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## IS HEGEL'S MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC A REFUTATION OF SOLIPSISM?

**Abstract:** This paper considers whether Hegel's master/slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should be considered as a refutation of solipsism. It focuses on a recent and detailed attempt to argue for this sort of reading that has been proposed by Frederick Beiser – but it argues that this reading is unconvincing, both in the historical motivations given for it in the work of Jacobi and Fichte, and as an interpretation of the text itself. An alternative reading of the dialectic is proposed, where it is argued that the central problem Hegel is concerned with is not solipsism, but the sociality of freedom.

There is no need for any vulgar prevarication: I believe that the answer to the question posed in my title is 'no', as an answer to the two ways in which the question could be taken: did Hegel succeed in refuting solipsism in his discussion of the master-slave dialectic in the Self-Consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and related works?<sup>1</sup> and did he intend to so refute solipsism, even if he failed to do so? – where by solipsism I mean the thesis there are no minds other than my own.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this paper will mainly be negative, to show why a positive answer to this question is mistaken, though I will also briefly set out my alternative view of what I think Hegel was trying to do instead.

However, I fully recognize that the temptation to answer 'yes' to this question is strong and seemingly well-motivated, both in terms of the text itself, and its historical background and influences. Not surprisingly, therefore, many commentators have adopted this approach, offering readings that put forward this sort of anti-solipsistic interpretation in greater or lesser detail.<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I will attempt to challenge a recent reading of this sort that has been developed at some length, namely the account proposed by Frederick Beiser. By trying to show where his account goes

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<sup>1</sup> That is, as it appears in the Miller translation of the *Phenomenology*, section B. IV. A.: 'Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Solipsism' is sometimes used to refer to the thesis that nothing exists outside my mind, including not only other people, but also the physical world, space and time, and so on. I am not using solipsism to refer to this broader thesis, which might better be characterised as 'nihilism'. In relation to the discussion below, Fred Beiser generally recognizes this terminological distinction, though sometimes slips into using solipsism to refer to the broader thesis.

<sup>3</sup> As well as Fred Beiser, who will be discussed in detail in what follows, the following sample may be mentioned: Richard Norman, *Hegel's 'Phenomenology': A Philosophical Introduction* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), pp. 46-7; Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 429-55; Leo Rauch 'A Discussion of the Text', in Leo Rauch and David Sherman, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Self-Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 83.

wrong, I hope I will establish that any reading of this sort is likely to be mistaken, and so make room for alternative views.

Beiser's discussion of the master-slave dialectic as an argument against solipsism has two aspects, which I will treat separately: first, a contextual and historical element, which motivates it as an argument against solipsism by drawing on the philosophical background to Hegel's writing of the text, where it is claimed that this background makes solipsism a likely target; and second, an analysis of the text itself, which reads it in anti-solipsistic terms. Against the first suggestion, contrary to Beiser I will argue that nothing in the historical background he identifies should lead us to treat Hegel's concerns as pre-dominantly anti-solipsistic (section I); and against the second, I will challenge his analysis of the text, and the account it provides (sections II and III).

## I

One very interesting aspect of Beiser's anti-solipsistic reading of Hegel is the way in which he argues for this as the likely target of Hegel's concerns – where, as anyone who has read the *Phenomenology* will know, Hegel himself is notoriously guarded about such issues, preferring (albeit arguably for good philosophical reasons), not to signpost his discussion in the usual way.

Beiser's claim is that in the early 1800s, the issue of nihilism became of paramount concern to Hegel and his contemporaries, and that it is nihilism which draws along with it the problem of solipsism and the existence of other minds. While there were perhaps other precursors,<sup>4</sup> Beiser argues that F. H. Jacobi was primarily responsible for making this issue seem pressing and for bringing it to the forefront of philosophical debate:

It was above all Jacobi who made nihilism such a disturbing issue for German philosophy in the early 1800s. After his first assault on reason in the late 1780s, Jacobi pressed home his attack in the late 1790s, now making

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<sup>4</sup> Beiser mentions J. H. Obereit: see Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 27-8. For further discussion, and additional references, see Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 65.

Kant's and Fichte's philosophy his main target. In his 1799 Letter to Fichte he argued that rationalism must end in a complete 'egoism' or solipsism, or what he called 'nihilism' (Nihilismus). According to Jacobi, the nihilist is someone who doubts the existence of everything: the external world, other minds, God, and even his own self. The nihilist follows his own reason to the bitter skeptical end, doubting the existence of anything outside the immediate contents of his own mind. The transcendental idealism of Kant and Fichte end in this abyss, Jacobi argues, because its paradigm of knowledge is that we know only what we create or what we produce according to the laws of our own activity. We are then forced to admit that we know either ourselves or nothing.

