

# Towards a Non-Foundational Absolute Knowing

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I wish to express appreciation to Dr. Lumsden for his contribution to the discussion, which in part explores implications of the concepts of recognition and relation for absolute knowing. Since Lumsden's interpretation and analysis of absolute knowing are restricted to Hegel's discussion in the *Phenomenology*, my remarks are likewise so restricted, and I shall hold the *Logic* in abeyance. What follows is a limited response to what I take to be a central issue in Lumsden's thesis, his proposed reconciliation between absolute knowing and the concept of relation. Does absolute knowing exclude or rather transform the concept of relation? Lumsden opts for the latter alternative.

In his discussion of this issue, Lumsden refers to previous discussions between Professors Houlgate and Flay, as well as to my book, *Recognition*<sup>1</sup> Stephen Houlgate reviewed *Recognition* in the *Owl*, and in his review accepted much of my analysis of the concept of recognition, but criticized my discussion of absolute knowing.<sup>2</sup> Houlgate criticized my analysis of the problem of the other for retaining a Fichtean concept of subjectivity as foundation, and for thinking of absolute knowing as a reciprocal relation modeled on intersubjectivity. Houlgate argued that absolute knowing has a quasi-Kantian and quasi-Spinozan dimension that, when thought together, mean that otherness disappears in the unity of absolute knowing. This unity excludes relation. Relation implies things, *relata*, that are related, and this apparent duality undercuts the unity of thought and being by introducing into it an unacceptable externality. I responded to his review in my article, "Discernment in the Realm of Shadows,"<sup>3</sup> which Lumsden does not mention. Readers may wish to consult this article for a fuller discussion of some of the issues that will follow. My reservations about Houlgate's proposal are whether and/or how the quasi-Kantian and quasi-Spinozan elements can be coherently thought together.

I agree with Lumsden's two principal theses that 1) absolute knowing involves a critique of all "givens" and so it cannot be understood as a relation between wholly independent entities, and 2) that absolute knowing does not eliminate relation, but transforms it into a holistic conception. In what follows I shall first make some terminological remarks and criticisms, then I shall pose the central problem Lumsden is struggling with, namely reconciling the autonomous self-grounding character of absolute knowing with the concepts of relation and interdependence. Does the critique of representationalism and transition from *Vorstellung* to *Begriff* imply an exclusion or repudiation of relation as Houlgate maintains? I agree with Lumsden that it does not.

The following essay is not a "complete" account of absolute knowing, but merely an attempt to analyze one motif in absolute knowing. I shall contend that love qualifies

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<sup>1</sup> Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel and Fichte: Recognition, Otherness and Absolute Knowing," *The Owl of Minerva* 26:1 (Fall 1994), 3-19 .

<sup>3</sup> Robert R. Williams, "Discernment in the Realm of Shadows: Absolute Knowing and Otherness," *The Owl of Minerva* 26:2 (Spring 1995), 133-148.

absolute knowing as selfemptying, and this motif of selfemptying implies that absolute knowing is non-foundational.

## *I. Terminological Issues*

Throughout his discussion, Lumsden retains the terms “consciousness,” “selfconsciousness,” “subject and object”—in short, the standard language of idealism. The point of such language, particularly in its transcendental development from Descartes to Kant, is to claim a transcendental and foundational role for subjectivity. Whether taken in an ontological sense or a methodological sense, the meaning and status of objectivity is determined by the subject. The object is therefore not independent of, much less equi-primordial with, but rather relative to and derivative from, the subject.

However, Lumsden also acknowledges that Hegel criticizes transcendental idealism from Descartes through Kant. Thus subjectivity undergoes a constant reorientation, or better, *Aufhebung*, especially in the later chapters of the *Phenomenology*, Selfconsciousness is superseded by spirit. While *Geist* is not unrelated to consciousness, it is not a subject, or even transcendental subject, but an intersubjectivity. If this is so, then Lumsden’s retention of the language of the idealist philosophy of the subject is puzzling, because such language is fundamentally at odds with his central thesis, namely, that absolute knowing can only be understood as a holism, which is far removed from idealism as the latter is usually understood.

Second, according to Lumsden, Houlgate’s criticisms of Williams and Flay express “an Hegelian insight: even what is taken to be other than thought can only be grasped in terms of thought.”<sup>4</sup> This is an Hegelian insight, but what does it mean? Since the other would apparently have to be immanent to thought in order to be grasped by thought, does it mean that thought can have no other? That is Feuerbach’s conclusion.

