BETWEEN THE INFINITE AND THE FINITE: GOD, HEGEL AND DISAGREEMENT

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Abstract. In this article, I consider the importance of philosophy in the dialogue between religious believers and non-believers. I begin by arguing that a new epistemology of epistemic peer disagreement is required if the dialogue is to progress. Rather than viewing the differences between the positions as due to a deficit of understanding, I argue that differences result from the existential anchoring of such enquiries in life projects and the under-determination of interpretations by experience. I then explore a central issue which is often implicit in these dialogues, namely the ontological status of God-world relations. Drawing on the reflections of Hegel on the infinite and the finite, I argue that his version of panentheism provides an insightful way to conceptualise God-world relations that avoids both dualistic and monistic approaches and helps to explicate a holistic ontology of transcendence from within the world of experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

The dialogue about basic convictions and core beliefs between religious believers and non-believers has had a chequered career. In fact, it would be more accurate to characterise these exchanges as a series of monologues rather than proper dialogues. However, there are signs that a more truly dialogical approach to these encounters is emerging. In a recent book which I co-edited with Richard Norman entitled *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*,[1] we have attempted to foster a more creative approach to this dialogue and to the many complex issues it raises. In this article, I would like to consider two central issues which have emerged out of such dialogues following the publication of the book.

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1   Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman, eds., *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide* (Routledge, 2017).

The first concerns "epistemic peer disagreement" in the specific area of religious belief and non-belief. I suggest that religious believers and non-believers should not view each other's different claims to believe or not as *necessarily* lacking in some aspect of knowledge or understanding. I argue further that neither side should assume that their position is the default position. Avoiding these assumptions creates a more symmetrical exchange between those in dialogue and reduces the risk of one side or another adopting a *sceptical* position with respect to an *evangelical* opponent.

The second issue is an ontological one which arises in the opening dialogue in *Religion and Atheism* between Rowan Williams and Raymond Tallis. This is the view that God is not simply to be thought of as "another thing in a list, another agent among agents."[2] Viewing God in this manner overlooks the constitutive relation between God and the world and tends to promote an oppositional way of thinking about these relations. I sketch an alternative to this approach through a consideration of Hegel's account of panentheism. This is the view that all things have their being in God. Whilst Hegel does not use the term "panentheism", it is the best concept to describe his overall position. I argue that Hegel's dialectical method of tackling this ontological question provides a helpful way to think about how we experience God through awareness of our own finitude and its opening up to infinity.

II. BEYOND EPISTEMIC DEFICIENCY

The framework within which the exchange between the religious and the non-religious has been typically set is problematic. Assuming that one side has got it right and the other has got it wrong misunderstands the nature of this particular disagreement. I have been inspired to take this view by the work of Charles Taylor, especially his *A Secular Age* in which he proposes a different understanding of secularity based on the new conditions of belief in the "minority world."[3] These new conditions provide alternative ways of living our moral and spiritual lives which speak to the human quest for fulfilment. Taylor speaks of these conditions in terms of an "epistemic pluralism" which faces believers and non-believers as they realise that there are different

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2   Carroll and Norman, *Religion and Atheism*, 4.
3   "Minority world" here signifies what is sometimes referred to as the "western world".

legitimate ways to provide lived answers to these existential questions.[4] The central idea here is that the background conditions of belief have shifted to a non-naïve optional choice which is aware that it is not the *only* way that people strive to live a fulfilled life.

Prior to the dawn of the modern era, the optional understanding of belief did not arise because it had been foreclosed by the taken-for-granted assumption of religious belief and the absence of toleration of diversity in these matters. Taylor's central point is that this contemporary "epistemic pluralism" should be understood within a context of the new conditions of fulfilment. Briefly put, if the former conditions for fulfilment were transcendent involving, that is to say, the good was *beyond* human flourishing which entailed a belief in a transcendent God and an afterlife, the new conditions make *immanent* human fulfilment in this world sufficient. Taylor also suggests that in the "minority world" this understanding of fulfilment has become a cultural default position.[5]

I want to draw out an implication of Taylor's work that is an important consequence of this transformation in the background assumptions of belief and unbelief. Namely, that believers and unbelievers should not view each other as giving wrong answers to the same question. Rather, I want to suggest that we should view these parties as providing different answers to the shared question of what makes for fulfilment and as attempting to live in the light of these answers in differing though overlapping ways. The implications of this shift in framework for situating the exchange between believers and non-believers are important. Rather than looking at someone on the "other side of the divide," so to speak, as simply getting the wrong answer to the question that we have got right, we should look at each other as exploring different options for understanding and living a fulfilled life that have arisen in modernity. Whilst in the past these issues were more often than not resolved by the cultural milieu within which one grew up and was embedded, now this context is made up of a range of plural options. According to Taylor's contemporary conditions of belief there is no single way to answer this question of fulfilment which defeats all other options.