Again, Jacobi's polemic proved remarkably successful in disturbing his contemporaries. He made nihilism the inevitable result of Kant's philosophy, and indeed the entire 'way of ideas' of modern philosophy. In Jacobi's usage, the term 'nihilism' already had the connotation later associated with it in the nineteenth century: the Christian's despair that life is meaningless because there is no God, providence or immortality. But Jacobi gave the problem of nihilism a much deeper dimension by connecting it with the classical challenge of skepticism, with the skeptic's thesis that we have no reason to believe in the existence of everything beyond our own passing impressions. He read Hume's closing statement in the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature* as the confession of a nihilist. With Jacobi, then, the problem of nihilism is not only a moral crisis of the Christian's lack of faith; it involves the fundamental skeptical challenge to all our beliefs. It was in this form that Hegel first confronted the problem. We shall see...how he addressed it in the famous 'Lordship and Bondage' chapter of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Beiser, Hegel, pp. 28-9. Cf. also Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 3-4: 'It was in the revival of Hume's skepticism at the end of the eighteenth century that we find the first glimmerings of a problem which was to haunt philosophy towards the end of the nineteenth century: nihilism. As early as the 1780s, nihilism, "that most uncanny of guests," was already knocking at the door. It was F. H. Jacobi who introduced the term "nihilism" (Nihilismus) into modern philosophy. To Jacobi, the paradigm case of the nihilist was someone like Hume at the end of the *Treatise*. The nihilist was a skeptic whose reason told him that he had to doubt the existence of everything – the external world, other minds, God, and even the permanent reality of his own self; the only reality that he could affirm was nothingness itself. In its original sense, then, the word "nihilism" was used to denote the alleged solipsistic

Seen through this reading of Jacobi and this account of his influence, then, Beiser has a compelling story to tell about how Hegel may have felt obliged to refute solipsism in his account of Self-Consciousness. Let me look at this story in a little more detail.

According to Beiser, Jacobi held that philosophical reason<sup>6</sup> must in the end prove self-undermining, as the characteristic philosophical tendency is to question knowledge, until in the end all we think we know is how the world is determined to be by our minds. At this point, we end up with idealism, that is really no more than a kind of scepticism, denying knowledge about or even the existence of a mind-independent world. Faced with this bleak outcome, on Beiser's account, it is then that Hegel takes up the Jacobian challenge of trying to show how we can know more than idealists prior to him had managed to establish,<sup>7</sup> by providing a proper refutation of solipsism, in an attempt to finally silence Jacobi and his radical challenge to philosophy.

In his most extended treatment of Hegel's position as an argument against nihilism in a way that includes an argument against solipsism, Beiser offers two pieces of textual evidence to support his view that it was indeed this epistemological problematic of nihilism that concerned Hegel in writing the *Phenomenology*, in a way that then shaped the *Self-Consciousness* section. Firstly, he cites the Introduction to the *Phenomenology* itself:

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consequences of all rational enquiry and criticism'. Cf. also Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, p. 81: 'Seen from a broader perspective, then, Jacobi's dilemma [of either a rational scepticism or an irrational faith] is a perennial one, as old as philosophy itself. It is the business of philosophy to examine, criticize, and if possible justify our most fundamental principles and beliefs, the principles and beliefs that are the necessary presuppositions of science, religion, morality, and common sense. But in pursuing this task philosophy almost inevitably leads to skepticism: to doubts about induction and freedom, the existence of God, other minds, and the external world'.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobi of course changed his mind about whether to call the culprit here 'reason' or 'understanding', in later writings giving reason a more intuitive, quasi-mystical meaning that made it part of the cure rather than the disease. But I will generally use 'reason' to correspond to the earlier sense, which later came to be called the understanding.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781-1801* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 345: 'For all its problems, Fichte's attempt to solve the problem of other minds remains of interest and importance. Though the technical argument proves weak, it is also suggestive. That the intersubjective order is a normative one, that the radical privacy of the subjectivist tradition is incompatible with the self-consciousness of moral agency, that I become self-conscious only through having a sphere of rights and duties for my freedom – these were ideas at least worthy of later exploration. It is no wonder that Hegel soon followed in Fichte's footsteps'.

No one worried more about nihilism than Hegel himself. The reason for this concern was plain enough. Nihilism seemed to be the inevitable result of epistemology, the very foundation for his new critical metaphysics. Hegel alluded to this very problem in the first paragraph of his Introduction to the *Phenomenology*... Epistemology seemed to show us that the faculty of knowledge is either an instrument or a medium for knowing the truth, so that it appears we cannot know the object in itself, as it exists prior to the application of the instrument or medium. So if the phenomenology affirms epistemology as an immanent critique of consciousness, how does it avoid trapping consciousness inside the circle of appearances?<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, he refers to the 1802 essay *Further Presentation from the System of Philosophy*, which he says Hegel co-authored with Schelling while they were both in Jena, where Beiser argues that from this common starting point over the problem of nihilism, Hegel then went on to criticise Schelling's response to it, and thus to develop an approach of his own:

Hegel's concern with nihilism appears more explicitly in an early treatise he co-authored with Schelling, the 1802 *Further Presentation from the System of Philosophy*. Here Hegel and Schelling, under the influence of Jacobi, pondered Fichte's dilemma at the close of his 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* (*Doctrine of Science*). This dilemma consists in the fact that the Fichtean ego is caught between two impossible extremes: the circle of its own consciousness and an unknowable thing-in-itself. The vocation of the Fichtean ego is infinite striving, a ceaseless struggle to make nature conform to laws of its own activity. In so far as it conquers nature, the ego knows it; but in so far as nature is resistant, it is an unknowable thing-in-itself.<sup>9</sup> The dilemma is the inevitable result, Schelling and Hegel argue, of Fichte's principle of subject-object identity.

