

SPINOZA, SUBSTANCE, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN  
HEGEL'S LECTURES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Anna Madelyn Hennessey, University of California Santa Barbara

This essay will assess Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's treatment of the difference between subject and substance as found in *The Concept of Religion*, or the first part of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*. Of subsidiary importance in evaluating Hegel's argument for this difference is the determination of whether Hegel's concept of religion—a concept which according to Hegel relies almost exclusively upon the faculty of human reason alone—successfully departs from Spinoza's concept of Absolute Substance. This paper will thoroughly evaluate the logical soundness at the heart of Hegel's argument for a dialectical union, mediated by human reason alone, as necessarily at work between God and humanity. Thorough analysis of this relationship also entails consideration of the theoretical developments that occur in Hegel's other works. However, of primary concern here is an understanding of whether Hegel effectively demonstrates that subject and substance are different in the construction of the concept of God that is set forth in his *Lectures of 1827*.

The first premise of Hegel's proof for the concept of God in the *Lectures of 1827* [LPR] is bound to an initial human understanding of God as that which is absolute unity and self-enclosed [*das in sich Verschlössene*]:

Thus it is to be grasped as the absolutely full, replete universality. [To say that] God is this universal that is concrete and full within itself is [to say] that God is only *one* and not in antithesis to many [other] deities. Instead there is only the One, who is God.<sup>1</sup>

This premise asserts that God is “the One,” a universal whole, unopposed by a system of multiple gods. God is all-encompassing. As such, his universality logically encompasses every possible particularity:

This is the form of the content at the beginning, and this content remains the foundation. All through the development God does not step outside his unity with himself. In God’s creating of the world, as tradition has it, no new principle makes an appearance, nor is something evil established, something other that would be autonomous or independent. God remains only this One; the one true actuality, the one principle, abides throughout all particularity (119).

To refute the formation of Hegel’s argument at this point would be to contest the concept of God as that which is universal. Such refutation would necessitate a lucid justification for the concept of God as an entity which does not include everything in the universe. In other words, such justification would recognize independent particularities as existing apart from and external to God. The difficulty of this kind of refutation becomes apparent when one looks past the hypothetical separation between God and independent particularities and attempts to define that entity within which all of this separateness lies. At such point, the concept of a single design that encompasses all of these entities becomes inescapable. Here, separation of the concept of oneness in the universe appears to serve only as a technicality which ultimately carries cognition back to totality, albeit a more complicated totality. Although the occurrence of multiple gods or other independent particularities may indeed relate to a breakdown of the universe, this paper agrees with Hegel both that an operative totality becomes inevitable in any human concept of the universe, and that such totality may be referred to as God.

Accepting Hegel’s premise that the concept of God is equivalent to the concept of that entity which is all-encompassing immediately entails an encounter with the seventeenth-century ontology of the Dutch philosopher, Benedict de Spinoza. As Peter Hodgson’s editorial remarks to his translation

---

<sup>1</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans., Peter C. Hodgson, One-Volume Edition (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), 118.

of Hegel's *Lectures* maintain, the term, "pantheism," did not occur in English until well after Spinoza's death.<sup>2</sup> Yet the term came to represent the fundamental character of Spinoza's concept of God as found in his *Ethics*.<sup>3</sup> Hegel defines the term as that which, "in the proper sense means that everything, the whole, the universe, this complex of everything existing, these infinitely many individual things—that all this is God."<sup>4</sup> This paper will use the term as it is reflected in Hegel's definition of pantheism.

Hegel quickly defends Spinoza against accusations that atheism is pantheism's equivalent. As Hodgson explains, Hegel did not view Spinoza's concept of the One as a concept that negates God's existence. Rather, Hegel explains Spinoza's concept of God as *acosmism*, or *cosmotheism*, a philosophy which essentially understands the concept of God as "world is God" and not as "God is world."<sup>5</sup> In the *Lectures of 1827*, Hegel strives to accentuate the importance of Spinoza's philosophical developments, and before differentiating his own concept of God from Spinoza's, he briefly criticizes those who denounce Spinoza's ideas as atheistic in character:

Spinozism has also been reproached as *atheism*; however, in Spinozism this world or this "all" simply *is not* [*ist gar nicht*]. Certainly the "all" appears, one speaks of its determinate being [*Dasein*], and our life is a being within this existence [*Existenz*]. In the philosophical sense, however, the world has in this view no actuality at all: it simply *is not*. But the accusers of Spinozism are unable to liberate themselves from the finite; hence they declare that for Spinozism everything is God, because it is precisely the aggregate of finitudes (the world) that has there disappeared (125).