The terminology in which Lumsden formulates and expresses “Hegel’s insight” was coined by Ludwig Feuerbach. Rather than merely expound Hegel’s views, Feuerbach used this language to criticize Hegel for allegedly failing to do justice to the other of thought. Feuerbach complains that the *Phenomenology* “begins . . . not with the ‘other-being’ of thought, but with the *idea of the other being of thought*.”<sup>5</sup> Feuerbach’s polemical point is that Hegel confuses “the other of thought” (that is transcendent to thought) with the “*thought of the other*.” Once the other has been reduced to a mere idea or representation, the other has been tamed if not denied. Everything

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<sup>4</sup> See Lumsden, “Absolute Knowing,” current issue of *The Owl of Minerva*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *The Fiery Brook*, trans. Zawar Hanfi (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 79. Feuerbach refers to the chapter on Sense Certainty, and not Hegel’s account of recognition. Nevertheless his point holds also as a more general criticism of Hegel’s account of the other. For a critique of Feuerbach’s reading of sense certainty, and a defense of Hegel, cf. Merold Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979).

thus gets “flattened” into a cognitive immanence. Moreover, the other, conceived as a negation, can easily be canceled and negated again, and through such a cancellation (*Aufhebung*) the original unity/identity is restored. Hence when the other is thus said to be *aufgehoben*, the *Aufhebung* means that the other is merely instrumental to identity, and not co-constitutive of it because otherness and difference “vanish” in the final unity. Consequently Feuerbach concludes that the other is eliminated by identity.

This language and the reading of Hegel that it suggests, fails to note that for Hegel, the dialectic is meant as a corrective to abstract identity and unity. As Hegel observes, every proposition of reason is an antinomy: “Every . . . proposition of Reason permits resolution into two strictly contradictory assertions. . . . Thus the principle of skepticism [against every argument there is an equal one on the other side] comes on the scene at its full strength.”<sup>6</sup> However, when speculative dialectic is mishandled by *Verstand*, it is constantly subject to dissolution. Since the understanding thinks in terms of abstract identity and difference, it tends to give priority to one side of the antinomy, or to reduce one side of the antinomy to the other.

Hegel intends speculative dialectic as a corrective to such reductive one-sidedness. The point of the dialectic is *not* to *suppress* otherness and difference, but rather to *allow* the other that abstract identity suppresses to come on the scene, and thus to restore the suppressed other to a constituent moment of identity. Hegel seeks to transform abstract identity into an organic totality (in which otherness and difference are co-constitutive of identity/totality). Speculative philosophy is holistic, or, as Hegel later put it, the truth is the whole.

In contrast to Feuerbach’s reading, I agree with G. R. G. Mure’s observation that the other that thought thinks is not simply pure thought itself in the guise of alterity. “This “*other*,” which, taken simply in the act of severance and apart from the process of reconciliation . . . *is ... at once thought and the opposite of thought*”<sup>7</sup> Mure’s nuanced formulation of the other as *both* thought and the other of thought, has the not inconsiderable merit of capturing and preserving the complexity of Hegel’s dialectical thought. It states a third alternative to sheer identity (monism) and sheer difference (dualism), which alone is compatible with Hegel’s conception of organic unity. Thus Lumsden is correct in regarding Hegel’s position as a criticism of the philosophy of the subject, and in viewing Hegel’s alternative as a holism, but he tends to formulate his account in misleading terminology.

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<sup>6</sup> Hegel, “Skepticism Essay,” in George di Giovanni and H. S. Harris, eds., *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), pp. 324-5.

<sup>7</sup> G. R. G. Mure, *A Study of Hegel’s Logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 319—320 (emphasis mine). Mure’s analysis of the possible readings of Hegel is exemplary, and almost completely overlooked in contemporary discussions. In Mure’s view, thought and its other, the rational and the empirical, cannot be reduced to a simple unity. Both monism and dualism are ruled out.

## *II. Autarchic Self-Grounding and the Possibility of Relation*

Lumsden seeks to mediate between Flay who wants to emphasize relationality (relation to world) and Houlgate who believes absolute knowing excludes otherness and that absolute knowing denies or excludes reciprocity between knower and known. Absolute knowing involves the twin issues of the philosophical comprehension of religion and the transformation of *Vorstellungen* into *Begriffe*. The latter issue concerns us here. Lumsden discusses the critique and transformation of representationalism by bringing in the problematic of self-consciousness. This gives the misleading impression that Hegel is a philosopher of the subject. The language of self-consciousness introduces several issues, not the least of which are the centrality of the subject-object relation and the issue of autonomy, self-determination.

This language of autonomy creates problems for Lumsden's attempted mediation. Put simply, as self-grounding, absolute knowing can have no givens, because there is nothing independent of it that could be given to it. All apparent "givens" can only be its own positings. Absolute knowing thus appears (formally at least) to be absolute autarchy. Hence all externality, including the subject-object relation, are supposed to be internal relations of absolute knowing. This means that all mediation by the other must in the final analysis be resolved into absolute self-mediation. This makes it look as if the other must be derived from a prior unity, and come to be through a diremption of that unity or identity. The other and/or otherness are accounted for as a negation, and as such are secondary and derivative from the primordial unity. The other, the difference, serves merely an instrumental function whereby the unity mediates itself by itself. This account of otherness appears to reduce it to an "internal relation." The other and the difference apparently vanish. However, it may be doubted whether an "internal relation" is any relation at all, since a relation implies distinct, if not independent *relata*. But absolute knowing appears to cancel independence of its *relata*, and thus undermines relation, including the dialogical relation.