Previously, these differences of belief were considered to be due to error. People lacked something or they misunderstood something and that is why they

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4   Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 3.
5   Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 12.

made the *wrong* choice. And this is not a foolish idea, of course. In many areas of life, we can and do make wrong choices. But in the area of religious-existential commitments, I think that this way misunderstands the nature of the differences. These differences are of a different kind to those concerned with recognising ordinary states of affairs where the existence or proof of the fact of the matter decides the case. In the case of a religious commitment a better analogy to use to understand these differences is that provided by the notion of a gestalt switch.[6]

It is possible to view a gestalt image in two different ways and for each to be an accurate account of the representation. In other words, the interpretation of the religious fact of the matter is underdetermined by the data. The data, so to speak, allow for plural interpretations. In the case of religious commitments and disagreements the way that one views the issue will depend upon one's life experiences, background, and personal assessment of the arguments and no position is ever without counterarguments. One can put this in explicitly religious terms by acknowledging that whilst religious faith is correlated with knowledge it is not simply reducible to it. It is not only possible to view religious commitment from contrasting positions, but inevitable given the nature of the disagreement. Rowan Williams alludes to this state of affairs in his dialogue with Raymond Tallis when he comments:

> If good arguments against or for the existence of God were as good arguments as they think they are, then the world would be either full of people like Richard Dawkins or it would be full of people like — whoever else you want to name. And because the world is not full of complete idiots, presumably there is something else going on here than just argument.[7]

In other words, whilst arguments for or against the existence of God are important and provide reasonable grounds for belief or unbelief, "there is something else going on" that needs to be understood in order to better make sense of these differences. Taylor's historical-philosophical account of the replacement of the former default "transcendent frame" by a modern "immanent frame" is a more convincing picture of how these differences have arisen with the emergence of our "secular age." The modern world now explains reality according to natural causal relations. This system of explanation has

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6   For discussion of this Wittgensteinian idea as applied to religious beliefs, see Leander P. Marquez, "Belief as Seeing-As", *Kritike* 10, no. 1 (2016). John Wisdom has made a similar point in his article "Gods". See John Wisdom, "Gods", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 45, no. 1 (1945).
7   Carroll and Norman, *Religion and Atheism*, 18.

replaced a former model which saw spiritual forces and transcendent agents as operating on the world from the outside and from within human beings to bring about changes. Taylor builds upon his earlier work in *Sources of the Self* to elucidate how the development of a so-called *buffered self*, an enclosed identity protected from outside forces, has replaced a former understanding of the self which was permeable or porous to spiritual forces. In the transition to the modern world this new understanding of the self has gone hand in hand with an elimination of spiritual forces from the world in a general process of disenchantment.[8]

But to be clear, I do not want to suggest that arguments for or against the existence of God are unimportant in the dialogue between the religious and the non-religious. They clearly are. My point is rather that I do not think that we should consider the taking of one position or another as *necessarily* due to some kind of rational deficit, of not quite seeing the argument or the counterarguments. It is reasonable to assume that people as intelligent as Rowan Williams and Raymond Tallis understand the arguments and counterarguments and have come to different reasonable conclusions.[9] So, "something else is going on." Pursuing what this "something else" is requires attention to the existential anchoring of our arguments in *optional* life projects through which we try and live fulfilled lives. Perhaps in doing this, we can gain greater insight into the differences that positions of either belief or unbelief make in actual lives.