Elsewhere, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* [LHP], Hegel speaks even more forcefully against critics of Spinoza, especially as found in the writings of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Hegel goes as far as to state that

---

<sup>2</sup> LPR, [Ed.] 118:11*n*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> LPR 123.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*. [Ed.] 125 and 125:27*n*.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans., by E. S. Haldane, Vol. 3 (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Chapter 1-A2. "In the first place Spinozism is asserted to be Atheism - by Jacobi, for instance (Werke, Vol. IV. Section I, p. 216) - because in it no distinction is drawn between God and the world; it makes nature the real God, or lowers God to the level of nature, so that God disappears and only nature is established. But it is not so much God and nature that Spinoza sets up in mutual opposition, as thought and extension; and God is unity, not One made up of two, but absolute Substance, in which has really disappeared the limitation of the subjectivity of thought and nature. Those who speak against Spinoza do so as if it were on God's account

certain anti-Spinozistic thought—thought devoted to the finite world, is actually a refusal of God and “many degrees worse than Spinoza.”<sup>7</sup> Although even in the very beginning of the *Lectures of 1827* Hegel wishes to depart from Spinoza’s concept of God, one right away notes the reverence that Hegel observes for Spinoza’s idea of God as absolute substance and absolute unity. Furthermore, as is clear in Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel takes the fundamental oneness that characterized the God of Spinoza’s ontology as the real starting point of philosophy and philosophical inquiry:

This Idea of Spinoza's we must allow to be in the main true and well-grounded; absolute substance is the truth, but it is not the whole truth; in order to be this it must also be thought of as in itself active and living, and by that very means it must determine itself as mind. But substance with Spinoza is only the universal and consequently the abstract determination of mind; it may undoubtedly be said that this thought is the foundation of all true views – not, however, as their absolutely fixed and permanent basis, but as the abstract unity which mind is in itself. It is therefore worthy of note that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

With this reverence for Spinozism in mind, one turns again to Hegel’s *Lectures of 1827*, this time in an attempt to examine how Hegel differentiates his concept of God as all-encompassing from Spinoza’s concept of God as all-encompassing.

At the heart of Hegel’s philosophical divergence from Spinozism is his understanding of *substance* and *subjectivity*—both as they exist in and of

---

that they were interested; but what these opponents are really concerned about is not God, but the finite – themselves.”

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. “Therefore the allegations of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of truth; with him there is too much God. They say: If God is the identity of mind and nature, then nature or the individual man is God. This is quite correct, but they forget that nature and the individual disappear in this same identity: and they cannot forgive Spinoza for thus annihilating them. Those who defame him in such a way as this are therefore not aiming at maintaining God, but at maintaining the finite and the worldly; they do not fancy their own extinction and that of the world. Spinoza's system is absolute pantheism and monotheism elevated into thought. Spinozism is therefore very far removed from being atheism in the ordinary sense; but in the sense that God is not conceived as spirit, it is atheism. However, in the same way many theologians are also atheists who speak of God only as the Almighty Supreme Being, etc., who refuse to acknowledge God, and who admit the validity and truth of the finite. They are many degrees worse than Spinoza.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

themselves, and as they relate to one another. Whereas Spinoza conceives of God as *Absolute Substance*, Hegel comprehends God as *Absolute Spirit*:

God is the absolute substance. If we cling to this declaration in its abstract form, then it is certainly Spinozism or pantheism. But the fact that God is *substance* does not exclude *subjectivity*, for substance as such is not yet at all distinguished from subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Although Spinoza describes God as encompassing everything, including human subjectivity, he failed, according to Hegel, to recognize the importance of human subjectivity as something that, while enclosed within substance, still generates an otherness that is a concrete essence—essence comparable to God’s own subjectivity and unlike any other form found within substance. Basically, the dilemma that Hegel points to regarding Spinoza’s Absolute Substance is how substance in Spinoza’s sense results in a God that absorbs the very *sum* of Descartes’ *Cogito*. While not discarding Spinoza’s concept, Hegel wishes to utilize human subjectivity as the tool through which Spinoza’s Absolute Substance becomes concretized. As such, substance becomes spirit.

The dialectical relationship at the heart of Hegel’s concept of God—or his assertion that God exists—indeed creates a non-pantheistic argument, or one which differentiates itself clearly from Spinozism in its presentation of the new idea that harmonic symbiosis is operative in the relationship between God and humanity. Hegel’s philosophy of dialectics is both ontological and epistemological, for it understands both the nature of human reason and the use of that reason as indispensable factors in understanding the design of the universe. Hegel’s dialectical treatment of the concept of God presents a valid argument that is both ontological and epistemological in its construction. However, the crucial element in Hegel’s argument is his claim that human reason and subjectivity exist over and above substance. After first outlining the dialectical relationship present in Hegel’s understanding of God’s relationship to humanity, I shall therefore especially scrutinize Hegel’s categorical treatment of human reason.

Early in his *The Concept of Religion*, Hegel looks to the experiences of living beings on earth and immediately separates human experience from animal experience because humans *think*:

It is a universal and ancient preconception that human beings are thinking beings, and that by thinking and thinking alone they distinguish

---

<sup>9</sup> LPR 118.

themselves from the beasts. Animals have feelings, but only feelings. Human beings think, and they alone have religion. From this it is to be concluded that religion has its inmost seat in thought. No doubt it can subsequently be felt, as we shall show later in our discussion. We also express this process thus: When human beings think of God, they elevate themselves above the sensible, the external, the singular.<sup>10</sup>

Hegel's treatment of the differentiation between animal feeling and human thought becomes extremely important in testing the argument's soundness. Thus, a longer look at Hegel's treatment of this differentiation is necessary. Following through with the basic outline of Hegel's argument for the time being, however, one observes that Hegel understands human beings as thinking beings who are the only world-beings capable of religion. And religion, according to Hegel, is a process through which human beings think of God. Thinking of God, claims Hegel, is not something of which animals are capable.

Integral to the human process of thinking of God is the determination of God as something existing as an object external to human subjectivity:

...if we take the *human being* as our point of departure, in that we presupposed the subject and begin from ourselves because our immediate initial knowledge is knowledge of ourselves, and if we ask how we arrive at this distinction or at the knowledge of an object and, to be more exact in this case, at the knowledge of God, then in general the answer has already been given: "It is precisely because we are thinking beings." God is the absolutely universal in-and-for-itself, and thought makes the universal in-and-for-itself into its object.<sup>11</sup>

Hegel's assertion that there exists a moment in which human subjectivity discovers a universal object also appears to act as 1) the moment that his subjectivity differs from the substance of pure Spinozism and 2) the moment at which Hegel's argument professes the concept of God as a concept which may be concretized as an object for human consciousness. According to Hegel, humans are individual idealities, essential particularities that are parts of Absolute Substance. Yet they have the power, within their very understanding of God as an object which exists apart from their own subjectivities, to concretize God from the abstract to the actual:

---

<sup>10</sup> LPR 121.

<sup>11</sup> LPR 132-133.