It was this dilemma that Schelling and Hegel wanted to overcome with their absolute idealism. But, by 1804, Hegel realized that Schelling did not

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<sup>8</sup> Beiser, Hegel, p. 175.

<sup>9</sup> As a referee has pointed out, Beiser's account is problematic here: for it would appear from this that Fichte is presented not as someone who fails to overcome nihilism, but only as someone who fails to show how we can know the *thing in itself* – which is a very different kind of problem.

have a solution to Jacobi's challenge. Schelling had argued that to attain the standpoint of the absolute – to have insight into reality in itself – it was only necessary to abstract from the subjective. But he never fully explained how such abstraction is possible. This only begged the question against Kant and Fichte, who had insisted that the 'I' is a necessary condition of all knowing. We cannot think away the 'I', they argued, without presupposing it in the very attempt. Hegel's dissatisfaction with Schelling's cavalier treatment of the problem appears in his famous damning lines in the preface to the *Phenomenology*: that Schelling had shot absolute knowledge out of a pistol.<sup>10</sup>

Beiser thus provides us with an intellectual context that appears to make the problem of solipsism a pressing one for Hegel, and evidence from outside the *Self-Consciousness* section which seems to suggest that he would have wanted to resolve it, before going on to offer an interpretation of this section itself along these anti-solipsistic lines.

However, I believe that Beiser is mistaken in the contextual analysis that he provides, and that the evidence he cites to show that this could plausibly have been Hegel's target in the *Phenomenology* is wrongly interpreted. Beiser is doubtless right about some things, principally that Jacobi is a highly significant figure in this period; that the problem of other minds was taken seriously by Fichte; and that Hegel's discussion of *Self-Consciousness* contains some Fichtean elements. But, I think, none of this quite adds up to the story Beiser wants to tell.

#### (i) The influence of Jacobi

Let me start by considering Jacobi and the problem of nihilism.<sup>11</sup> As Beiser interprets it, this is a problem that Hegel inherits from an epistemological principle that Kant and Fichte had seemed to establish, that 'the self knows only its own creations'.<sup>12</sup> He then sees Hegel as responding to it, by showing that the self in fact knows about other minds that are independent of it, thus enabling him to escape the nihilistic consequences that adopting this principle had led to for the other idealists. But I think

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<sup>10</sup> Beiser, *Hegel*, pp. 175-6.

<sup>11</sup> For a general discussion of this issue, see Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, 'Nihilismus als Konsequenz des Idealismus: F. H. Jacobis Kritik der Transzendentalphilosophie und ihre philosophiegeschichtliche Folgen', in Alexander Schwann (ed), *Denken im Schatten des Nihilismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), pp. 113-63.

<sup>12</sup> Beiser, *Hegel*, p. 175.

Beiser's discussion here misses the point that for Jacobi, what primarily drew idealists like Kant and Fichte into treating the world as its own creation and thus 'negating' it was not this epistemological principle, but something else altogether.

For, in my view, the issue that Jacobi took to be fundamental here was not the conception philosophy has of knowledge, but of comprehension, in the sense of having a complete grasp of why things are as they are, with nothing left unexplained. The step to nihilism comes about, Jacobi thinks, because of how such comprehension works according to Jacobi: namely, to comprehend something we must construct it in thought, so that these idealized constructions replace the things we are trying to explain, and hence we lose the reality of a world outside thought, which is then 'annihilated'. In this way, then, realism is replaced by idealism. The following passage, taken from Jacobi's Letters to Fichte (which Beiser himself cites), makes this clear:

All human beings, in so far as they strive for knowledge at all, set that pure philosophy [through which everything outside reason is changed into nothing] as their final end without knowing it. For man knows only in that he comprehends, and he comprehends only in that, by changing the real thing [Sache] into mere shape [Gestalt], he turns the shape into the thing and the thing into nothing.

More distinctly!

We comprehend a thing [Sache] only in so far as we can construct it, i.e. let it arise before us in thoughts, let it become. And in so far as we cannot construct it, or produce it ourselves in thoughts, we do not comprehend it...

So if a being is to become for us a fully comprehended object, we must cancel it in thought as something objective, as standing on its own; we must annihilate it in order to let it become something thoroughly subjective, our own creation, a mere schema. Nothing must remain in it, and constitute an essential part of its concept, which is not our activity, now just a display of our productive imagination.

