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Introduction: interpreting German Idealism

I The idealist achievement

The period of German Idealism constitutes a cultural phenomenon whose stature and influence has been frequently compared to nothing less than the golden age of Athens. For this reason the era from the 1770s into the 1840s that we tend to call "the age of German Idealism" is often designated in Germany simply as the period of "classical German philosophy." This designation is meant to indicate a level of preeminent achievement rather than to characterize a specific style or content. It thus bypasses issues such as how philosophers of this era match up with the division in German literature between classicism and romanticism, and how strong a distinction is to be made between the "Critical" or "transcendental" idealism of Kant and the so-called "absolute" idealism that culminated in the work of the three most famous philosophers who came after him: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.[1]

Standard works on German Idealism, especially in English, still tend to focus on (at most) these four best-known philosophers and one or two of their main works. As a consequence, the philosophical complexity of the era as a whole is seriously misrepresented. Studies that compensate for this approach by attempting to indicate the full richness of the period are apt to get lost in historical detail and fail to set key philosophical distinctions in sharp relief. An additional problem arises from one of the most valuable features of German Idealism – the unique degree to which its works transcend standard boundaries between academic disciplines. The texts of German Idealism continue to be an enormous influence on other fields such as religious studies, literary theory, politics, art, and the general methodology of the humanities. Philosophy often generates applications of itself in other areas, but with German Idealism an extraordinarily close relation to other domains was built in from the start. The idealists were not only responding directly to major cultural upheavals such as the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the rise of romanticism; they were also determining the reception of these epochal events. In recognition of the

complexity of this period, this volume will cover a broader range of writers than readers might expect, although the focus will remain on the main *philosophical* arguments and themes that concern the era *as a whole*.

Two pairs of cities played a special role in the diffusion of idealism: Königsberg and Berlin, and Weimar and Jena. In these cultural capitals, the lectures of idealist philosophers were objects of pilgrimage for leading writers, scientists, and politicians. Although Kant remained in his remote hometown and let others come to him, his many contacts with other leaders of the Enlightenment kept him in close touch with developments in other cities, especially Berlin and its new Academy. He had no trouble in drawing an audience even before the publication of the first – and by far the most important – major work of the era, his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Riga, 1781). After formative experiences with Kant in Königsberg, Herder and Fichte took up residence near Goethe, who was in charge of the cultural institutions of the Weimar region. As a result of the enormously effective popularization of Kant by Reinhold,[2] who lectured in the nearby university town of Jena, the area had become a breeding ground for scores of apostles of the Critical philosophy.[3] When Reinhold left Jena in 1794, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel took over in turn. They offered to improve on the "letter" of Kant's work in the name of its "spirit," and developed one system of German Idealism after the other, often within a span of a few months.[4]

In the very same town and era, the literary giants Schiller, Hölderlin, Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg), and Friedrich Schlegel worked with the greatest intensity on their own philosophical essays and notebooks. An unprecedented cultural revolution was taking place, fueled by the collaboration of Goethe and Schiller, the birth of German romanticism, and the arrival of a new and – at least for a while – radically non-conformist generation rich with aesthetic and scientific talent. In addition to those already named, its leading figures were Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Ludwig Tieck, Jean Paul Richter, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Dorothea [Veit] Schlegel, Caroline [Böhmer] Schlegel, and Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt.[5] It was a relentlessly creative and interactive group and inevitably split into factions. It suffered from the early death of Novalis (1801), the retreat into madness of Hölderlin (1802), and the depression of Schelling after the death of Caroline Schlegel (1809). By the time of Napoleon's victory at Jena in 1806, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Schelling, and others had already dispersed in different directions. Most of the group eventually settled in Berlin to present later versions of their philosophies at the new university there. In the context of the recovery of Prussia, German Idealism in its later years contributed significantly to the rise of nationalism and conservatism within Germany – and also to the worldwide growth of liberalism and the philosophical underpinnings of the revolutionary movements of the 1840s and after.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the reputation of the movement suffered a noticeable setback. Schopenhauer and Marx, who were peripheral figures earlier, gained considerable philosophical attention largely because they appeared to be an alternative to the whole mainstream tradition. During this period Dilthey and historical scholars began to edit influential and more accurate editions of the writings of the classical German philosophers, but for the most part this research had a limited effect on regenerating first-rate systematic philosophy. Kant's work alone maintained a fairly constant significance, but usually in precisely those areas where his philosophy was sharply distinguished from that of his idealist successors. The tide began to turn again in the period around the First World War. Intense crises in art, theology, and politics brought about a renewal of interest in figures such as Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Hölderlin. Indicative of this shift is the fact that already in 1915 Heidegger turned from purely logical, scholastic, and phenomenological interests to an explicit concern with history, "spirit," and neo-Hegelianism. Very soon, however, idealism was eclipsed by Heidegger's other shifts, which dominated the continental philosophical scene after he came to prominence in the 1920s. The debacle of fascism and the Second World War left a temporary vacuum in German philosophy. Independent thinkers such as Walter Schulz, Dieter Henrich, Ernst Tugendhat, and Jürgen Habermas eventually managed to combine an appreciation for Heidegger's significance with a fruitful return to the classic themes of German Idealism. In addition, historical work became much more careful, and it has now reached a level of unparalleled detail, with meticulous thousand-page studies of the background of figures who had a direct influence on only brief and never before appreciated subperiods of the movement.[6]