But there is another more fundamental reason why reflection on the existence of God should avoid presuming that this question can be categorised according to the taxonomy of just one more fact of the matter and so solved according to a simple "yes" or a "no" answer. As Rowan Williams puts it, God should not be thought of as "another thing in a list" or "another agent among agents."[10] The constitutive relation between God and the world, which I shall discuss below, means that God should not be understood to be simply a separate reality from existence to be either believed in or not. For classical theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, God is both an entity (*id quod est*) and being itself (*esse*). In *reality* these necessary analytical distinctions are one and the same. The conceptual distinction between God as "being" and God as "an entity" aris-

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8   Anthony Carroll, *Protestant Modernity: Weber, Secularisation and Protestantism* (Univ. of Scranton Press, 2007), 87–94.
9   Wisdom, "Gods".
10   Carroll and Norman, *Religion and Atheism*, 4.

es because we cannot think a concrete particular (*id quod est*) and an abstract universal (*esse*) as one and the same. We require two concepts to link these thoughts. But as God is not a composite but a simple being in whom essence and existence are one then this conceptual distinction is overcome in reality.[11] Divine simplicity means that being subsists as a particular entity in God.[12]

I want to make one further point related to this deficit model of the belief and unbelief problematic prior to moving on to a second point. The tendency to assume one or another position as the *only* rational position available has clearly played its part in justifying default positions regarding belief and non-belief. If previous ages anchored belief in a cultural default position, today we have the opportunity to move beyond this and do what Anthony Kenny suggests that we do namely, to not assume the default position as our own so as to put the burden of proof on the other side.[13] This is important because otherwise we get caught up in a sceptic vs evangelical contest. This again means that a certain suspension of judgment needs to be operative in these exchanges as well as a recognition of its possible epistemic validity but not necessarily of its truth. Accepting a reasonable justification does not *necessarily* entail assenting to its truth claim. Richard Norman and I express this idea in our conclusion to *Religion and Atheism* in the following way:

> Religious and non-religious can properly regard one another's beliefs as false but not irrational. They *may* be irrational, of course. Undoubtedly some beliefs held by some religious believers are irrational, as are some of the beliefs held about religion by some of the non-religious. But they may not be. We shall put the point by saying that it is possible to reject one another's beliefs but still regard them as having epistemic status.[14]

Whilst some default positions are worthy of their status, and "innocent until proven guilty" is arguably one, in the area of the belief and non-belief exchange all that imposing a default position achieves is to foreclose the exchange before it has really begun. Philosophically, it falls short of good ra-

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11   Eleonore Stump, *The God of the Bible and the God of the Philosophers* (Marquette Univ. Press, 2016), 77–97. For Aquinas's texts on these issues, see Joseph Bobik, ed., *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1965).

12   Frederick Sontag, "Being and God: Universal Categories and Particular Being", *Religious Studies* 9, no. 4 (1973).

13   Anthony Kenny, "Knowledge, Belief, and Faith", in *Philosophers of Our Time*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 265.

14   Carroll and Norman, *Religion and Atheism*, 246.

tional argumentation by committing the fallacy of the *petitio principii*, of begging the question or of assuming that which you are trying to prove.

The consequence of this is that if there is no single rational default position which the other side simply needs to adopt then dialogue between believers, non-believers and indeed other believers will be significantly influenced by the different life-experiences of the individuals in these exchanges. Consequently, the first stage in this dialogue should be to understand why a position is held by a dialogue partner and how they correlate their beliefs and way of life implied by these beliefs. A "default critique" prior to this process of deeper understanding may only prevent progression in the dialogue. This requires a mutual recognition of the parties in the dialogue which fosters a capacity to be open to another's way of seeing things, something which can develop and is a fruit that is to be found in some areas of the related dialogue between different religious traditions in interreligious dialogue. And, if in the twentieth century a great breakthrough has been the opening up of a vast new program of interreligious dialogue it may be that in the twenty-first century this dialogue will be further developed by the inclusion of those who do not hold religious beliefs.

III. HEGEL'S PANENTHEISM: TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGY OF THE GOD-WORLD RELATION

In order for dialogue between the religious and the non-religious to proceed well it is important to be clear exactly what the dialogue is about. This is not as obvious as it may at first appear because if the dialogue is to be rooted in a mutual recognition of the personal experience of the participants, and not simply a jousting about abstract arguments, one should not assume that all the parties in the dialogue share the same experiences or share the same interpretative categories for these experiences. Raymond Tallis puts this point in the following way in dialogue with Rowan Williams:

> For many people, in a sense arguments about God are pointless. It primarily is an experience, or fire in the head, or whatever you want to call it; and arguments, in a sense, are rather 'after the fact', a matter of defending your experience against somebody who hasn't shared that experience. The reason I'm saying this is because, in many ways, I worry as an atheist that I just sim-

ply haven't had the experience, rather than that I have a very good argument against the existence of God.[15]

The openness and perhaps even vulnerability displayed by Raymond Tallis here is impressive and reveals his concern that it might be that he has not "had the experience" of God that accounts for his atheism. But how should we understand the notion of "experience of God" in such dialogues?

