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Introduction

Dieter Sturma/Karl Ameriks

*The Project of *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy**

The era of classical German philosophy, from Kant to Hegel, is unique in the history of philosophical theories. Within barely forty years there arose: the main works of Kant, the *Elementarphilosophie* of Reinhold, the *Wissenschaftslehre* of Fichte, the philosophical works of the young Kantians and post-Kantians, including, above all, Hölderlin and Novalis, and idealist systems of philosophers from Schelling to Hegel. Moreover, recent research has uncovered the philosophical significance of a series of previously little known thinkers in the period of the transition from Kant's transcendental philosophy to German idealism.¹

For a large of variety of issues, current philosophical attention has also become focused on the argumentative value of the philosophical ideas developed in this era. The full potential (which is not a merely quantitative matter) of this period has certainly not yet been adequately appreciated. Each age poses new questions, and a classical period is distinguished by the fact that, in retrospect, it can be presented in ever new intellectual configurations, and in that way it is able to give ever new answers to changing questions. This point emerges especially clearly in the context of the problems of current philosophy concerning the subject and subjectivity. Against the background of the tendencies of current philosophy, which are very critical of, and even antagonistic to, subjectivity,² classical German philosophy takes on an overwhelming significance, because from its very beginning, this philosophy has combined perspectives that construct and criticize the standpoint of subjectivity. The great complexity of its arguments concerning the subject makes for a contrast with current philosophy, since these arguments avoid the exaggerations of pronouncing a death of the subject or the inevitability of its unlimited decentralization.

The various theoretical perspectives of classical German philosophy are distinctive in that they take up, in very different ways, justified criticisms of subjectivity and justifiable claims of its decentralization, but without thereby giving up the notion of the self.

Against the background of this historically and theoretically complex constellation of issues in German idealist thought, this volume undertakes the task of presenting new historical evaluations of philosophical movements in the classical German period, as well as a systematic reconsideration of the foundations of classical German theories of the subject. Behind our title, *The Modern Subject: Conceptions of the Self in Classical German Philosophy*, there also lies a transatlantic research project carried out together by American and European scholars of German philosophy. Its founding idea is the conception of a continuing "transatlantic workshop" that will include attitudes and perspectives coming from different traditions and bring them to bear on a common object of research. In this way, the theme of this project is programmatic. Whatever the differences in their theoretical intentions, all the participants agree that systematically sustainable answers to questions about the subject are to be sought not in the controversies going back and forth in our era about the general decentralization of the fundamental concepts of modernity, but rather in an argumentative engagement with the philosophies of subjectivity in the era of classical German philosophy.

The main points of the philosophy of subjectivity in classical German philosophy emerge primarily in the context of the study of the history of philosophy, whereas in the systematic efforts of contemporary philosophy the invocation of classical German philosophy usually proceeds only with hesitation. The only exceptions here are Kant, who now as before is a common point of reference for many divergent philosophical orientations, and in part Hegel, whose influence in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy has remained limited primarily to social philosophy. The other great names of this period, such as Reinhold, Fichte, Hölderlin, and Schelling show up in systematic discussions only occasionally, at best.

Furthermore, the analytic philosophy which has dominated the Anglo-American realm for so long has had difficulty in thematizing the self and self-consciousness. Even when it has not followed primarily reductionist interests, it has hardly tried to get close to the ideas of classical German philosophers. However, there have been some indications that the reception of these philosophers is clearly changing, for the significance of the theory of subjectivity in classical German philosophy has not remained wholly unnoticed in the systematic context of Anglo-American philosophy. For example, in the work of P. F. Strawson, Hector Neri Castañeda, John Rawls, and Charles Taylor there are investigations which put contemporary

problems of subjectivity directly into relation with the classical positions. The same can surely also be said of philosophers like Thomas Nagel, Roderick Chisholm, and Robert Nozick, though they are less interested in the reconstruction of particular positions in the history of philosophy.³

The growing interest of Anglo-American philosophers in the traditional figures of classical German idealism may come in part from the stimulus of Continental philosophy, but to a significant extent it also comes from a dissatisfaction with the thematic narrowness that analytic philosophy has brought along with it. On the Continental scene, where the most important source for the systematic rehabilitation of idealistic philosophy of subjectivity is to be found in the so-called Heidelberg school (represented mainly by the works of Dieter Henrich and more recently, Manfred Frank), there has also been a growing interest in the methods of analytic philosophy. This school is also primarily responsible for the new-found interest in post-Kantian theories of self-consciousness among Continental thinkers.