Thus the human spirit, since its philosophical understanding will simply not reach beyond its own production, must, in order to penetrate into the realm of beings and conquer it with its thought, become world-creator, indeed, its own creator. Only to the extent that it succeeds in this last [task]



will it notice any advance in the other [i.e. the task of being a world-creator]. But it can be even its own creator only under the stated universal condition, viz. it must annihilate itself according to its being so as to arise, to possess itself, in concept alone – in the concept of a pure absolute exodus and return (from nothing, to nothing, for nothing, into nothing); or the concept of a pendulum movement which, since it is a pendulum movement, must, as such, establish limitations for itself in general, though it has determinate limitations only as a particular movement, through an incomprehensible process of limitation.<sup>13</sup>

Beiser is thus right to say, as he does, that for Jacobi what is central to idealism concerns ‘what we create or what we produce according to the law of our activity’;<sup>14</sup> but Jacobi does not make this central because he thinks that this is the idealist’s ‘paradigm of knowledge’<sup>15</sup> according to which this is how knowledge works. Rather, Jacobi thinks that the idealist is committed to this because it is required for comprehension, for the full understanding of why things are as they are. Jacobi makes this clear in a long note from the Doctrine of Spinoza:

We comprehend a thing whenever we can derive it from its proximate causes, or whenever we have insight into the order of its immediate conditions. What we see or derive in this way presents us with a mechanistic context. For instance, we comprehend a circle whenever we clearly know how to represent the mechanics of its formation, or its physics; we comprehend the syllogistic formulas, whenever we have really cognized the laws to which the human understanding is subject in judgment and inference, its physics, its mechanics; or the principle of sufficient reason, whenever we are clear about the becoming or construction of a concept in general, about its physics and mechanics. The construction of a concept as such is the a priori of every construction; and at the same time our insight into its construction allows us to cognize with full certainty that it is not possible for us to comprehend

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<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, ‘Jacobi to Fichte’, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel ‘Allwill’*, translated by George di Giovanni (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), pp. 507-8.

<sup>14</sup> Beiser, Hegel, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

whatever we are not in a position to construct. For this reason we have no concept of qualities as such, but only intuitions or feelings. Even of our own existence, we have only a feeling and no concept. Concepts proper we only have of figure, number, position, movement, and the forms of thought. Whenever we say we have researched a quality, we mean nothing else by that, save that we have reduced it to figure, number, position, and movement. We have resolved it into these, hence we have objectively annihilated the quality. From this we can easily perceive, without further argument, what must in each case be the outcome of the efforts on the part of reason to generate a distinct concept of the possibility of the existence of our world.<sup>16</sup>

Now, I would argue that the consequences of Beiser's mischaracterization of Jacobi's position are significant. For, as we have seen, Beiser takes Jacobian nihilism to be a fundamentally epistemological position, concerning our lack of knowledge of anything outside ourselves, where he writes: 'I use the term "nihilism" in its original sense, as defined by Jacobi in his 1799 Brief an Fichte, where it means doubt about the existence of anything beyond one's own immediate representations'.<sup>17</sup> But, as Jacobi himself presents it here, what reduces the world to nothing for us is not that only what results from the 'activity of the I' can be known; it rather comes about because of the way in which we render the world comprehensible through that activity, by substituting conceptual constructions for real things. For Jacobi, therefore, what leads the idealism to trap the self within the circle of its own creative activity is not that it subscribes to the epistemic principle that we know only what we create, but the way in which it attempts to arrive at a complete explanation of what there is.

If this is correct, then, we can accept that Beiser is right to identify Jacobi as a central figure in this period, and one who had a significant influence on Hegel's conception of the problems faced by philosophy; but we need not agree that this means that in defending idealism against the charge of nihilism, Hegel must have felt

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<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Moses Mendelssohn, in *The Main Philosophical Writings*, pp. 373-4. Cf. also 'The Doctrine of Spinoza', p. 370: 'We appropriate the universe by tearing it apart, and creating a world of pictures, ideas, and words, which is proportionate to our powers, but quite unlike the real one. We understand perfectly what we thus create, to the extent that it is our creation. And whatever does not allow being created in this way, we do not understand. Our philosophical understanding does not reach beyond its own creation'.

<sup>17</sup> Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 642, note 2.

the need to show that we know there are other minds.<sup>18</sup> For, if it is true to say that it is the issue of explanation<sup>19</sup> and not knowledge that is fundamental to Jacobi's critique, then responding to that critique does not require any such demonstration. I would therefore agree with Beiser that Jacobi provides a crucial context to Hegel's discussion; but it does not follow that this must have led him to offer some sort of epistemological proof of the existence of other minds. For, what Hegel really needs to see off the 'spectre of nihilism' is a reply to Jacobi's challenge that in attempting to render the world comprehensible thought annihilates everything beyond it; and this is indeed an issue that I think Hegel deals with elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> Thus, we can endorse Beiser's claim that Jacobi's critical position was a real influence on Hegel, without seeing Hegel as having to respond to it in the way Beiser suggests.