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the outstanding work of a new generation of German philosophers (for example, Gerold Prauss, Ludwig Siep, Manfred Frank, and Otfried Höffe) has coincided with developments in philosophy outside of Germany to create an international influence for German Idealism that appears to have reached a new high point. "Analytic philosophy," which arose as largely a rejection of German Idealism (and its neo-Hegelian British variants), has for the most part given up any thought of being able to impose a substantial form or content that would wholly replace traditional philosophy. Anti-"idealist" movements such as logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy have themselves become historical curiosities. While the extremely clear and careful style of analytic philosophy has gained a universal and irreversible influence, its leading practitioners now often turn, without apology, not only to Kant, but also to Hegel, Fichte, and other idealists. Wilfrid Sellars's reminder that where Kant appears, Hegel cannot be far behind, has been taken up positively by contemporary philosophers as diverse as Charles Taylor, Stanley Cavell, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, John McDowell, and Robert

Brandom. At the same time, the study of German Idealism, especially in its interconnections with romanticism, has become central in the work of the most influential international scholars concerned with cultural studies in general – for example, in major books by Isaiah Berlin, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Tzvetan Todorov, and Terry Eagleton.

In 1900, exactly one century after the high noon of German Idealism, it might well have seemed as if the passage of one more century would make the movement look like a much overrated phenomenon. Astonishingly, in the year 2000, the very opposite appears to have happened. The significance of German Idealism is here to stay, and our task is to begin to understand this fact in order to be able to appropriate it authentically for our own time – and not to imagine any longer, as Heidegger or the positivists did, that it can or should be "overcome."

German Idealism deserves the attention it has received. It fills an obvious gap generated by traditional expectations of philosophy and problems caused by the rise of the unquestioned authority of modern science. Unlike most of the philosophy of the later twentieth century, its works always demand that philosophy take on the traditional challenge of articulating a synoptic account of all our most basic interests. It holds that philosophy must be a deeply unified and autonomous enterprise, not a series of ad hoc solutions to abstract technical puzzles, or the mere application of findings taken from other disciplines. The main philosophers of the idealist era each constructed an extraordinarily broad and tightly connected system of their own. And those writers who did not go so far as to offer such a system, in any traditional sense, at least made it a major point of their writing to indicate how and why modern systematic philosophy must be limited.

Modern philosophy was developed in the shadow of the sharp decline of the hegemony of authoritarian thinking in theology, traditional science, and politics. This decline was brought about by the consequences of a series of momentous revolutions: the Reformation, the "new physics," and the political movements culminating in the French Revolution. A natural first response to the decline of the old authorities was an attempt to construct purely philosophical foundations for the new revolutionary perspectives. Descartes and Hobbes have been taken to be prime examples of this approach at the beginning of the modern era. The intensely self-critical tendency of modern philosophy itself soon led, however, to a skeptical perspective that threatened (in the aftermath of Hume) to undermine not only the claims of all the new philosophical systems but also the whole project of a rational justification of any common knowledge.

In the face of this challenge, Kant presented a system that at first seemed to offer an ideal reconciliation of all interests. He took it to be obvious that no

modern rational person would want to turn back from either common sense or the fundamental claims expressed most powerfully by Newton and Rousseau. But there seemed to be a deep conflict between these claims. In so far as it had a clear metaphysics, Newton's science of "the heavens above" appeared, on the one hand, to entail a deterministic universe, with no need for the three basic claims of traditional philosophy – the existence of God, freedom, and immortality. On the other hand, Rousseau's reminder of the "law within," the overriding claim of morality upon all persons as free, equal, and practical beings, seemed to require – or so Kant and his older generation assumed – precisely these claims. And not only did these basic perspectives on nature and freedom appear to conflict with one another; they both seemed in tension with elementary common sense, which says nothing about either strictly universal physical laws or strictly universal moral laws, let alone the non-physical grounds that these were alleged to require.