Since the Enlightenment, and especially since the writings of Hume and Kant, the notion that you can experience God or indeed know God has become problematic. The "heavenly realm," if it is said to exist at all, is beyond cognition and experience. Experience and cognition are held to be limited to the mundane world of sensory objects and the relations between ideas. In this framework, *religious* experience is non-cognitive. However, as soon as one tries to talk about religious experiences one is inevitably pushed up against this dilemma: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind," as Kant puts this conundrum in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[16]

The separation of the "heavenly" and the "earthly" creates irresolvable antinomies or contradictions in modern efforts to speak about religious experiences. Attempts to think about experience of God only create a "cognitive paralysis" as we now operate within what Charles Taylor calls the "immanent frame" within which the "heavenly realm" has become an empty idea shorn of empirical and rational contents. In this situation it is not surprising that Raymond Tallis worries that he has not "had the experience." Identifying the characteristics of such experiences is hampered by an inability to articulate the ontological status of God-world relations in human experience. And, as we lack clarity about the ontological nature of experience of God then it is not surprising that God-talk becomes limited to hypothetical speculation, and abstract exchanges about conceivable possibilities or merely postulated propositions.

The Catholic theologian Walter Kasper notes that this creates a major challenge for contemporary theology, which in order to be effective needs to draw on symbols, images, concepts and categories which have social purchase in the imagination of contemporary women and men.[17] When these no longer have

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15   Carroll and Norman, *Religion and Atheism*, 18.
16   "Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind", in Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* (Felix Meiner, 1998), B75, 130.
17   Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (SCM Press, 1984), 41.

the capacity to convey the reality of the experience of God they merely reproduce an imagined fiction. Consequently, a central challenge for religious and non-religious dialogue at the philosophical level is to explore the ontological issues embedded in claims of experience of God and to employ philosophical language to better understand the nature of these experiences.

The modern way of thinking about God and the world has processed former ways of conceiving these relations and converted them into fixed dualistic and separate ontological categories. God is postulated as occupying one ontological space and the world another. These postulations are then reified and taken to be isolated from one another. Consequently to experience God you have to shift ontologically from one reality to another. But, if you hold to a monistic ontology you have nowhere to shift to and no way to think of this *other place* than as a fictional invention. Thinking ontologically about God in separate spatial and indeed temporal terms leads to a "two-world" theory that has significant *transport* and *communication* difficulties between the two worlds. Thinking ontologically within a "one-world" theory of a scientific naturalist variety leaves no space for God or indeed values and even carving out a meaningful space for humans in nature becomes challenging.[18]

It was Hegel who was the first to really attempt to think through these seemingly intractable ontological problems in the post-Kantian era. His philosophy develops a panentheistic ontology (all things have their being in God) of the God-world relations in which God and the world are seen as related through a dialectical conception of mediation. This view of Hegel's God-world mediation has been viewed by critics such as Kierkegaard and Feuerbach as falling into pantheism, but in common with a reading of Hegel shared by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert R. Williams, I consider Hegel to be a panentheist in which "unity-in-difference" is preserved between God and the world.[19] By developing this conception of reality, which is neither monistic nor dualistic, Hegel seeks to overcome the antinomies of reason identified by Kant and point in a direction in which the world and God can be conceived within a holistic theory of differential relations

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18   Fiona Ellis, *God, Value, & Nature* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 117–45.

19   Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 68, and Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 15–16.

of mutual recognition.[20] Hegel's approach to thinking about God-world relations is instructive because it provides a helpful philosophical language for exploring the complex ontological issues which arise when one attempts to speak meaningfully about the experience of God in a post-Kantian era.