Lumsden argues contrary to Houlgate that absolute knowing does not preclude relation, but transforms the relational terms that characterized representationalism, i.e. *Vorstellung*. Absolute knowing does not end the *relata* or their relation, but transforms them. Concerning the transition from *Vorstellung* to *Begriff*, *Vorstellung*, Hegel tells us, is the form of other- being, or being-other (*Andersseins*).<sup>8</sup> The question is, does the transition from *Vorstellung* to *Begriff* cancel the other, or only the *form* of being other, i.e. the subject-object dichotomy? I believe that the transition from *Vorstellung*

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<sup>8</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes (PhG)*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952), p. 554. An accessible English translation may be found in A. V. Miller's translation, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §795. However, all translations from the *PhG* that appear in this paper are my own. I will nevertheless cite Miller's version by paragraph number, after the German reference (thus: *PhG*, p. 554; §795).

to *Begriff* sublates the form of being-other, but it does not for that reason eliminate the other itself. For Hegel, the standpoint of *Vorstellung* assumes differences that are fixed, permanent and incapable of mediation. One such difference is the subject-object difference; another is the irreducible difference of *relata* in relation. In contrast, *Begriff* overcomes the fixed difference constitutive of *Vorstellung*.

*Vorstellung* has its own way of construing relation. Relations are taken to be external to the *relata*. The *relata* are thus taken to be other to each other and serve as limits to each other. Relations are relations between entities that are and remain independent in spite of relation. Consequently the entities remain unaffected by their relation. They would be what they are even if they were not related. Hegel illustrates this point conceptually and logically in his discussion of the whole-part relation in the *Logic*, in his account of mechanism and machines, and politically in his analysis of civil society or the external state.<sup>9</sup>

However at the level of the *Begriff*, the putative irreducible and external dichotomies constitutive of *Vorstellung* are transformed, mediated and reconciled. Instead of an external relation between independent entities that remain unaffected by relation, the concept of recognition and the logical *Begriff* formulate an organic totality. Here relation does not disappear; rather it ceases to be purely external, but also without becoming merely internal (as in Spinoza's monistic substance/accidents scheme). The *relata* are no longer entirely independent of relation, but rather have become *interdependent*, mutually-reciprocally mediating.<sup>10</sup> The whole may be greater than its parts, but it is dependent on and influenced by its members. Conversely the members are what they are only as vital members of the whole and thus reflect the whole.

Thus, although Lumsden is correct in his basic line of argument, more analysis is needed. Having raised the important issue concerning the "relation" of absolute knowing to "relations," one would have expected some reference to the previous discussions of this issue, at least to F. H. Bradley.<sup>11</sup> Bradley pointed out that neither internal relations nor external relations are satisfactory concepts of relation. External relations imply that relation is wholly external to the *relata*, leaving the *relata* unaffected. Hence the *relata* would be what they are even if they were not related. On the other hand internal relation implies that one of the *relata* disappears into the other. If one of the *relata* disappears, what is left of the relation? Can there be a relation with only one term? For these reasons Bradley concluded that the concept of relation is problematic.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Chs. 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> Lumsden ignores or misrepresents my position when he contends that the relation between thought and being is a relation between independent realms (see Lumsden, §8).

<sup>11</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); see also Rolf- Peter Horstmann, *Ontologie und Relationen: Hegel, Bradley, Russell und die Kontroverse über interne und externe Beziehungen* (Hain: Athenaum, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> For a summary of Bradley and more recent discussions of the problem, cf. my *Recognition*, pp. 151-53.

Lumsden believes that at the level of *Begriff*, neither relation nor *relata* disappear. Relation continues, namely a relation of individual to whole. Further, this is not an external relation, because the whole is one in which the individual is a constitutive and active moment, and the whole is reflected in the individual who embodies it. Absolute knowing does not eliminate either the self or its other, but rather reconciles the subject-object dichotomy of representational self-consciousness. Nevertheless, Lumsden is vague on the issue of the other and relations, as well as vague descriptively.

For example, when Lumsden discusses love, he interprets love as a releasement from conceptual determinacy into “an absolute difference.” Surely this is an overstatement. If love were releasement into *absolute difference*, then Hegel would be a metaphysical dualist. Further, as Sartre has shown, on dualist grounds love degenerates into sadism and masochism, and marriage would be either a relation of domination or simply impossible.<sup>13</sup> For Hegel, marriage presupposes and implies an overcoming of dualism. Marriage is a determinate shape of intersubjectivity founded on love which requires both sameness and difference, identity and otherness. Hence, if love allows the other to be, this is not a releasement into absolute difference, or dualism. If the other is allowed to be, then the original identity of each individual cannot remain abstract identity; it must undergo an inner transformation and become complex. For when the other is allowed to be, the other alters or “others” the self: the I becomes a We. There is no absolute difference here, but a union in which difference is essential and constitutive, but not unqualified, primary or absolute. In other words, marriage is not a refusal of *Aufhebung* and mediation, but an illustration of the *Aufhebung* of abstract identity and abstract personality that overcomes their alienation, by bringing the *relata* into a new mode of relationship and totality.<sup>14</sup> The We does not mean that either the “I” or the other vanishes or utterly ceases to be another. The other ceases to be alien, ceases to be a merely negative limit. The other, and relation to the other, become affirmative, i.e., co-constitutive of a new enlarged consciousness of freedom and identity/totality, the We.