Kant's Critical system attempted to deal with all these problems by arguing that a philosophical analysis of common judgment in theoretical and practical contexts can provide a consistent justification for the essential presuppositions of both of the structures that Newton and Rousseau had articulated. There was a price to the Critical solution: the laws of nature were given a universal and necessary but empirical and "merely phenomenal" significance, while the sphere of freedom was grounded explicitly in a metaphysical and not theoretically knowable domain, one revealed only by "pure practical reason." Knowledge had "made room for faith," albeit a strictly moral faith that did not rest on supernatural evidence or theological arguments.

Apparent weaknesses in Kant's system were heavily attacked from the first, even by its "friends." Reinhold introduced a demand for *premises* that were absolutely certain, *arguments* that were absolutely unified, comprehensive, and rigorously deduced, and *conclusions* that absolutely excluded unknowable transcendent features. The project of an *absolutely* "rigorous science" (*Fundament*) was taken up with a vengeance by Reinhold's successors in Jena. While holding on to the new ideal of a completely certain, thorough, and immanent system, Fichte modified Kant's balanced perspective on nature and freedom, and his sharp distinction of theoretical and practical philosophy. Fichte accepted the view of those who had concluded that modern *theoretical* philosophy led only to skepticism. He based his system entirely on the implications of the (allegedly) absolute certainty of our mere self-consciousness in its commitment to freedom and morality in a strict sense. Kant had argued for a highest "moral world" in a traditional transcendent sense (with happiness proportionate to virtue in some manner independent of space and time) as a domain supposedly required by the rational hopes underlying our commitment to morality. Fichte insisted instead that our moral conscience requires us to see the actual shape of the natural world as *already completely* fitting (in principle) the "revelation" of pure practical

reason. He called this the one and only "moral world," and any transcendent domain was dismissed as not only unknowable but also meaningless. His insistence on preaching this doctrine on Sundays in Jena led to the famous "Atheism Controversy" of 1798 in which Goethe eventually chose to allow Fichte to be removed in order to avoid complications. This event had momentous implications; it opened the door for new teachers in Jena, and it taught them to express any radical implications of their idealism in a much more esoteric form.

Fichte's views had a profound impact on the Swabian trio of Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin, who all came to Jena after having studied together as seminarians in Tübingen. Schelling was the first to develop a post-Fichtean system, one that offered a more balanced approach to the relation of freedom and nature. In place of a foundation in reflections on morality and self-consciousness alone, Schelling argued that it is only rational to presume that there is a series of basic stages intrinsic to the development of nature, which is an organic whole embracing history and "spirit." (Not surprisingly, Marxists have looked back to Schelling's earliest views as an anticipation of their own critical naturalism and historical materialism.) These stages exhibit a necessary progressive sequence that can be explored independently and still leads to the same *conclusion* that Fichte reached, namely that the natural world is a domain (and the only domain) that provides for the ultimate realization of pure practical reason. Thus it is a moral world, a heaven on earth in the making – provided that human beings take up their capacity to be rational and reorder their society in line with the revolutions of modernity. For a while, this result came to be expressed by Schelling in terms of a "system of identity," for it asserted an underlying identity of nature as implicit rationality and of mind as explicit rationality. The structures that allow for humans to come explicitly to know the rationality of nature as a whole must be structures that are built into nature itself from the start.

Schelling's position was a radicalization of teleological ideas in Kant's later work. Kant supplemented the natural and moral perspectives of his first two *Critique*s with a third *Critique* on the power of judgment. He observed that in both aesthetic judgment and the regulative principles of natural science, especially biology, there is a phenomenon of purposiveness and systematicity that exceeds the minimal conditions that seem needed for human experience to take place. Kant noted that the appreciation of natural beauty in particular provides a "sign" of a deep harmony of nature and freedom, a harmony that he thought his moral argument for God alone rigorously justified. Unlike Fichte, Kant had stressed the apparent purposiveness of nature itself; unlike Schelling, he had stressed that this was a mere sign, not even a partial proof, of objective purposiveness – and, unlike both, Kant had stressed that it was, above all, a sign that freedom and nature had a transcendent ground and not merely an immanent unity.

