pursuing various areas of Hegel’s philosophy, but as yet, Hegel’s philosophy of religion remains relatively untouched from this perspective. For our purposes, however, and to close, I want to return to the sorts of questions from which we started, and suggest some consequences that might follow for philosophy from what Hegel sees as signified by the Vorstellung of Christ’s death, the idea that “the negative” is a “moment of the divine nature itself”.

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33 Ibid., 326.
On the logical issue of negation, Hegel’s thought stands in stark contrast to that of Kant. In his discussion of the idea of God in “The Transcendental Ideal”, Kant says that “all negations … are mere limitations of a greater and finally of the highest reality; hence they presuppose it, and as regards their content they are merely derived from it.”\(^\text{34}\) As Henry Allison points out, with this claim Kant accepts the logical and ontological prioritization “of realities or positive predicates over negative ones”.\(^\text{35}\) We can appreciate this fact when we see how, if one simply “realizes” Kant’s idea of God as the ground of all determinations, without further “hypostatizing” or “personalizing” it, one seems to find Spinoza’s divine substance in which all determinations are negations of a single positively conceived being. Were this God further personalized, one presumably arrives at the idea of an omniscient and effectively unitarian God, the God of the Old Testament, whose knowledge stands as a model against which we are to grasp our own as partial and limited. But Hegel’s resistance to prioritizing positive predicates over negative ones, as familiar in his idea of “determinate negation”, has been, as we have seen, taken right into the inner structure of the idea of God itself.\(^\text{36}\) Again, attempting to trace the consequence of this move would take us well beyond the scope of a short paper, but we might start to grasp one consequence it might have by returning to the idea of omniscience as we have seen it used in the thought experiments such as the one involving Mary.

The metaphysical dilemma generated by the story of Mary was that she, surely, learns something on leaving her black and white room, she learns what colours are like. But her knowledge had purportedly been complete, so surely, we want to say, her

\(^{34}\) “Thus all the possibility of things … is regarded as derivative, and only that which includes all reality in it is regarded as original. For all negations (which are the sole predicates through which everything else is to be distinguished from the most real being) are mere limitations of a greater and finally of the highest reality; hence they presuppose it, and as regards their content they are merely derived from it.” Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A578/B606.

objective knowledge must not have been all the knowledge there was to be had. But this produces a paradox, and the paradox, it would seem, comes from the Kantian conception of omniscience presupposed. It seemed as if Mary, like God the Father, could only extend and so “complete” her knowledge by foregoing knowledge—that is, by accepting the partial, limited and perspectival type of knowledge characteristic of humans into a body of already perfected knowledge. But this is incoherent, and with his rival conception of God, who already contains negation and limitation within himself, Hegel refuses Kant’s problematic starting point. In short, we should not accept the equation of God’s knowledge and objective knowledge. And, of course, if we are, as in Leibniz’s metaphor, “mirrors of God”, Hegel’s reconfigured idea of God must have consequences for our conception of ourselves and our own capacities.

When we reflect on our capacity to reason both theoretically and practically, and to move from our clear but confused ideas to clear and distinct ones, we should now no longer conceive of this movement as from a state which is simply conceived as a limitation in relation to its telos. This movement too, involves a loss—for example, the loss of knowledge of what colours are like, when we move from our perceptual experience to the science of colour. The idea of moving from the limited to the less limited was just the conception that had generated the problematic image of movement towards some ultimate fixed telos purified of all limitation. For Hegel, the God representing that epistemic telos had been a false one and should be replaced by a better one. And the new idea of God, as a God who necessarily comes into the world as a finite man, provides us with a new image in which we can recognize ourselves. In this new image, we see the movement characteristic of our own rationality, the movement from sensuous immediacy to the concept, as reversed as in a mirror. That is, if our characteristic movement is to move away from sensuousness to the mediation of concepts, God’s characteristic movement starts by going in the opposite direction: God moves down to us, as it were, mirroring our climbing the conceptual tree and “going up” to him. But the next phase of the trinitarian moving image, has Christ, the anthropologized God, leaving us to reunite with his father after death, so as to complete him. Consequently, if I am to think of myself as something

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36 On the logic of Hegel’s treatment of negation see my Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chs 3 (sections
like an inversion of this triune God, I should think of my characteristic movement as involving an essential moment of return to the limited sensuous existence from which I started. In short, I’m encouraged to give up the effectively idolatrous idea, that reason is going to liberate me completely from the finitude of human existence, including the finitude of my epistemic existence. I should give up such a fetishistic attitudes towards my rational capacities. Here, as elsewhere, the true religion is the enemy of idolatory and false gods. But Hegel’s doctrine of the death of God is not the familiar nihilism often associated with this Vorstellung. One’s return to the finite, as in the mirror image of Christ’s return to his father, does not leave the starting point untransformed. We should resist the lure that conceptual thought will take us to a place free of the limitations of our finite being: the God of that conception is dead. But, grasped in the right way, thought and reason can, nevertheless, orient us within our finitude in ways that, by our capacity to conceptualize and reconceptualize our world, ourselves, and our goals, local limitations can be overcome, false gods dispelled, and our finite lives enriched. Something like this seems to be at the heart of the metaphysical consequences of Hegel’s theology.