Against the background of this theoretical situation, there has developed in Continental philosophy a trend of combining research into classical German philosophy with the methodological insights of contemporary systematic philosophy. All the contributions in this volume are indebted to this methodological advance. This cooperative transatlantic project shows how one can exploit and develop the overlaps in the different theoretical perspectives in a more fruitful way than would be possible if one stayed wholly within the context of the discussions in separate theoretical traditions.

The Contributions

The thematic approaches in the contributions to this volume follow roughly the path of the development of the determinations of the self and self-consciousness in classical German philosophy. As is well known, this path takes its starting point from Kant's epistemological analyses of self-consciousness, then moves to Fichte's speculative theory of self-positing, and culminates in Hegel's broadening of subjectivity into intersubjectivity.⁴ Kant's theory of the self, in its systematic as well as historical context, is the central focus of the essays by Henry Allison, Georg Mohr, and Véronique Zanetti.

Henry E. Allison investigates the connection of spontaneity and autonomy in Kant's concept of the self. He thereby brings the relation of theoretical and practical reason within a strict Kantian conception of the self as an explication of the freedom of the person. For Allison, the concept

of the self finds its concretization in the "Incorporation Thesis," according to which incentives can determine the will only when a person takes them up in the form of a maxim. Allison uses this thesis to give a new defense of what he has called Kant's "Reciprocity Thesis," that freedom and the moral law reciprocally imply each other. Allison concludes by arguing that objections to this thesis have failed to see that Kant is making a "conceptual," not a "metaphysical" claim, and that he is contending only that the reality of freedom cannot be denied "from a practical point of view."

Georg Mohr puts forward an argument that includes a developmental history that brings together the different fundamental stages of the eighteenth century philosophical accounts of the consciousness of freedom: introspection (in Wolff and the pre-Critical Kant), moral consciousness (in the Critical Kant), and intersubjectivity (in Fichte). These developmental stages find their thematic correlates in new interpretations of the philosophical concept of freedom, which is taken first in a psychological, then a moral, and finally a social sense. In conclusion, Mohr calls for opening up the perspective of Kantian theory in the direction of a Fichtian conception of intersubjectivity and interpersonality—a conception that identifies essential conditions in the formation of subjectivity that should not be neglected by contemporary philosophy.

Véronique Zanetti draws attention to the rarely noticed connection between the concept of the self and the notion of teleology. There is a tension between regulative and constitutive principles of teleology in Kant's later philosophy that finds a tentative solution in the moral positing of a transcendent divine principle. This positing is reinterpreted by Kant's successors, notably Schelling, in a Spinozist manner. According to Zanetti, Schelling deserves credit for having exploited the argumentative potential of the *Critique of Judgment* for the purposes of an idealistic theory of the self and above all for developing the concept of teleology in a new way.

In his study of the philosophical foundations of early romanticism, *Manfred Frank* explores the immediate reactions of the first successors to Kant. Here Frank elucidates two rarely noticed argumentative developments in early post-Kantian idealism in the period between 1789 and 1792. The first development is the influence of Friedrich Jacobi's book on Spinoza, the second (and not first) edition of which was decisive for the early romantic rejection of Reinhold's and Fichte's philosophy of a first principle. The second development is the work of Novalis and Niethammer, who following Jacobi, were responsible for the original form of the early romantic critique of the philosophy of a first principle. Frank also presents Novalis's philosophy of consciousness, which went far beyond Kant, Fichte, and Hegel in its claim that consciousness has its root in being, which transcends consciousness.