Hegel took Schelling's philosophy of identity a step further by presenting detailed arguments, with a more intricate dialectical structure, for each of the stages in the development of nature and history, as well as in logic, metaphysics, and self-consciousness in general. In insisting on an "objective" rather than merely moral purposiveness as his starting point, Hegel's system had a problem that was the opposite of Fichte's. Where Fichte started with freedom alone and left the internal structure of nature to appear arbitrary, Hegel started with such a global focus on being, nature, and history that it became unclear how freedom in the sense of individual free choice could retain its full meaning. This problem became a dividing point after Hegel. Those more sympathetic to traditional religion, such as the later Schelling or Kierkegaard, insisted in going back, in a Kantian fashion, to a belief in a "fact" of absolute human freedom. Left wing Hegelians, in contrast, insisted on a thoroughly naturalized notion of freedom. They were no longer afraid of the difficulties of another "Atheism Controversy" but instead gloried in their radicalism. If he had only lived long enough, Kant would no doubt have been shocked by the ultimate consequences of his argument for a moral world – but no doubt he would have understood them too.

Parallel to these mainstream developments in theoretical and practical philosophy, an equally important tradition was developing in other areas opened by Kant. His third *Critique* – combined with the impact of Goethe's and Herder's work – stimulated the growth of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline, and this became one of the glories of the era. It made possible fundamental works on art by philosophers such as Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer, and by philosophic writers who were also great poets, such as Schiller and Hölderlin. More importantly, it raised the whole issue of the relation of philosophy to aesthetic writing. Ultimately, it opened the door to the suspicion raised later by Nietzsche, and developed intensively by a wide range of thinkers at the end of the twentieth century (Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty, and Williams), that the future of philosophy lies more in a dissemination of something like aesthetic insights and values than in a pursuit of the traditional claim to be a rigorous science.

The key philosophical arguments of idealism are all examined in much more detail in the chapters that follow. In the remainder of this Introduction I will attend briefly to two issues that, left unattended, can lead to considerable misunderstanding: (1) the meaning of the notion of idealism itself in the German tradition and (2) the philosophical significance of the phenomenon of romanticism.

II What is the "Idealism" of German Idealism?

For a long time, the term "idealism" has had a largely negative and unattractive connotation for Anglo-American philosophers. This feature, combined with the

difficult and speculative style of most German writers in the idealist era, has created a strong barrier to their appreciation in England and America. It is not possible to escape this problem by pointing to a single uncontroversial and appealing core-meaning for idealism throughout the period. Exactly what "idealism" means for Kant, Hegel, Fichte, etc., is precisely one of the main issues that dominates the work of the participants and interpreters of this era.[7] It is possible, however, to set aside some common and very misleading presumptions.

Because of the influence of philosophers such as Berkeley and G. E. Moore, "idealism" has tended in the English tradition to be associated primarily with negative metaphysical or epistemological doctrines: the thesis that matter, *or* the external world, is not independently real, *or* at least that it cannot be known, *or* known with certainty, as real. Given such quite distinct meanings, one would be better off substituting clearer and more specific terms, such as immaterialism and skepticism (or fallibilism). Unfortunately, "idealism" continues to be used for many ambiguous purposes, and the term is generally assumed from the start to have to indicate some kind of anti-realism, as if "ideal" must always mean "not-real." To be sure, the word has often been used precisely that way – and that is the problem. For it has also been used in other ways by very significant thinkers. Originally, for philosophers such as Plato, the "ideal" was precisely the real, the most real. In modern times, at least in many philosophical contexts, matters became reversed. Somehow, just as with the terms "subjective" and "objective," "ideal" has come to mean almost the opposite of what it did before.

In German philosophy, from Leibniz through Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, it is quite clear that the Platonic tradition had a much heavier influence, systematically and terminologically, than the skepticism of the British tradition. Therefore, anyone reading German Idealism should, at the very least, take note that the notion of idealism has carried with it both positive and not merely negative meanings, and that the negative sense dominant in contemporary English is by no means to be assumed. The negative meaning of "idealism" implies that most things that are commonly taken to be real are *not* so in fact, that is, they do not exist at all, or at least not in the manner that has been assumed. The positive interpretation of "idealism," in contrast, involves seeing the term as *adding* rather than subtracting significance, as emphasizing that, whatever we say about the status of many things that are thought to exist at a common-sense level, we also need to recognize a set of features or entities that have a higher, a more "ideal" nature.