Houlgate is correct when he claims that Hegel does not intend to assert an *absolute* difference. Hegel is not a dualist. But neither is he a metaphysical monist, as Houlgate’s Spinozist formulations suggest. Hegel obviously wants to both cancel and preserve difference. Hence he is neither a monist nor a dualist. Intersubjectivity and community are undermined by both of these unacceptable alternatives.

To summarize: relation cannot be understood as external relation, because this would imply that absolute knowing, as absolute self-determination had something given to it. This seems to rule out dualism. On the other hand, monism is not acceptable either, because in monism one of the *relata* disappears into the other. Is there a middle position between these unacceptable alternatives? As indicated above, I believe that

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956).

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller discussion, cf. *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, Ch. 10.



there is, and the alternative is to be found in Hegel's concept of organism—a category of the logic that is prior to the systematic division between nature and spirit.<sup>15</sup> The category of organism implies that relations are neither simply external (Hegel's critique of mechanism) nor simply internal (the We does not simply suppress, but rather sublates its constitutive members and depends upon their reciprocity). The difficulty with Houlgate's Spinoza-inspired account is that he fails to observe that Hegel parts company with Spinoza, whom he accuses of defrauding difference and finitude of their due.<sup>16</sup>

### *III. Absolute Knowing and Relation*

The difficulty is, how is it possible to affirm both that absolute knowing is self-grounding *and* that it involves relation, which implies distinct *relata*? The absolute autarchy of the former conception seems to undercut relation and interdependence, while relation seems to undermine absolute self-sufficiency and autarchy by implying something to which absolute knowing must refer and/or relate itself. Absolute knowing cannot have anything given to it, as in the case of realism. For if it did, then there would be something independent of absolute knowing, and it would have to correspond to the given. This would seem to contradict absolute knowing. Against the empiricist view that thought must correspond to a given, Kant proposed a counter thesis, namely, that things must correspond to thought. Thought is active, self-determining. According to the preface to the second edition of the First *Critique*, “reason has insight only into that which it produces according to a plan of its own.”<sup>17</sup> Or stated in simpler terms, we can know only what we can make. But Kant did not go far enough, because he retained the notion of the thing in itself, and thus achieved only a mixed transcendental program. Eliminate the thing in itself, and the result would be a pure transcendental program. Thus absolute knowing can have no givens, but apparently must produce (posit) all its apparent givens. However, the difficulty is that if the thing in itself, or other, is simply eliminated, then all otherness and any other appear to be constituted

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<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, cf. *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, Chs. 10-13.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel observes that “The so-called atheism of Spinoza is merely an exaggeration of the fact that he defrauds the principle of difference or finitude of its due. Hence his system, as it holds that there is properly speaking no world, at any rate [that] the world has no positive being, should rather be styled acosmism” (*Encyclopedia* §151 *Zusatz*). Cf. Hegel's critique of Spinoza in his *History of Philosophy Lectures*. Hegel specifically criticizes Spinoza for having an inadequate concept of negation, in which negation is taken to be merely a vanishing moment. Negation is not taken to be constitutive like the “Separator” Hegel finds in Jacob Boehme. (*History of Philosophy*, trans. Haldane [New York: Humanities Press, 1963], Vol. 3, p. 289.)

<sup>17</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965) p. 20. Cf. p. 23, where Kant says, “we can know a priori of things only what we ourselves have put into them.”

through a self- othering or self-diremption of the “absolute.” The other is a construct, and thus not other.

Such a view of absolute knowing apparently precludes the possibility of relation to anything not constructed by absolute knowing, and thus appears to rule out any plausible account of intersubjectivity and community.<sup>18</sup> The apparent contradiction between absolute knowing and relation rests upon the presupposition that the absolute excludes the relative, and vice-versa. This presupposition is shared by the classical metaphysical distinction/separation between God and world, by modern philosophy’s distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, and by contemporary criticisms of metaphysics as will to power. It underlies Heidegger’s critique of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as *aparousia* of the absolute and his criticism of absolute knowing as *absolvent Wissen*, a knowing that absolves itself of dependence on any given.<sup>19</sup> This reading of absolute knowing interprets Hegel as the culmination of traditional metaphysics and foundationalism.