Fichte is the central point of reference for the next post-Kantian developments of the idealist theory of the self. His main idea—that the self is essentially to be conceived as unconditioned activity—became a stimulus for new interpretations which ultimately led the German romantics to a decisive critique of Fichte's starting point. In presenting investigations of the internal structure of the early forms of Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Günter Zöller and Daniel Breazeale aim to provide a substantive basis for examining the objections raised against Fichte's starting point. Zöller provides a critical reconstruction of Fichte's account of the human subject in terms of its theoretical and practical activities. Zöller traces the radicalization of Kant's transcendental idealism in Fichte's theory of ideal and real thinking and stresses the systematic supposition of some ultimate pre-discursive reality underlying all activity of the I in Fichte.

While Zöller provides a critical reconstruction of the real and ideal activities in the notion of the 'I' in the early forms of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, Breazeale analyzes variations in the meaning of Fichte's theory of an *Anstoss* (or "check"). Breazeale's thesis is that, when we understand Fichte's theory of the *Anstoss*, contrary to many prejudices in the history of its reception, it becomes clear that Fichte's theory of the self is neither dogmatic nor inappropriately idealistic. Rather, from its very beginning, Fichte's conception of the self contains an element of finitude.

Hegel's dialectic of negativity is often taken to be the end point of, and the departure from, the idealist theory of subjectivity. Hegel's dialectic is usually interpreted as orienting itself according to the formal structure of reflection but no longer holding on to an independent concept of the self. The contributions of *Ludwig Siep* and *Robert Pippin* show that such interpretations significantly underestimate the subtlety of Hegel's attitude toward subjectivity. Siep determines the conception of individuality in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in light of its chapter on reason. Accordingly, at the center of Siep's elucidations there are systematic analyses of the concepts of self-relation, self-actualization, and the synthesis of individual conscience with the *Sittlichkeit* (or "ethical life") of law-governed society. Pippin investigates Hegel's development of the problems of practical philosophy. He shows that Hegel's conception of action is much closer to Kant's than to Hume's, contrary to what is held often and incorrectly in contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, Pippin says that Hegel's critique of Kant's implicit subjectivism is justified. We are to follow Hegel's proposal that reason can satisfy itself only in social and political institutions.

The analyses of Siep and Pippin are "truly Hegelian" in that they go along with Hegel in opening up the philosophy of subjectivity to the realms of the political and the cultural. To that extent they can be understood as direct responses to debates about the pros and cons of the project

of modernity, to which Hegel took a critical but in the end affirmative position.

The works of Sturma and Ameriks, as well as the second contribution of Frank, complete the systematic connection drawn between the classical idealist theories of the self and contemporary philosophy of the subject. *Manfred Frank* critically engages some typical attempts at an elimination of subjectivity and self-consciousness. Precisely in view of the present spirit of the age, which is pushed back and forth by a manifold of streams of reductionism, from physicalism to neostructuralism, Frank's presentation of the ineliminability of subjectivity and self-consciousness expresses an original challenge. Frank's fundamental conviction is that the special task of philosophy is to make explicit in as undistorted a form as possible the importance of subjectivity. The ultimate motive for such a thesis lies not incidentally in the fact that it is a vital interest of human existence that rational individuals can understand themselves as subjects.⁵

The final contributions by Sturma and Ameriks are attempts at the systematic rehabilitation and development of Kant's theory of the self. *Karl Ameriks* reconstructs the argumentative path that the idealist theory of the self has taken from Kant to the present. Ameriks essentially accepts the defense of the ineliminability or irreducibility of the idealist concept of the self, as it has been presented by the Heidelberg school, and especially Manfred Frank. But Ameriks also draws attention to the fact that Kant's theory of the self anticipates later philosophers and is to a certain extent compatible with the Heidelberg school theory of subjectivity, which is known to be more oriented toward Fichte. In particular, Ameriks defends Kant against objections that his account of consciousness rests on an absurd "Reflection Theory."

Dieter Sturma makes a plea for a reconsideration of Kantian arguments in the effort to formulate a nonreductionist theory of the self. Sturma develops an argument for irreducibility that has at its center the concept of a subjective perspective which, because of its behavioral implications, can also be employed in the determination of practical rationality. Sturma also argues that Kant, who is often maligned for being stuck helplessly in dualism, provides a basis for making a step from the self to the Other and a corresponding step from theoretical to practical philosophy.