What enters into consciousness in the beginning is the simple, the abstract. In this initial simplicity we have God as substance, but we do not stop at that point. This is the form of the content at the beginning, and this content remains the foundation... We express the beginning thus, as a content within us, an object for us.<sup>12</sup>

Diagrams #1 and #2 here represent visualizations of the initial distinction made between Hegel's concept of God and the concept of God as represented in Spinoza.<sup>13</sup>

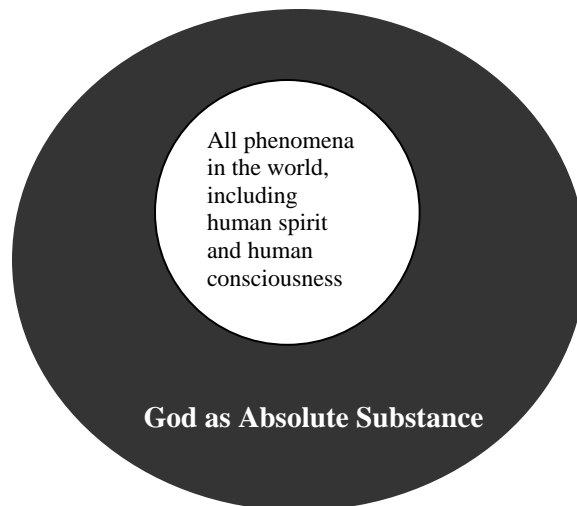


Diagram #1: Spinoza's Concept of God – *Absolute Substance*

<sup>12</sup> LPR 119-120.

<sup>13</sup> In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel both comments on, and reconstructs, the diagram that Spinoza himself created for the purpose of expressing his concept, "Philosophic infinity, that which is infinite actu, Spinoza therefore calls the absolute affirmation of itself. This is quite correct, only it might have been better expressed as: "It is the negation of negation." Spinoza here also employs geometrical figures as illustrations of the Notion of infinity. In his Opera postuma, preceding his Ethics, and also in the letter quoted above, he has two circles, one of which lies within the other, which have not, however, a common centre." [*Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Period of the Thinking Understanding, Chapter I. - The Metaphysics of the Understanding: A.2. First Division, Spinoza* (online at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org))].

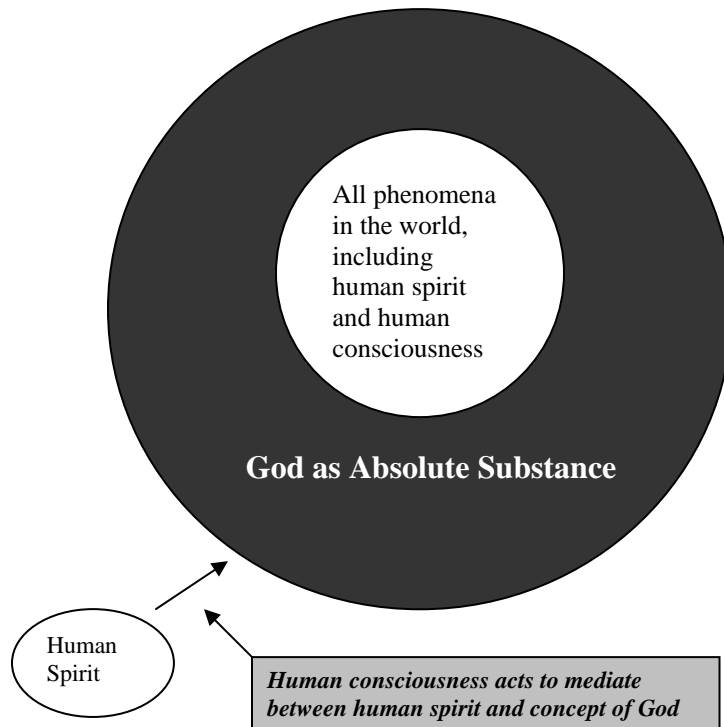


Diagram #2: First Stage of Hegel's Dialectical Relationship between Substance and Spirit

In this first stage of Hegel's dialectical relationship between substance and subjectivity, Hegel's idea of "form of the content at the beginning" unfolds, and the existence of human subjectivity as apart from substance is acknowledged:

Thus we arrive at the standpoint for which God (in this general indeterminateness) is object of consciousness. Here for the first time we have two [elements], God and the consciousness for which God is.<sup>14</sup>

As visualized in Diagram #1, Spinoza's concept contains subjectivity within substance, never allowing for clear separation of the two. Later in the argument, mapped out here in a moment, Hegel's ontology offers a concept of human subjectivity as both separated from, and circumscribed by, absolute substance—a concept which distances itself even further from Spinoza's concept.