There is an alternative reading of absolute knowing, articulated in different ways by William Desmond, Donald Verene, Joseph Flay, Stephen Houlgate and myself, which interprets it as non-foundational.<sup>20</sup> In this view, absoluteness and relation are not exclusive, but reciprocal.<sup>21</sup> Hegel’s claim that everything involves both immediacy and mediation implies an absolute relativism: nothing can fend off relation, but everything exists only in relation to everything else. Absolute knowing involves absolution, but not self-absolution as Heidegger has it, and as Lumsden apparently erroneously attributes to me. Nor is absolute knowing a knowing that creates or produces its object. Rather absolute knowing absolves its *other*; it allows its other to be. What does this mean?

Absolute knowing is autonomous, self-determining. But it is selfdetermining only as a result of a development, through which it learns that it must allow its other to be. So while absolute knowing is self-determining, independent of any given, etc., this is only part of the story. The principle of autonomy involves a bracketing and critique of all prejudices. But there is a second step beyond critique, namely, absolute knowing both surrenders any preinterpretation such as Kant’s quasi-mathematical proposal that we can know only what we can construct according to a plan of our own. Stated positively, the autonomy of absolute knowing consists in being faithful to its object, and, instead of imposing its own schemes, concepts, etc., on its object, rather to surrender or hold

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<sup>18</sup> See Jurgen Habermas, “Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel’s Jena *Philosophy of Mind*,” in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 142-169; see also Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Hegels Begriff der Erfahrung,” in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950), p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> The following analysis is my own; my colleagues can and no doubt will speak for themselves.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948). For an account of the convergence of Hegel and process philosophy, cf. George Lucas, Jr., *Two Views of Freedom in Process Thought* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979). See also George Lucas, Jr., ed., *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

these in abeyance, in order *to allow its object to be*. Absolute knowing suspends all anticipatory pre-determination and allows its object to provide the clues, criteria and categories for its own interpretation and understanding.<sup>22</sup> Absolute knowing arises out of an immanent examination and critique of its object.

I want to develop this notion further by commenting on Houlgate's proposal that absolute knowing includes a quasi-Kantian element and a quasi-Spinozan element.<sup>23</sup> This analysis already implies that instead of the dyadic conception of subject and object that dominates traditional epistemological discussions, absolute knowing involves a holistic triadic conception. But we shall begin with the critique of representationalism. Representation (*Vorstellung*), Hegel tells us, is the form of other-being, or being-other (*Andersseins*).<sup>24</sup> The language of representation is limit language, language of separation.<sup>25</sup> Houlgate contends that language about the other as limit, corresponds to and reflects a limited conception of the self. The concept of the other as limit corresponds to this limited, restricted concept of the self. The conception of the other as limit implies a conception of the other as negation. At the level of representation, the limit is regarded as absolute, as incapable of mediation and/or reconciliation. Hence to speak of otherness and the other is to reflect the restricted standpoint of representation (*Vorstellung*) and the understanding (*Verstand*).

In absolute knowing there is a breaking through limits or removal of restrictions. When *Vorstellung* is overcome, so is the negative conception of the other as limit, and the limited conception of the self. This is tantamount to claiming that mutual recognition overcomes and involves a "letting go" of the form of other-being constitutive of *Vorstellung*. Surely this is correct. But what does this mean? Does the letting go of *Vorstellung*'s form of other-being imply a letting go of the other? Or does it mean only a change in the relation to the other as Lumsden contends?

I believe that Lumsden is correct, and Houlgate's position tends to become one-sided. Houlgate seems to think that overcoming and transcending the standpoint of *Vorstellung* implies an elimination of the other. As Houlgate says, all otherness "falls away." This language is misleading, because it could mean that the other is simply eliminated and relation terminated. The following passage from Hegel's recently published *Lectures on the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit 1827-1828* speaks directly to this issue. Hegel is reported by J. E. Erdmann to have said:

There are two real, independent beings confronting each other. I have the [other] ego as object. This infinite self-relation that is the ego, is my object. However, *this perfect absence of difference is at the same time the most perfect difference*. The ego

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<sup>22</sup> H. S. Harris also develops this interpretation. See his *Hegel's Ladder*, Vol. 2 (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), p. 725.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Houlgate, "Hegel and Fichte: Recognition, Otherness and Absolute Knowing," *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> PhG, p. 554; §795.