(ii) The influence of Fichte

Nonetheless, Beiser might say, even if I am right that Jacobi's place in all this has been misunderstood, the spectre of solipsism was still there, and Fichte for one thought he had to dispel it;<sup>21</sup> moreover, it can be argued, his attempt to do so in *The Foundations of Natural Right* clearly helped to shape the *Self-Consciousness* section

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<sup>18</sup> Beiser might argue that Hegel must have felt the need to show that philosophy can successfully prove there are other minds, as Jacobi also argued that it is the attempt by philosophy to come up with proofs for what the senses and rational intuition tell us that leads to subjectivism and nihilism (see, for example, David Hume on Faith, or *Idealism and Realism a Dialogue*, p. 583); a convincing proof would therefore show that Jacobi is wrong on that score. But, as Kenneth Westphal has made clear, in many ways Hegel himself was opposed to the prioritising of deductive scientia as a model of knowledge precisely because it often cannot be provided and so can make scepticism seem inevitable: see e.g. Kenneth R Westphal, 'Mutual Recognition and Rational Justification in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*', *Dialogue* (forthcoming, 2009); 'Self-Consciousness, Anti-Cartesianism and Cognitive Semantics in Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology*', in Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hegel* (forthcoming, 2009); and 'Urteilkraft, gegenseitige Anerkennung und rationale Rechtfertigung', in: H.-D. Klein (ed.), 'Ethik als prima philosophia?' (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010). So, notwithstanding their other important differences and disagreements, on this issue Hegel can be shown to be on Jacobi's side.

<sup>19</sup> Beiser sees clearly that this was of concern to Jacobi; but he associates it only with Jacobi's attack on Spinozean materialism, atheism and determinism, not the issue of idealism and nihilism. See e.g. Beiser, *Hegel*, pp. 25-7. For an account that makes the connection more in the manner I suggest here, see Paul Franks, 'All or Nothing: Systematicity and Nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold, and Maimon', in Karl Ameriks (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 95-116, esp. pp. 97-99.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion of this sort of issue, see my *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. Chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>21</sup> I will leave aside the more general issue, of whether even Fichte was concerned with the sort of epistemological project that Beiser associates with the response to nihilism. For doubts on this score, see Wayne Martin, *Idealism and Objectivity: Understanding Fichte's Jena Project* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 14-18, to which Beiser briefly responds in his *German Idealism*, p. 647 note 31.

of the Phenomenology, so (it could be said) this provides all the context Beiser's reading needs, even if we leave Jacobi out of the picture.<sup>22</sup>

Now, again, I would not deny that Beiser is right about something here, namely that Fichte was concerned with the problem of other minds, and that Fichte's discussion of it in *The Foundations of Natural Right* had a significant influence on Hegel. But, once more, I am not convinced that putting these points together is enough to make Beiser's case. Put briefly, my thought here is this: We may see Fichte's discussion in the *Naturrecht* as having two main phases, the first of which is the transcendental argument for other subjects via the notion of the summons, and the second of which is the argument for the mutuality of recognition between subjects; my claim will then be that it is the second phase of the argument but not the first that is taken up by Hegel, where this can be given significance for him independently of the problem of other minds. Let me spell this out in a little more detail.

Fichte's concern with the problem of other minds is well-known and well-attested.<sup>23</sup> His approach to the problem is to adopt a Kantian, transcendental strategy of starting from the conditions of self-awareness, arguing that it is a condition of my self-awareness that I am aware of another subject. Fichte bases this claim on the concept of the summons, arguing that I first see myself as a rational being when I see another subject as summoning me to free activity, in wanting me to do something and hence as recognizing me as a free agent. As Fichte puts it:

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 340: 'Fichte's systematic and mature position on the problem of other minds is developed in the first main section of his later 1796 work *Grundlage des Naturrechts*. For its clarity of exposition, rigor of argument, and boldness of conception, this text remains one of Fichte's best. Though it has been little studied outside the context of political philosophy, it is indeed one of the central works of German idealism. Nowhere else in the modern tradition is the problem of other minds made so central, and nowhere else is the case for an intersubjective normative order made so well. The text is of considerable historical significance because it marks a clear break with the privacy of the subjectivist tradition. On point after point Fichte's argument anticipates Hegel's later position in the famous "Herrschaft und Knechtschaft" section of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.'

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the following passage from a lecture given at Jena in 1794: 'Among the questions which philosophy has to answer we find the following two in particular, which have to be answered before, among other things, a well founded theory of natural rights is possible. First of all, by what right does a man call a particular portion of the physical world "his body"? How does he come to consider this to be his body, something which belongs to his I, since it is nevertheless something completely opposed to his I? And then the second question: How does a man come to assume that there are rational beings like himself apart from him? And how does he come to recognise them, since they are certainly not immediately present to his pure self-consciousness?' (J. G. Fichte, 'Some Lectures Concerning the Vocation of a Scholar', in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans and ed D. Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 153; *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (henceforth FGA), eds Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob et al. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstat: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1964 - ), I, 3: 34). For a very helpful discussion of Fichte's views on this issue, see Paul Franks, 'The Discovery of the Other: Cavell, Fichte, and Skepticism', *Common Knowledge*, 5 (1996), pp. 72-105.