---

<sup>14</sup> LPR, 129.



Having distinguished his argument for God from Spinoza's, Hegel next spends much of the first part of his *Lectures* in an examination of differing types of knowledge of God. These types include immediate knowledge, feeling, representation, and finally, thought. Hegel does not wish to dismiss the first three forms of knowledge as irrelevant. In fact, he discusses the importance that each form plays in the process of acquiring an overall knowledge of God. Ultimately, however, Hegel wishes to focus his attention on *thought's* ability to achieve an absolute knowledge of God:

What now holds our closer interest is *thinking*—the stage at which what is properly objective comes under consideration. We have an immediate certainty of God; we have faith in him and feeling and representations of him. But we also have this certainty in thought and here we call it “conviction.” Conviction involves grounds, and these grounds essentially exist only in thought.<sup>15</sup>

While acknowledging the importance of these other forms of knowledge, the study here directs most of its attention on Hegel's concept of human *thought*. As expressed earlier, Hegel's understanding of human consciousness, or of thought, is an understanding of a special tool that acts to mediate substance and subjectivity, or perhaps more clearly stated, to mediate world from ideas. This quality of mediation does not characterize these other three forms of knowledge of God.<sup>16</sup>

Looking again to the two diagrams set forth above, human subjectivity, mediated by human consciousness, clearly seems other than absolute substance. Yet how does mere separation of world and idea as such allow for *absolute knowledge* of God? René Descartes had famously arrived at the idea of such separation between subject and object well before Hegel's time. Additionally, Immanuel Kant asserted that human beings could never know any one object, including the object of God, as it exists in itself. Hegel's creation of a dialectical system effectively reevaluates this relationship between subject and object. His system attempts at overriding these earlier philosophies which either negated human comprehension of God, or understood such comprehension as a limited one which could never fully grasp God as God exists in himself. This study therefore now turns to an understanding of how a human subjectivity that has God as its object may, according to Hegel, *know* that object.

---

<sup>15</sup> LPR 151-152.

<sup>16</sup> Hegel also claims consciousness to be an “ejection of the content out of feeling...a kind of liberation” (LPR 140).

In Part I.c of Hegel's *Lectures of 1827*, "Religious knowledge as Elevation to God", Hegel sets forth the true dialectical method through which substance, existing as an object for subjectivity, reunites with that subjectivity. The Hegelian unification of substance and subjectivity, however, differs drastically from that found in the pantheism of Spinoza. For while substance and subjectivity rejoin, their Hegelian unification entails a "passing over" of finite world to infinite idea and vice versa (infinite world to finite idea), which fundamentally involves substance's encompassment of separation:

This total simplicity, this knowledge of God, is inwardly a movement; more precisely, it is an *elevation* to God. We express religion essentially as an elevation, a passing over from one content to another. It is the finite content from which we pass over to God, from which we relate ourselves to the absolute, infinite content and pass over to it. The characteristic nature of mediating is what is determinately expressed in the passing over. This passage is of a double kind. First it is a passing over from finite things, from the things of the world or from the finitude of consciousness and from this finitude in general that we call "we"—or, as the particular subject, "I"—to the infinite, this infinite being more precisely defined as God.<sup>17</sup>

It is in Hegel's subsequent discussion of the dialectical relationship between finite human as both subject and object, and infinite God as both subject and object, that the philosopher's brilliant attempt at proving God becomes clear. Diagrams #3, #4 and #5 here seek to set forth this next stage in Hegel's argument. In Diagram #3, the human subject realizes not only God as an object external to human subjectivity, but as an object that contains the concept of being an object that is an all-encompassing entity. This cognition logically leads to Diagram #4, which expresses the concept as such: if God is all-encompassing, then God encompasses both human subjectivity and human subjectivity's objectification of God's self. In such realization, a novel cognition arises: human subjectivity is actually an object for God, and God therefore also becomes understood as a subject. But God is a subject that understands human subjectivity as an object that is subjective to itself and which will see God as object. In comprehending this doubling effect, as represented here in Diagram #5, human rationality understands God as intimately bound to world, thereby elevating its own subjectivity as encompassed as both object and subject within God's subjectivity.