This is how Rowan Williams expresses the problematic:

> I guess where I'm coming from is certainly a commitment to the view that the universe exists because of some prior or independent agency, which can in certain circumstances be called intelligent, which is God, and that that's the context within which I make sense of what goes on in my life and the life of the universe. And I guess that the challenge for me is how you articulate that without slipping in by the back door what a great deal of traditional philosophy and theology tries to keep out, which is the idea that God is another thing in a list, another agent among agents, and can be drawn on as a sort of rabbit out of the hat to solve problems.[21]

Rowan Williams speaks of the world here in "God-involving" terms. It is not that we experience one item on the list of possible human experiences called "God" as if God were a spatio-temporal being to be experienced alongside this person, or that object. That would be to make God into "another thing in a list," "another agent among agents"; a composite entity in Aquinas's terms. This "added member on the list" would then be used to *explain* the universe by making God the first cause in a causal chain. But the problem with this view, as Rowan Williams comments, is that for traditional theology and philosophy, as in the thought of Thomas Aquinas for example, there is a causal chain in the universe *because* there is an active God. In other words, this "God-involving" manner of speaking about the existence of the world implies that God's relation to it is *constitutive* and not simply causal. The relation is thus not one of being *an extra thing in a list* of things. That would be to conflate God with the world. Neither is it to isolate God from the world as God's *difference* from the world is not one of *separation*. But if the relation is neither one of conflation nor of separation then how should we think about it?

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20   For a discussion of the importance of mutual recognition in Hegel's social ethics which considers the place of the Lutheran ritual sacramental practices of confession and forgiveness and their overcoming of the domination and alienation of conflictual relations, see Molly Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethic: Religion, Conflict, and Rituals of Reconciliation* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2017), 54–80. For a general consideration of the place of recognition in Hegel's philosophy, see Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Univ. of California Press, 1997).

21   Carroll and Norman, *Religion and Atheism*, 3–4.

Hegel's thought provides an interesting way to conceive God-world relations that avoids falling back into either a conflation or separation of God and the world. He speaks of God-world relations in terms of the concepts of the "infinite" and the "finite." Hegel is aware that some ways of speaking of God do so in such a way that God is spoken of as a "bad infinite" (die schlechte Unendlichkeit). This way of speaking sets the infinite (God) over against the finite (world) and merely reproduces the dualisms and abstractions that are posited when one thinks about the infinite as an opposing reality to the finite. This results in a squashing or a levelling (schlichten) of the infinite by circumscribing it within the limit that it transcends and makes it into an "abstract universal" which cannot but be exclusive of all that is not infinite. Such an account of the infinite is spoken of by Hegel as the "negative infinity."[22] It merely results from the negation of the finite by the infinite without acknowledging that the finite is *also* affirmed by the infinite. This affirmation takes place through a relation of inclusion between the infinite and the finite, but this inclusion does not result in a reduction of the finite to the infinite. For Hegel, the preservation of the autonomy of the finite is not compromised by its inclusion within the infinite. To do so, would be to fall back into pantheism, which destroys the essential relationality between the finite and the infinite. Rather, his concept of the "true infinite," which for Hegel is "the basic concept of philosophy,"[23] thinks the infinite *in relation* to the finite; the finite is an *essential* moment of the infinite and not merely an optional extra. The nothingness of the finite (for Hegel, non-being *nichtsein* is the nature of the finite) is reconciled with the "true infinite" in the dialectical process of "self-sublation" (negation and preservation on a higher level and so coming to be what it is- that is to say, reality is a process of becoming and not a fixed substance).[24]

The "true infinite" brings together these relations into a harmonious whole through affirming the nothingness of finite reality as an ideal moment within the becoming of the "true infinite." The finite is thus not necessarily an *absolute* moment of nothingness, but is rather in flux from its own negation in death to an affirmation in the life of the "true infinite." As Hegel puts it, the "true infinite is at home with itself in its other."[25] It is the resistance to die to

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22   Georg W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic* (Hacker, 1991), §94.
23   Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §95
24   Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God*, 183–85.
25   Hegel, *Encyclopedia Logic*, §94.

itself as nothingness that reduces the finite to an *absolute* nothingness rather than a moment of transition to its true identity in relation with the infinite.[26] This resistance to relinquish itself is actually a false affirmation of the finite because it merely fossilises its nothingness into a false absolute, rather than affirming its nothingness as a moment in the process of the becoming of the "true infinite." Hegel thought that this ontological "short-circuiting" of the dynamic of the finite was socio-culturally manifested in the nihilism of his times as the cultural-spiritual horizon of a self-sufficient individualism. He puts this idea in the following way:

> what seems to be as close as can be, is the furthest away. This ideality, this fire in what all determinations are consumed, is at this standpoint still uncon-summated negativity: I as this one, without mediation, am the unique real-ity; all other determinations are posited ideally and turn to ashes, and only I, this one, maintain myself. There is just this certitude of myself, this certainty that all determinations are posited only through me, that they are valid or invalid only on my say-so. To this extent, ideality is not carried through to its conclusion, and this last acme of finitude still contains what must be ne-gated: that I as this one, in my immediate being or particularity, do not have truth or reality.[27]

Hegel expresses here the anguish which is experienced when one is confront-ed by one's own nothingness. We take fright at our "ontological poverty" and so in reaction to this shock posit ourselves as *absolute* nothingness, rather than as a transitional moment via negation to union with the "true infinite." In this way, the ceasing to be of the finite becomes objectified rather than relinquished. We literally hold on to death, to our own nothingness, rather than allow both to die and to recognise the infinite as our ground in the af-firmation of our self-surrender by the "true infinite."

The kenotic or self-emptying recognition of the infinite as our true ground provides Hegel with another way to conceive of the nothingness of the finite. It overcomes an oppositional notion of the relation between the finite and the infinite that is suggested by the notion of the "bad infinite," and instead re-inscribes their relations in a harmonious unity of reciprocal recog-nition. Hegel illustrates this other possibility which presents itself when one

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26   Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume 1: Introduction and the Concept of Religion* (Univ. of California Press, 1984); Translation by R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, 295–96.
27   Ibid., 298.

becomes aware of one's "ontological poverty" through describing the dialectical process of "sublation": [28]

> In the first place there is indeed the finite. But in the second place, because the finite is not, is not true in itself but rather the contradiction that sublates itself, for *that* reason the truth of the finite is this affirmative element that is called the infinite. Here there is no relationship or mediation between two elements each of which *is* [abides]; for rather the point of departure sublates itself; there is a mediation that sublates itself, a mediation through the sublation of mediation. The infinite does not merely constitute one aspect. For the understanding (Verstand) there are, in the mediation, two actual beings: on this side there is a world and over yonder there is God, and the knowledge of the world is the foundation for the being of God. But through our treatment the world is relinquished as genuine being; it is not regarded as something permanent on this side. The sole import of this procedure is that *the infinite alone is*, the finite has no genuine being, whereas only God has genuine being.[29]

Through this dialectical process of "sublation" the finite is preserved without reinstating separate limits between itself and the infinite. As the finite does not endure in the process of "sublation" as a separate reality, there can be no limits between it and the infinite.[30] Hegel conceives the God-world relations here as neither conflating the finite with the infinite nor of separating the infinite from the finite: the finite is an ideal moment of the infinite and the infinite is the being of the finite. But the ideality of the finite does not mean that the finite is unreal, rather that it is no longer a collection of separate entities. The finite represents a real moment in a process of becoming. The being of the finite should be thought of as distinct but not independent or separate, it is not a self-subsistent being separate from its ground, which is the infinite. It becomes what it is or gains its unique character through the role that it plays in the whole and in this way it helps to constitute the whole.

Therefore, ideality in Hegel is an ontological position which identifies the nature of the finite within the "true infinite." And, this ideality of the finite is manifested in various kenotic forms of mutual recognition, which make the "being with oneself in another" an intrinsic part of the process of coming

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28   "Sublation" is an English translation of the German "Aufheben/Aufhebung" — to raise, to negate and to preserve.

29   Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Volume 1*, 424.

30   Ibid., 425.

to full self-realisation in "ethical life" (Sittlichkeit).[31] But he is also clear that whilst the finite as a moment in a process of becoming contributes its part in constituting the infinite, the difference or particularity of the finite is preserved in the process of "sublation."

Hegel's way of thinking of this ontological difference between the finite and the infinite has been interpreted by some Christian philosophers as falling back into a philosophy which ultimately cannot count up to two.[32] That is, in the end, Hegel's panentheism is really a version of pantheism. This interpretation fails, however, to appreciate the real relations of reciprocal recognition which exist between the finite and the infinite in the process of "sublation."