Future Perspectives

A look back at the theories of the self in classical German philosophy is always also a look forward to various methodological options. Behind the

transitions from Kant to Fichte, and from Fichte to Hegel, there are hidden deep theoretical and methodological conflicts and fundamental decisions that remain controversial even today. To this day philosophy has still not come to a final judgment as to whether the appropriate model for subjectivity is the epistemological critique of speculative idealism or rather an encompassing concept of social philosophy.

Methodologically, it is crucial to explain and reconstruct the often opaque texts of classical German philosophy, and in particular the speculative systems of German idealism, in such a manner that for systematic purposes, one brackets from the beginning those presuppositions and arguments which are no longer justifiable in light of the criteria and methods of contemporary theories. The important question then becomes whether, in this way, one can get beyond the classifications of the history of philosophy and make a philosophically significant contribution to solving systematic problems.

The analysis of the classical texts of German idealism must also live with the uncomfortable fact that the meaning and significance of its concepts is determined essentially by their justificatory position in a philosophical system. The need for a kind of coherence theory has the immediate consequence that the arguments and positions developed by German idealism cannot be isolated; they must always be investigated against the background of their systematic context.

While Kant has always received great attention, the speculations of German idealism have remained largely unnoticed, at least in systematic contexts. However, this difficulty in gaining recognition is unjustified by the facts. German idealism contains insights that are of great systematic interest and that can be brought profitably into current efforts to develop theories of self-relations in modernity. Of course, from a current perspective one can follow the positions and solutions of German idealism only to a certain degree.

It is still not possible to determine with certainty the position of classical German philosophy and in particular the full relevance of its contribution to the theory of the self and its self-relations. The contributions of this volume make clear in any event the methodological difficulties and the various thematic perspectives that must be mastered in such a project. It is not clear whether the context of philological and historical work will receive adequate attention in contemporary systematic philosophy. It is to be expected that systematic interest will arise primarily from those unsolved problems that have to do with the project of modernity. Classical German philosophy has a contribution to make in this context that has at last received the beginning of an adequate hearing.

But the intention of this volume is not simply to gain a hearing for the theories of subjectivity developed in classical German philosophy; the articles in this volume are also concerned with presenting to contemporary philosophy a more differentiated picture of its own historical presuppositions. Precisely in regard to the question of the modern subject, which our age has placed on the agenda with so much emphasis, it is unavoidable that we take a look at that era of philosophy that was most intensely focused on the issue of the interconnection of subjectivity and reason.

When the pros and cons of the project of modernity are weighed, it is commonly said of the era of classical German philosophy that at no other time was so much entrusted to human subjectivity and reason, theoretically and practically. However, it would be too partial and too distorted a picture if one characterized this era unrestrictedly as the high age of human subjectivity and reason. Such an estimate seems plausible only because this era made subjectivity and reason a topic of reflection and speculation in a way that has in fact remained unparalleled in its extent and intensity. But the result of these efforts is by no means an overly optimistic claim about a far-reaching effectiveness of human subjectivity and reason, as is often maintained; rather, it is a recognition of the deep contextual dependence of human self-relations. In German idealism, speculative reflection leads to an uncovering of the finitude of human self-relations and not at all to the implication that human existence transcends its contexts and conditions. Here above all is where the contribution of classical German philosophy is to be recognized for its efforts to gain a more differentiated view of the project of modernity.

Notes

1. For a systematic and historical analysis of the philosophy of this period of transition, see Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991); and, in this volume, M. Frank, "Philosophical Foundations of Early Romanticism."

2. Examples of such tendencies can be found in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, and others.

3. It is interesting that the situation is quite different in practical philosophy, especially in regard to Kant. The systematic reconstruction and revision of Kantian moral philosophy is being worked on very intensively, above all in connection with the work of John Rawls. See, e.g., *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten: Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, ed. O. Höffe (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1989).

4. In this context, Schelling's treatise on freedom and his later philosophy take on a special significance that is not covered in this volume.

5. This work of Frank's can be readily understood as the concluding contribution of this volume, but it does not appear at the end simply because the following contribution by Karl Ameriks makes reference to it.