"Ideal" features or entities thus need by no means be thought of as having to be projected into "another" world; on the contrary, they can be taken to be simply the purposive structure or ideal, in the sense of optimal, form of our one world of ordinary objects, once these are properly understood. In general, the *positive* exploration of such features is precisely what characterizes those later

philosophers who are often assumed, by non-sympathetic "readers," to be *especially* negative in their idealism: Fichte, Schelling, Hegel. In fact, these philosophers started by repeatedly mocking the whole metaphysical tradition of opposing any fully transcendent (unknown, "in itself") realm to the world that we take ourselves to share and to be certain of through the latest forms of knowledge and social self-determination. The disputes among these German philosophers have to do primarily with *identifying* specific philosophical categories, the genuinely ideal structures that provide the most illuminating general account of how all experience, history, and nature hang together. In addition, like Marx (see below, chapter 13), they resisted a crude mechanistic epistemology that would attempt to explain cognition as simply a brute effect of receiving data in perception. Just as contemporary thinkers latch on to more complex notions such as "evolution" to suggest an intelligible pattern for everything from genetic and cosmological development to sensation and higher acts of mind, so too late eighteenth-century German philosophers welcomed the radical scientific strands of the late Enlightenment, and tried to elaborate dynamic, chemical, and organic models that aimed not at denying the existence of given natural forms but at affirming deep ("ideal") structures that make these forms comprehensible as a whole, and that force us to go beyond the meager passive vocabulary of mechanics. (Chomsky's appropriation of Humboldt is an example of one of the few contemporary American attempts to encourage a scientific appreciation of this side of German thought.[8])

In sum, the sad and ironic fact is that the "idealist" German thinkers in this period took themselves to mean something that is precisely the *opposite* of anything like negative metaphysical idealism – the philosophical view that, in its paradigm modern form, prides itself on a denial of public material objects. Yet it is precisely this negative kind of idealism that English readers have tended to presume is the core of the philosophical position that they have derisively rejected as "German Idealism."[9] It is not only English readers who have obscured matters. Very influential strands of left wing Hegelianism also tended to speak as if there was an anti-realistic metaphysical position in their predecessors that needed to be overturned – when it can be shown that in fact the genuine differences between figures such as Hegel and Marx had nothing to do with such a position (see below, chapter 13).

Even if one succeeds in comprehending that the idealism of the German idealists is not the negative kind, there remain difficulties enough in the positive aspects of their systems. The main problem is precisely that they are so elaborately systematic, that this is what their idealism largely consists in – a holism of a highly ambitious "idealizing" kind that refuses to take *any* particular, wholly contingent, and limited structure as the final story. Even if they in no way mean to deny nature and experience, they do frequently insist on offering an absolutely

certain and purely philosophical framework to "ground" or complete "true" science. By itself, however, this systematic urge should not be regarded as a sin of German Idealism alone. It remained an even stronger influence in several branches of empiricism and the positivist movement into the twentieth century, from Mill to Schlick and Carnap. The systems of twentieth-century empiricist foundationalism and its radical pragmatist successors proved to be much more of a threat to ordinary realism than any philosophy that came from the "idealists" of Jena. Nonetheless, even without any misplaced worry about a threat to realism, the systematic ambitions of the German idealists were enough by themselves to create considerable and legitimate resistance from the very beginning. In the 1790s Jena gave birth not only to absolute idealism but also to a philosophical counter-movement generated by an unusual alliance of thinkers who shared a deep interest in views about the limits of reason that were stressed by both Kant and romanticism.

III Idealism and romanticism

It is no accident that in this era the *style* of philosophical writing itself became a *fundamental* problem for the first time. The question of style took on a special importance because of two developments. On the one hand, Kant and some of his immediate followers introduced a new kind of writing that required massive efforts of interpretation even for those who were specialists and close to the author in time, space, and language. Geniuses such as Mendelssohn and Goethe were sincere in professing difficulty in merely reading Kant's major works. (This problem was in part connected to the fact that Kant belonged to the first generation of philosophers who presented their major works in German alone and had to invent their own terminology.) An unprecedented number of digests, popularizations, and conflicting interpretations flooded the scene. Later systems, especially those developed by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, only exacerbated this problem. Every attempt of an author to present one more "crystal clear report" (*sonnenklarer Bericht*, a term in one of Fichte's titles) of the latest idealist system was met with curiosity that soon gave way to incredulity and incomprehension.

On the other hand, there was also, almost from the very start, and as a complementary movement to the growing esotericism accompanying the rise of German Idealism, the development of an intentionally anti-systematic, nontechnical style of writing. This strand is internal to German Idealism itself. An anticipation of the ideas behind it can be found already in some of Kant's own work (his desire to overturn "the philosophy of the schools"), but it became a genuine movement only in the early romantic circles of mid-1790s Jena.

The "anti-systematic" strand of this period favored a specific *content* and *form* for philosophy. In its *content* this strand emphasized a distinctive feature of