Clearly the difficulty for Hegel's position is the challenge of talking about difference without doing so in categorical terms of "this" and "that." Using such categories would either repeat an oppositional dualism that reinstates limits or generates a fusional monism that destroys the mutually recognised difference. Some scholars of Hegel, such as Peter Hodgson, have proposed using the language of the *Advaita Vedanta* which speaks of a wholeness of neither one nor two, neither monistic nor dualistic, to articulate Hegel's conception of a holistic ontology of harmonious difference.[33] In a way reminiscent of Aquinas's and later Spinoza's conceptions of God, Hodgson notes that for Hegel, "God is the substance or essence on which everything depends for its existence."[34] But this essence is no abstract universal. Rather it is the subject and spirit which is "an abundant, overflowing universal."[35]

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31   "Ethical life", for Hegel (following Rousseau's conception of the *general will*), is embodied in a spiritual community made up of three basic institutions–the family, civil society, and the state. It is antithetical to the politics of a self-sufficient individualism, as often portrayed in social contract theories, which is detached from the community and hence also of the true interests of individuals. See Georg W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (CUP, 2012); Translation by H. B. Nisbet, 275–281 (§258). Hegel's opposition to self-sufficient individualism is a result of his understanding of *modern* "social freedom," which he develops in Part III of the *Philosophy of Right*. For discussion of his views on "social freedom," see Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (Polity Press, 2014), 42–62, and Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).

32   William Desmond, *Hegel's Counterfeit Double?* (Ashgate, 2003).

33   Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 252.

34   Ibid., 269.

35   Ibid.

There is no doubt that for religious believers, such as Rowan Williams, articulating this difference is challenging because the usual way to define "difference" is in categorical terms which separate one reality from another; "this" from "that."[36] But the unique difference which is God cannot be distinguished in these categorical terms because to do so would be to impose a distinction of ontological separation on God-world relations. St. Paul puts this idea in existential terms when he says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."[37]

Hegel's conception of the ontological difference between the infinite and the finite shares much in common with St. Paul's existential account of the relation between Christ and the kenotic conception of the self. Like St. Paul, Hegel is aware of the instability and fragility of the self. St. Paul's notion of the "crucified self" in Christ is echoed in Hegel's idea of the finite finding its being in the infinite. Moreover, Hegel shares with St. Paul the conception of the human search for identity as a process in which the true self is discovered through self-emptying. Through self-emptying, relations of mutual recognition are fostered and ultimately for both St. Paul and Hegel true identity is to be found *in* God in whom "we live and move and have our being."[38]

Through experience of one's ontological fragility, one's nothingness, one comes in a certain sense to a "first death," a realisation that there is nothing that one can hold on to. This is disturbing as the whole egocentric grasping of oneself is reduced to nullity in this experience, but it can also be viewed as growing pains. One's identity is transformed as one comes to realise one's "ontological poverty" at the same time as realising God's constitutive relation with us. This manner of con-

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36   The German theologian Karl Rahner speaks of this difference that is established by God who is this difference as an 'infinite horizon' of transcendence. For Rahner, this horizon can never be subsumed 'within our system of coordinates' because it can never be named or defined by separating it from something else. See Karl Rahner, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums* (Herder Verlag, 1976), 70–73.

37   Galatians 2: 20.

38   Acts 17: 28. The concept of kenosis or self-emptying (Entäußerung) is introduced by Hegel in Chapter VI of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the context of the initiation of his discussion of God. Through the sacramental practices of confession and forgiveness, which for Hegel are practices of reciprocal recognition, he sees the movement of the absolute as being actualized in history in ways which correspond to the self-emptying of the Trinity. This closely parallels the kenotic Trinitarian relations of the incarnation described in Paul's Letter to the Philippians 2: 6–11. See Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Felix Meiner, 1988), 439–42.

ceiving of the human condition finds echoes in many traditions which speak in overlapping ways of experiencing one's nothingness as well as one's openness to an infinite horizon which is constitutive of one's true self. Though there are significant differences between these traditions the similarities in reflecting on the human condition are striking and point towards interesting areas of investigation for a philosophical and theological anthropology of religious experience.[39]

This is perhaps a reason why for Hegel, as indeed for Kant, the starting point for discussion of God in the context of his concept of the "true infinite" is not reflection on God, but rather human self-determination.[40] It is through an investigation of the nature of human freedom that Hegel comes to reflect on God. But, unlike Kant, Hegel views this starting point as not simply an inescapable postulate of practical action and morality. Central to Hegel's enquiry of freedom is his concern to avoid separating the finite and the infinite so that the relation with God is not conceived on the basis of anthropology alone, but on the affirmative relation of mutual recognition between the infinite and the finite. Human experience of freedom understood in this way is thus neither one of heteronomy nor of autonomy, but rather an experience of transcendence from within. One experiences oneself as free through the opening out of the non-being of one's finitude to the being of the infinite. Through this opening out one comes to know oneself *in* God as free.