What was supposed to be demonstrated has now been demonstrated[:]... [T]he rational being cannot posit itself as such, except in response to a summons calling upon it to act freely. But if there is such a summons, then the rational being must necessarily posit a rational being outside itself as the cause of the summons, and thus it must posit a rational being outside itself in general... The human being (like all finite beings in general) becomes a human being only among human beings; and since the human being can be nothing other than a human being and would not exist at all if it were not this – it follows that, if there are to be human beings at all, there must be more than one. This is not an opinion that has been adopted arbitrarily, or based on previous experience or on other probable grounds; rather, it is a truth that can be rigorously demonstrated from the concept of the human being. As soon as one fully determines this concept, one is driven from the thought of an individual human being to the assumption of a second one, in order to be able to explain the first. Thus the concept of a human being is not the concept of an individual – for an individual human being is unthinkable – but rather the concept of a species.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, it seems quite correct to say that Fichte is concerned with just the kind of sceptical opponent identified by Beiser, which this argument (if it could be made to work) would refute in just the way that such transcendental projects normally suppose: namely, starting from a position the sceptic would be expected to accept (namely that he is a self-conscious subject), it is proved a priori (in a way not ‘based on previous experience or on other probable grounds’, but ‘from the concept of a human being’) that other minds exist.

Fichte then goes on from the proof of this ‘Second Theorem’, that the finite rational being must presuppose the existence of other finite rational beings outside itself, to the ‘Third Theorem’: ‘The finite rational being cannot assume the existence of other finite rational beings outside it without positing itself as standing with those beings in a particular relation, called a relation of right [Rechtsverhältnis]’.<sup>25</sup> Here,

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<sup>24</sup> J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, edited by Frederick Neuhouser, translated by Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 37-8.

<sup>25</sup> Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, p. 39.

then, Fichte is trying to move from the problem of other minds to the problem of law [Recht], and in particular the question of why subjects should limit their capacities for action in the face of other people.

Fichte does not address this problem from the perspective of the summoner, which is understandable: for, as Fichte has set things up, the summoner has already accepted the freedom of the summoinee to act, because the summons he utters is one to free action. The problem, however, arises with the summoinee: for, having been awakened to freedom (so to speak), why should he not then use this to do as he wants, regardless of the existence of the summoner, not to mention all other rational subjects?

As I understand it, the answer Fichte gives, is to say that the summoinee is awakened to freedom as an individual, and as an individual, he must see himself as distinct from other subjects, where this means having a sphere of activity that differs from theirs; but then, this is to grant them their own sphere of activity, and thus their freedom from interference, as well as to grant that they possess free will, as the former would make no sense without the latter.<sup>26</sup> It turns out, then, that the summoner has nothing to fear: in recognizing the freedom of the other, the other will end up having to recognize its freedom, so that the recognition of freedom must always be mutual, so that the ‘relation of right’ is hereby established.

Now, my suggestion is that once we see Fichte’s argument as having two steps in this way – the argument for other minds based on the summons, and the argument for reciprocal recognition based on the difference between individuals – we can see how it is possible to agree that Hegel might have been influenced by Fichte’s work in the Foundations of Natural Right, but by the second step and not the first, where it is the argument for mutual recognition between free agents that is crucial, not the argument for other minds. Of course, if we have some reason to believe that Hegel was indeed concerned with the latter question in the same way as Fichte, then that may suggest that the first step in Fichte’s argument also had a role to play in shaping Hegel’s position; and Beiser thinks we do have such a reason, where it is this which we will now also dispute.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Fichte, Foundations of Natural Right, p.41: ‘The subject determines itself as an individual, and as a free individual, by means of the sphere within which it has chosen one from among all the possible actions given within that sphere; and it posits, in opposition to itself, another individual outside of itself that is determined by means of another sphere within which it has chosen. Thus the subject posits both spheres at the same time, and only though such positing is the required opposition possible.’

(iii) *Evidence for Hegel's concern with the problem of other minds*

As we have seen, Beiser thinks he has evidence to show that Hegel himself was deeply concerned with the problem of other minds, whatever one thinks about Jacobi or Fichte as influences upon him in this respect.

The first piece of evidence Beiser cites is the opening paragraph of the Introduction to the Phenomenology, which Beiser takes to show that ‘no one was more worried about nihilism than Hegel himself’,<sup>27</sup> where as we have discussed at the start of Section I, Beiser directly connects nihilism with the problem of other minds (amongst others). Beiser takes Hegel’s concern to arise from the very nature of his epistemological project, which threatens to end up ‘trapping consciousness inside the circle of appearances’ in so far as the faculty of cognition may then end up being treated as an instrument or medium standing between the subject and the world.<sup>28</sup>

However, I believe that Beiser places too much weight on this text, and that far from showing that Hegel had a deep concern with this issue, it in fact suggests that he took the problem that might seem to generate the fear of nihilism, and hence of knowing nothing about other minds, to be pretty superficial, and thus as easy to dismiss. For, having suggested that the instrument or medium model of cognition may lead to ‘the conviction that the whole project of securing for consciousness through cognition what exists in itself is absurd’,<sup>29</sup> Hegel immediately and brusquely states that we can and should abandon the model and the assumption that goes with it, namely that ‘before we start to deal with [philosophy’s] proper subject-matter, viz, the actual cognition of what truly is, one must first of all come to an understanding about cognition, which is regarded either as the instrument to get hold of the Absolute, or as the medium through which one discovers it’.<sup>30</sup> Hegel’s argument is that the motivation for this assumption is deeply flawed, namely that unless we carry out this investigation, ‘we might grasp clouds of error instead of the heaven of truth’,<sup>31</sup> to which Hegel responds: ‘Should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is

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<sup>27</sup> Beiser, Hegel, p. 175.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 46 (Werke in zwanzig Bänden, edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols and index (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969-71), III: 68).