---

<sup>17</sup> LPR 162.

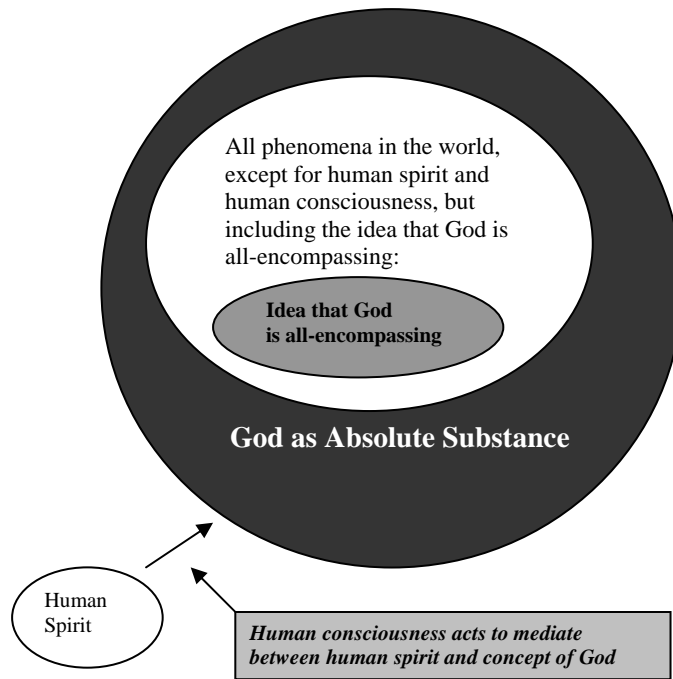


Diagram #3: Second Stage of Hegel's Dialectical Relationship between Substance and Spirit

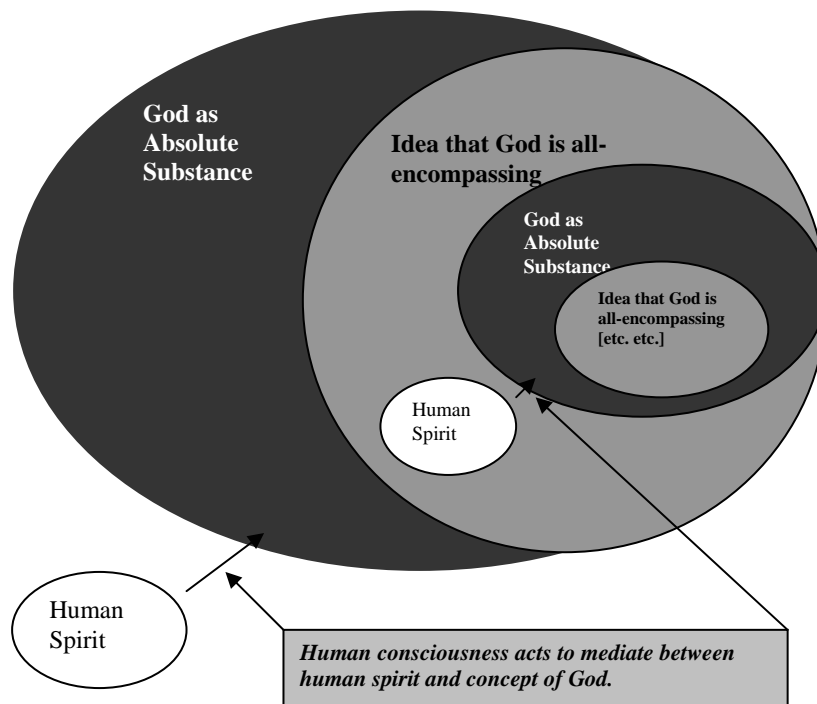


Diagram #4: Third Stage of Hegel's Dialectical Relationship between Substance and Spirit