Our experience of love can also display this "immanent-transcendence" as we experience the "sublation" of "being with oneself in another" through an indwelling of the beloved in the lover; the "Christ lives in me" of St. Paul. Through the affirmative self-emptying of love, the finite self is released from the bounds of its enclosed finitude and opened to an infinite horizon of freedom. This account of religious experience develops a philosophy of "immanent-transcendence" which mirrors the Christian account of death (negation), Resurrection (affirmation) and Pentecost ("sublation" in "ethical community"). In its articulation of an ontology of becoming, the categories of "being" and "nothing" are "sublated" in Hegel's account through the dialectical relations of mutual recognition between the finite and the infinite.

Such Hegelian reflections illustrate *one* possible way of understanding how philosophy can be at the service of religious and non-religious dialogue

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39   Peter Hodgson notes that for Hegel, 'God is not *simply* everything but the "All that remains utterly one" and as such is the negativity, not the apotheosis, of the finite. Here Hegel is able to affirm the Buddhist conception of being as emptiness,' Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 269.
40   Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God*, 193.

through providing a language to discuss central issues which arise when one attempts to think seriously about God-world relations. It provides a means through which we can begin to explore some of the most difficult ontological questions that lie at the core of the dialogue between the religious and the non-religious and perhaps enables us to disagree in more interesting ways than has sometimes been the case in the past.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have sketched two issues which have bearing on the potential fruitfulness of religious and non-religious dialogue. The first was the need to develop an epistemology of religious disagreement which allows us to view different approaches to the question of the good life as not *necessarily* based on a knowledge or understanding deficit, but rather on different legitimate approaches to living a fulfilled life. Seeing different positions as existentially anchored helps to avoid a reduction of these matters to being due simply to an epistemological deficit.

Together with this approach, I have also suggested, following Anthony Kenny, that no party should assume that its position is the default one, but rather that each side should provide arguments for their position. Assuming a default position introduces insurmountable asymmetries into the exchange which tends to foreclose the dialogue before it has properly started. This results in one side assuming the role of the intransigent sceptic with respect to an evangelical opponent. Little insight is gained in such encounters because the parties in the *dialogue* (more often than not parallel monologues) are unwilling to adopt a more open approach that allows for the heuristic exploration of options. Understanding religious and non-religious dialogue as anchored in ongoing life projects identifies these dialogues as a part of an existential quest to live a fulfilled life. Whilst these dialogues are served by theoretical argumentation, if they are confined to this level, they assume an inadequately thin account of the nature of the dialogue and indeed of the existential anchoring of rationality in concrete life projects and practices.

The second issue which I have considered has been the ontological one of how God-world relations should be conceived of in human experience. Taking my point of departure for these considerations from a recent dialogue between Raymond Tallis and Rowan Williams, I have discussed Hegel's panentheistic

conception of God-world relations of mutual recognition as a means of exploring a philosophical understanding of experience of God. Rejecting both dualistic and monistic accounts of such experiences, I have argued that Hegel's portrayal of the relations between the finite (world) and the infinite (God) provides a helpful ontological account of how the "difference-in-unity" between God and the world is experienced as transcendence from within. Such a panentheistic account of God-world relations provides a richer philosophical account of what is meant by religious experience in holistic ontological terms and facilitates a dialogue between the religious and the non-religious that is rooted in the life-story of individuals and communities.

In my recent experience, formerly abstract exchanges between the religious and the non-religious are giving way to more interesting and engaged learning processes between these groups. Through the capacity to explore fundamental issues in a philosophical language, philosophy can offer its resources to an area of human enquiry which has vital significance for the future of the planet and the well-being of our species. If, as some consider, we are now entering into a new geological epoch, the so-called "Anthropocene," in which the actions of humans are *the* determining factor for the evolution of the planet, the exploration and understanding of the different ways in which human beings find *ultimate* meaning and regulate their actions will be particularly vital. Religious and philosophical explorations of these fundamental questions have informed one another since humans began to theorise and at this challenging moment of history one can only hope that these great traditions will continue to do their part to serve this dialogue in the future.

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