<sup>30</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 46 (Werke III: 68).

<sup>31</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 46 (Werke III: 68).

not just error itself?',<sup>32</sup> based on an empty and groundless doubt? Thus, he argues we should not begin our inquiries with this doubt, as so far we have no evidence to substantiate it, and thus no need to turn to the kind of reflective inquiry that leads to the instrument or medium model in the first place; rather, we should simply get on with our inquiries, and leave the investigation of our cognitive capacities to one side, and with it the fear that we might in fact be cut off from the world. I see no evidence here, therefore, that Hegel believed that epistemology must inevitably generate a problem of nihilism and hence of other minds, to which some proof of their existence is then needed as a response; rather, he seems to have thought that the problem is generated by an empty and flawed view of epistemology, one gripped by a shallow Cartesianism, which can be pretty easily dismissed.<sup>33</sup> Of course, Hegel does then go on to point to what he takes to be a much more substantial issue, which is that genuine disagreements between inquirers in fact exist, and thus that these disagreements need to be resolved without recourse to dogmatism, where it is this problem that leads him to conception of immanent critique.<sup>34</sup> But none of this suggests that he ever took particularly seriously the epistemological problematic which leads to the instrument or medium model, and thus that he was troubled by the worry that we might be 'trapped...inside the circle of appearances', at least as far as the Introduction to the Phenomenology is concerned.

However, Beiser also refers to another text to support his claim that Hegel was concerned about the problem of other minds, namely the earlier 'Further Presentation from the System of Philosophy', which he says Hegel co-authored with Schelling in 1802, and which appeared in the *Neue Zeitschrift für speculative Physik*. As far as I can tell, however, Beiser is alone in claiming that this text should be attributed to Hegel in any significant way. Of course, during this period when both were working

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<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 47 (*Werke III*: 69).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), §10, p. 34 (*Werke VIII*: 54): '...the investigation of cognition cannot take place in any other way than cognitively; in the case of this so-called tool, the "investigation" of it means nothing but the cognition of it. But to want to have cognition before we have any is as absurd as the wise resolution of Scholasticus to learn to swim before he ventured into the water'. For further discussion of Hegel's position here, see my 'Hegel and Pragmatism', in Michael Baur and Stephen Houlgate (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Hegel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), forthcoming; a longer version of this article can be found in my *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 209-38.

<sup>34</sup> This transition comes in the middle of the long paragraph on p. 48 (*Werke III*: 71), beginning with 'But Science, just because it comes on the scene...', where Hegel allows that he cannot simply take for granted that what he believes to be the right account of the world in philosophical terms ('Science') will simply be accepted by everyone, and so he needs a way of establishing that viewpoint which is not merely dogmatic.



together closely, the question of influence cannot be discounted entirely; but the editors of the various editions of their work, as well as everyone else who has commented on it, seem to be unanimous in crediting Schelling with authorship here rather than Hegel; and as I have no reason not to go along with that general view, I propose not to discuss this text any further.<sup>35</sup>

## II

We have seen, therefore, that despite being initially plausible, Beiser's attempts to make out that Hegel would have seen the problem of other minds as a pressing issue, are on closer inspection rather flawed. However, it might reasonably be said that this is of tangential concern: what really matters is the text of the Self-Consciousness section itself, and how this should be read. If Beiser can supply a convincing and philosophically rich account of this section along the lines he suggests, then perhaps this is all he needs to clinch his case.

My aim in this part of the paper, therefore, is to probe Beiser's account of the Self-Consciousness section itself, and to reveal the flaws in this account, both as a philosophically compelling position, and as an interpretation with adequate textual support. Here, then, I want to begin by looking in more detail than we have so far at the way in which Beiser interprets the Self-Consciousness section, before going on to criticise the reading that he offers.