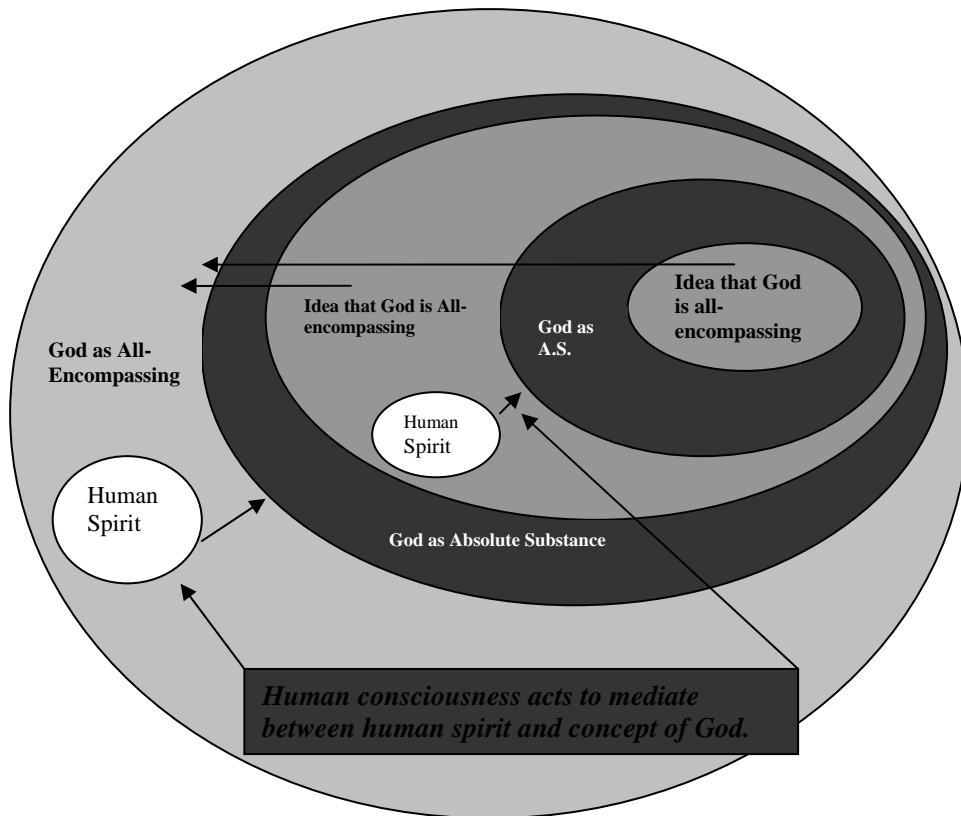


Diagram #5: Final Stage of Hegel's Dialectical Relationship between Substance and Spirit

As Diagram #5 attempts to demonstrate visually, human subjectivity realizes that God gives human spirit its human rationality, which then acts as that tool by which humans come to understand themselves both as they exist within God, and as each of their finitudes exists within God's infinity.

Having briefly outlined the basic structure of Hegel's dialectical argument, attention turns to an examination of the very tool that Hegel characterizes as so powerful in mediating subjectivity and substance. This tool, as explained above, and as found in all diagrams here representing Hegel's argument, is human thought.

Hegel's argument for a dialectical relationship between God and humanity appears valid because all of its premises are presented as true. Yet the argument's soundness relies not only upon its validity, but upon the certainty of its premises. Looking to the syllogism that makes up the early portion of Hegel's argument—that portion which allows the argument to proceed

beyond Spinozism—one observes, as explained above, the following construction:

- Premise 1: God is all-encompassing absolute substance.
- Premise 2: Subjectivity is other than substance.
- Premise 3: Human consciousness is subjectivity.
- Conclusion 1: Human consciousness is other than substance.
- Conclusion 2: Human consciousness is other than God.

Hegel's first premise of the argument, "God is all-encompassing absolute substance," as discussed in the earliest portion of this paper, presents itself as a sound assumption. The soundness of the second and third premises, however, has yet to be addressed. One now turns to the details of these two premises.