<sup>25</sup> This is Hegel's interpretation of Kant's theory of judgment, and why he regards Kant's philosophy as one which asserts the ultimacy of difference and finitude. Cf. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. W. Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), pp. 60-64.

is an existent, another self and person. It is universal, and yet exclusive, negative self-relating. It is a personal being, but the being of personality is the hardest. The ego is impermeable, to which no resistance is equal. *In this identity, this absence of difference, both are nevertheless absolutely distinguished from each other.* They are both personally absolutely independent, and nevertheless they are for each other.<sup>26</sup>

Houlgate's view that in love and absolute knowing otherness falls away, is not false; however it is only half of the story. The absence of difference is by no means a mere absence, much less an elimination of one of the *relata*. Rather it involves a mutually transformed relationship that renounces coercion. When both mutually renounce coercion and mutually affirm each other, the resulting absence of difference is at the same time "the most perfect difference" in which each is allowed to be.<sup>27</sup> If Houlgate's truncated version were allowed to stand, this would imply that love is a fusion in which there would be loss of individual identity, and it would make implausible Hegel's concept of marriage in which otherness is overcome and difference is preserved as a constitutive feature. Recall that Hegel maintains that marriage is a contract to transcend the standpoint of no contract,<sup>28</sup> marriage is a We or corporate personality that overcomes the standpoint of atomic, possessive individualism, but it does not eliminate individuals themselves.

I have tried to show that in mutual recognition both self and other are not simply negative limits, but play an affirmative, mediating role vis-d- vis each other. Each mediates the consciousness of freedom to the other. When otherness as limit is transcended and overcome, the result is an affirmative relation to the other through which a We, a universal consciousness can be brought about.<sup>29</sup> At the level of religious consciousness this is expressed as spirit in its community; this concept of spirit is portrayed by Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* as the divine - human relation constitutive of the cultus.

As the *Phenomenology* discussion makes clear, the specific shape of mediation that constitutes the transition from morality to religion is forgiveness. Forgiveness is a shape of mutual recognition that Hegel identifies with "the absolute Spirit."<sup>30</sup> Forgiveness involves the "letting go," not of the other per se, but of the hypocrisy of moralism that confuses noble sentiments with action. There is also a "letting go" in the shape of

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<sup>26</sup> *Hegels Vorlesungen uber die Philosophic des subjektiven Geistes 1827/28*, ed. Burkhardt Tuschling (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994), p. 167. Italics mine.

<sup>27</sup> This corresponds to the "Freigabe" of the final moment of mutual recognition. See *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, pp. 84-86.

<sup>28</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §75.

<sup>29</sup> The universal consciousness described in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Spirit*, §436 is the result of a process of mutual reciprocal recognition in which there is a mutual affirmative relation of self to other. Any putative passage to the universal that bypasses or short-circuits mutual recognition institutes a parochial universal consciousness, and a relation that is potentially one of domination or master and slave. See *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, Chs. 4, 10, 15.

<sup>30</sup> PhG, p. 471; §670.

a confession that certain compromises necessary for action are “impure.” In the word of reconciliation both parties let go of their restricted oppositional selves, both the rigidity and hypocrisy of moralism and the impure compromises of social action. In such mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, Hegel locates “the God who appears in the midst of those who know themselves as pure knowing.”<sup>31</sup> Forgiveness makes possible a new form or type of community, one that has important implications for absolute knowing.

#### *IV. A Non-Foundational Absolute Knowing?*

How are we to conceive the union of the quasi-Kantian-transcendental and quasi-Spinozan-substantial elements Houlgate identifies in absolute knowing? Houlgate’s view is that “To know the self absolutely therefore is to know the structure of substance or absolute reason within and as the absolute structure of thought, and it is also to know the self and its thinking as the activity or the work of substance or absolute reason itself.”<sup>32</sup> This proposal appears initially attractive, because it is a way of formulating the element of letting go, needed to move thought to a higher level, and finding this letting go creates “space” or receptivity for the positive work of substance and reason.

Nevertheless there may be an ambiguity here. Houlgate appears to present two versions of this union. In the first, the Kantian element of subjective autonomy is subordinate to the Spinozan element. That is, in surrendering its limited, restricted conception of itself, human subjectivity grasps itself as the activity or work of absolute substance or reason. Here we have a clarification of the process whereby substance becomes subject. Subjectivity grasps itself as subordinate to and the realization of what is substantial. In the second version, the Spinozan element (absolute substance) is subordinate to the Kantian such that the structure of being is identical with the structure of thought. This means that the structure of being can be investigated by investigating the forms of thought. This is correct on Spinoza’s grounds that the order of being and the order of ideas are one and the same order. However, given the transcendental turn, it is the subject and its thought-forms that determine being and its categories. The latter appear to be constructions of transcendental subjectivity, and this implies that the Spinozan element is subordinate to the Kantian.

Are these two accounts of the union compatible? Houlgate’s proposal seems to require it. The difficulty is that the first version gives ontological priority to being (substance) over subjectivity, while the second appears to give priority to thought over being. These do not seem to be equivalent. The former Spinozan alternative may require the surrender of autonomy, or result in a conception of freedom as servile,

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<sup>31</sup> PhG, p. 472; §671.