A problematic logical step was raised earlier in this essay: Hegel's treatment of the differentiation between animal feeling and human thought in his assertion that humans alone are capable of religion. Although there is a theoretical possibility that animals do indeed have cognitions, be they similar or dissimilar to human cognitions, one should understand that this possibility presents only a small technical flaw in Hegel's argument and will therefore agree with Hegel that animals do not have cognitions. The technicality can be overlooked because one is not primarily concerned here with understanding whether living beings—all, some or none—have the faculty of cognition. Rather, the focus should maintain its course and attempt to engage the more urgent matter at hand, that is, determining whether cognition is clearly something other than substance. Bypassing this technicality, one therefore continues with the primary investigation, seeking always to comprehend how human cognition, according to Hegel, exists as non-substance. Following the previous citation above, Hegel at once pursues a logical strain that he expects will make headway in differentiating thought from substance:

When human beings think of God, they elevate themselves above the sensible, the external, the singular. We say that it is an elevation to the pure, to that which is at one with itself. This elevation is a transcending of the sensible, of mere feeling, a journey into the pure region; and this region of the universal is thought. This is the content of the beginning, and in the subjective mode it is the soil for this content.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

Although one has already dismissed that which one had assumed a minor technical flaw—that animals do not have cognition and humans do—the reading of the ensuing paragraph points to an issue that begins to indicate a more problematic matter involving the greater logical structure of the argument. Hegel’s presentation of human experience as vastly different from animal experience, based on the presence of human cognition, while not central to any logical errors in Hegel’s thought, now points to the unfolding dilemma represented more clearly in the second of the two paragraphs above. Beyond the more basic query which desires clarity as to what that particular quality is which makes human cognition particularly special, as opposed to just different, when compared to the experiences of other living beings, how is it, one might demand, that subjectivity is not just another manifestation of pure substance, as found in Spinoza’s concept of God? Hegel’s assertions here claim that the mere human cognition of God, act to “elevate” humans “above the sensible.” Although human consciousness is indeed a complex matter, its existence, however, as something that is not just another element, albeit a highly complex element, of substance, is not clear from Hegel’s argument. Yet one perseveres with Hegel’s text, attempting to retrieve proof elsewhere for subjectivity as other than substance. In Part B, *The Knowledge of God*, as found in the *Lectures of 1827*, Hegel again aims to tackle the same dilemma. In doing so, he recapitulates the first development in his understanding of God as absolute substance—a development, as discussed earlier, which remains in accord with Spinozism:

The first [moment] in the concept of religion is this divine universality, spirit wholly in its indeterminate universality for which there is positively no distinction.<sup>19</sup>

Continuing, Hegel moves once again towards the explanation sought after here:

The second [moment] after this absolute foundation is distinction in general, and only with distinction does religion as such begin. This *distinction* is a spiritual distinction, it is consciousness. In general the spiritual, universal relationship is the knowledge of this absolute content, of this foundation. This is not the place to analyze the cognition of this absolute judgment [or primal division]. The concept judges, that is, the concept or the universal passes over into primal division, diremption, separation. Because it is one of the logical determinations and these are presupposed, we can express it here as a fact that this absolute

---

<sup>19</sup> LPR 128.

universality proceeds to the internal distinction of itself, it proceeds to the primal division or to the point of positing itself as determinateness.<sup>20</sup>

This citation proves crucial in an understanding of how it is that human consciousness is or is not *special* in the manner discussed earlier, at least as the issue is determined in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. As Hegel clearly states here, the distinction that elevates human consciousness from substance is part of a primal division that is *presupposed*. The *Lectures*, according to Hegel, is not the place to discuss the presupposition. Yet it is the opinion here that this presupposition is central to understanding the entire project of Hegel's concept of God as it occurs after the philosophical break from Spinozism and pantheism.

Although Hegel's argument for the dialectical relationship between God and humanity unfolds brilliantly, it rests on a premise that, at least in the philosopher's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, is not necessarily true. This essay therefore concludes, understanding Hegel's argument for the concept of God and for God's existence as a valid argument, but not as a sound one.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 128-129.