<sup>32</sup> “Hegel and Fichte: Recognition, Otherness, and Absolute Knowing,” p. 17.

while the latter Kantian moment appears to imply that the object is constructed by the autonomous subject of absolute knowing. Here being is relative to the subject and appears to be an extension of autonomy, of will to power. Clearly Houlgate would reject both of these alternatives, because his claim is that these elements are “quasi” Spinozan and “quasi” Kantian, and that they must be thought together. But the nagging question remains, how can they be thought together? It is unsatisfactory to assert that one element predominates over the other, for that would imply that there is no genuine union. The subordination of one to the other must be rejected because subordination is not a genuine synthesis.

Is there an alternative? Houlgate believes that being ceases to be something other than thought because “thought renounces its autonomy and independence from being.”<sup>33</sup> This conception of self-renunciation of the autonomy of thought is intriguing, problematic and not carried through consistently by Houlgate. It is problematic because if allowing the other to be requires the surrender of autonomy, this would seem to imply the loss of any critical function for thought, in short, the loss of spontaneous, self-originated possibilities. Allowing the other to be would then amount to a surrender of autonomy or a kind of fanaticism or superstition, and this would be the antithesis of enlightenment critique of prejudice. Allowing the other to be does not mean a surrender or loss of autonomy or critical capacity.

The concept of self-renunciation is not carried through consistently because at the end of his article, Houlgate continues to speak in ways that suggest the priority of thought and its activity over being. Thought comprehends differences and shows that they are necessary. It can do so, Houlgate maintains, because thought has learned “that it can determine by itself what being is, what it means to be.”<sup>34</sup> Thought is capable of determining what it means to be, not because it surrenders itself to being, but rather because it has given up the assumption that being is other than thought, something which thought encounters and to which it relates. If Being is not other than thought, then Being is whatever thought determines it to be. This seems to be a version of the constructivist thesis that we can know only what we can make (i.e., construct according to plan). If so, this seems far removed from the ideas of letting go and allowing the other to be.

Now for the intriguing part of Houlgate’s suggestion, that may articulate how absolute knowing is non-foundational. Houlgate is right that absolute knowing is self-determining. But this can be accepted only with the qualification that absolute knowing is non-foundational. The reduction of knowing to making must be resisted. Consequently we must turn from the constructivist version of Houlgate’s absolute knowing to the other alternative he mentions. In this version, human subjectivity surrenders its limited, restricted conception of itself and grasps itself as the activity or work of absolute substance or reason: “our own subjectivity is itself the manifestation or real-

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

ization of what is *truly* substantial.”<sup>35</sup> This proposal gives a novel twist to the concept of autonomy. Instead of being promethean self-assertion, autonomy 1) involves the overcoming of a restricted conception of itself and 2) grasps itself as the dependent realization of what is substantial. This implies that while substance depends on subjectivity for its actualization, subjectivity does not create but rather subordinates itself to what is substantial.

Note that on this reading, distinctions and otherness do not completely fall away; rather they remain immanent and constitutive of absolute knowing. For example, the distinction between the substantial self and the human self that is its work and realization cannot fall away or disappear. If that distinction and relation were to collapse or vanish, serious confusion would result. Consequently, autonomy does not exclude relation; rather autonomy includes and depends on relation, namely the relation of the human subject to the substantial content and power of which it is the realization. Relation to that which is truly substantial is not heteronomy, but rather the highest freedom. Hegelian absolute knowing does not suppress otherness and difference, but rather allows the other suppressed by abstract identity to come on the scene, and thus to restore the suppressed other to a constitutive moment of identity.<sup>36</sup>

H. S. Harris observes that the concept of the beautiful soul is one important element in Hegel’s concept of absolute knowing.<sup>37</sup> I would like to underscore this. The concept of the beautiful soul plays important but quite different roles in Hegel’s writings. For Hegel the beautiful soul can be both a negative and an affirmative concept. Negatively the beautiful soul is a withdrawn, alienated individual that is incapable of acting. In the *Phenomenology’s* analysis of conscience, the beautiful soul does not act, and either disappears like a morning vapor or fog, or rather becomes a hard hearted moralist that confuses noble principles and sentiments with action, while condemning the impurity of the man of action. In this case the beautiful soul is a hypocrite, that fails to see that its pursuit of purity is itself a kind of self-seeking and thus impurity.

There is also a positive conception of the beautiful soul according to which it does have a special mode of action, namely forgiveness. Forgiveness involves love, affirmation of the other in spite of injury. Forgiveness involves a mutual release from the injuries of action, a release from the consequences of the past that breaks the cycle of violence and revenge and makes possible a new beginning.<sup>38</sup> Hegel identifies the beautiful soul in its positive significance with Jesus in the *Early Theological Writings*. There Hegel uses the beautiful soul to analyze Jesus’s reconciling activity. The beautiful soul does not insist upon his rights, but rather surrenders them for the sake of reconciliation with others. This transcendence of the standpoint of legalism and right is a voluntary sacrifice that

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, italics in original.

<sup>36</sup> See my *Recognition*, see also my “Hegel and Skepticism,” *The Owl of Minerva*, 24:1 (Fall 1992), 71-82.

<sup>37</sup> H. S. Harris, Hegel’s *Ladder*, Vol. 2, pp. 725-741. Cf. *PhG*, p. 554, §795.

<sup>38</sup> See *Recognition*, pp. 208-210; see also Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

renounces coercion, even just coercion, and carries out this renunciation even to the point of death. The spirit of love and readiness for reconciliation displace the fear of death constitutive of the servile consciousness. Love is an act of self-emptying or *kenosis* that is an ethical beauty. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel calls this selfemptying beautiful soul the self-intuition of the divine.<sup>39</sup>

The central philosophical contribution of the figure of the beautiful soul to absolute knowing is the idea of kenosis or self-emptying. This brings out further the significance of allowing the other to be. Self-emptying here is the condition and background of the principle of fidelity to object. It implies a refusal to impose any scheme of its own on its object. Selfemptying is clearly related to allowing the other to be, of allowing the object to generate its own criteria and categories. Self-emptying is not the surrender or abrogation of autonomy, precisely because it is free. Self-emptying is the way absolute knowing is self-determining and self-grounding.

Thus on this reading, absolute knowing is not Hegel's endorsement of the proposition that we can know only what we can make or produce according to a plan of our own. Rather absolute knowing does not aim at production or revolution, but simply at comprehension and truth. The apparently idealistic sounding terminology of so-called absolute knowing does not really aim at productivist metaphysics or will to power; it aims at comprehension, *Wissenschaft*.

What in religion was the content or the form of an other, is here the doing of the self. The concept binds together that the content is the proper doing of the self—for this concept as we have previously seen, is the knowing of the doing of the self in itself as all essentiality and existence, the knowing of this subject as substance, and of this substance as the knowing of its own doing... The final *Gestalt of spirit*... is absolute knowing. It is spirit knowing itself in the form of spirit or comprehensive knowing. The truth is not only implicitly equal to certainty, but has the form of self-certainty. . . . Spirit appearing in this element to consciousness, or what is the same thing: as brought forth by consciousness, is science (*Wissenschaft*)

The “doing” of absolute knowing is not the creation or *production of* the absolute content in some metaphysical-causal sense but the *comprehension* of its content, i.e., science, *Wissenschaft*.<sup>40</sup>

Absolute knowing is not a claim to metaphysical production (the human as the projective source and origin of substance), but rather a claim to final comprehension, a comprehension achieved by surrendering to the object, becoming pervaded by it. But final comprehension is not a once and for all occurrence; it is an infinite task which is constantly begun anew. In every new beginning there is also a recollection (*Erinnerung*) that preserves the past as a shape of ethical substance. So that while Spirit begins anew and in immediacy, it does not, like Sisyphus, start all over again at ground zero; it begins anew on a higher historically mediated level.

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<sup>39</sup> PhG, p. 554; §795.

<sup>40</sup> PhG, p. 556, §§797-98.



The aim, absolute knowing—*Geist* knowing itself as *Geist*—has for its path the recollection of the various spirits as they are in themselves and as they bring about the organization of the spiritual-historical realm. Their preservation, according to the dimension of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is history, and according to the dimension of their organization, is the science of phenomenal knowing. “Both together are comprehended history, and constitute the reminiscence and Golgatha of absolute spirit, the actuality, truth and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone. From the chalice of this realm of spirits foams forth for him his infinity.”<sup>41</sup>

Hegel is close to Aristotle in that knowing is not a means to or condition of making, but rather an end in itself. Knowing is not a human projection onto the void, but rather a mode of being in the world that fits us into the world. This “fitting into the world” is what Hegel means when he writes that when the content is comprehended (*begriffen*) the ego is *bei sich in seinem Anderssein*.<sup>42</sup>

Do these reflections upon the themes of self emptying and of allowing the other to be resolve and unify the quasi-Kantian and quasi-Spinozan elements? I am not sure. They do appear to qualify, if not rule out any understanding of absolute knowing as autarchy on the one hand and as surrender of autonomy on the other. Absolute knowing releases its objects, and in such releasement comprehends their organization and its necessity. In HegeFs parlance, it is substance that becomes subject, rather than the subject that creates or produces substance according to its own plan. There is a dialectical relation between the elements constitutive of absolute knowing: the apparently bold assertion of final comprehension is dialectically qualified and combined with a modest self emptying humility that allows its object to be. This is precisely the modest spirit of Hegel’s thought to which Klaus Hartmann called attention in his essay on a non-metaphysical reading of Hegel, namely, that Hegel’s speculative enterprise is not con\*structive, but rather reconstructive in character.<sup>43</sup> Absolute knowing does not create its world, but reconstructs and comprehends its necessity, thereby transforming its relation to the world.

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<sup>41</sup> PhG, p. 564; §808.

<sup>42</sup> PhG, p. 557; §799.

<sup>43</sup> Klaus Hartmann, “Hegel: A Non’Metaphysical View,” in *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. A. MacIntyre (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 101-124.

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