Beiser's conception of Hegel's argument in this section of the *Phenomenology* is outlined by him as follows:

It is here that Hegel attempts to break outside the circle of consciousness, leading the self to its intersubjective self-awareness as spirit. The essence of Hegel's strategy is simple. He argues that self-knowledge as a rational being is

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<sup>35</sup> Italo Testa has pointed out to me that there are perhaps some other passages in Hegel's other early Jena writings that may be associated with the problem of solipsism, where he has mentioned Fragment 20 of the *Realphilosophie* 1803/4 (G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol 6, edited by Klaus Düsing and Heinz Kimmerle (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1971), p. 296), and the *Logik, Metaphysik, Naturphilosophie* 1804/5 (*Gesammelte Werke*, vol 7, edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Johann Henrich Trede), pp. 142-50. However, while these passages are in some ways suggestive, I do not think they are significant enough in themselves to indicate that we should interpret Hegel's later writings in the light of them, given the problems with such readings that I highlight below.

possible only through mutual recognition; in other words, the self knows itself as a rational being only if it grants to the other the same status it would have the other grant to itself. This common structure of self-awareness in mutual recognition – that the self knows itself through the other as the other knows itself through the self – Hegel calls ‘spirit’ (Geist).

The central target of Hegel’s argument is the claim that there is a privileged realm of subjectivity where the self knows itself independent of others and the world outside itself. Against the Cartesian tradition, Hegel contends that the self knows itself to be a rational being only if it recognizes the equal and independent reality of others, and only if the others recognize its own equal and independent reality. Without the recognition of others the self cannot prove its claim to be a rational being, and so it cannot know itself as rational. Hegel does not deny that the self might be conscious of itself without recognizing the equal and independent reality of others; but he does claim that it could not know itself without such recognition. Here knowledge is used in the strong sense of a claim that would have to be tested and proved through experience.<sup>36</sup>

As applied to the text, Beiser sees Hegel as carrying out this strategy in the following way: Beginning with desire as the most basic form of self-consciousness, where ‘the ego knows itself only as a sensible being with animal desires, not as a rational being with a will’,<sup>37</sup> Hegel shows how the ego faces the problem on the one hand of wanting to negate its object in order to establish its dominion,<sup>38</sup> but on the other being unable to escape the resurgence of desire, as without another object to destroy it cannot demonstrate its capacity to negate.<sup>39</sup> Instead of attempting to establish its independence by destroying objects through desire, therefore, the ego then attempts to wrest recognition from others in a one-sided way, because this one-sided recognition would mean the other could be negated without having to be destroyed. This then leads to a life-and-death-struggle, out of which the relation of

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<sup>36</sup> Beiser, Hegel, pp. 176-7.

<sup>37</sup> Beiser, Hegel, p. 181.

<sup>38</sup> According to Beiser, this drive to prove its ‘absolute independence’ builds on the material in the previous chapter on Consciousness, from which consciousness has come to hold that ‘its knowledge of an object is simply an externalization of self-knowledge’ (p. 179), but where it now seems to face things that are independent of it, whose independence it now needs to negate.

<sup>39</sup> Beiser, Hegel, p. 182.

mastership and servitude emerges, as one side gives up the struggle. In this one-sided relationship, however, the master realises he cannot be satisfied, so that in the end he sees that he ‘proves his rationality [only] when he fully recognizes the equal and independent reality of the slave’, in a way that overcomes the spectre of solipsism:

This experience brings the dialectic to its conclusion. The self knows that it is rational because another rational being recognizes its autonomy. But it also knows that it is rational because it recognizes the autonomy of another rational being. In other words, the self knows that it is rational only through mutual recognition. This is nothing less than its self-awareness as spirit, though, since spirit is that unifying act of self-awareness that arises from the mutual recognition between free rational beings...

Now the nihilist takes his final step outside the darkness of the circle of consciousness and into the broad daylight of reality. If, on the stage of desire, he acknowledges the reality of an external object, and if on the stage of the life/death struggle he grants that there is another living being, now after the master/slave dialectic he recognizes the equal and independent reality of another rational being. He finally admits that he is not the only self-conscious being, but that there is another such being. The self acknowledges that the other is not simply its own representations because it sees that the other is outside its conscious control. It cannot consume the other, as if it were an inanimate object; and it cannot treat it as a means to satisfy its desires, as if it were a slave. Rather, it admits that the other is outside its conscious control because it is an end in itself, a being that has a right to live according to its own self-appointed ends, even if they do not agree with the self’s own ends. So, for Hegel, to recognize another rational being as an end in itself is the refutation of nihilism. By such recognition, the solipsist has to concede that not all reality is within its conscious control, and that there is another rational being having equal status to itself.<sup>40</sup>

This, then, achieves the goal of overcoming the problem of other minds, as Beiser sees it.

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<sup>40</sup> Beiser, Hegel, pp. 190-1.

Having presented Beiser's account of the text, I now want to raise some difficulties for it. A first difficulty, I will argue, is that if we take Hegel's target to be solipsism, it is hard to see why the argument isn't over before Beiser says it is, leaving the master/slave dialectic to do little or no work; and a second worry, I will suggest, is that it is difficult to be optimistic about the argument Beiser presents really succeeding in refuting the sceptic, so that principles of hermeneutic charity should lead us to question his account. Both of these problems are in fact mentioned by Beiser, but I do not think he does enough to address them.

The first difficulty is highlighted by Beiser when he points out that Hegel seems to introduce other subjects into the dialectic as a solution to the problem of desire, because subjects can be self-negating in a way that objects cannot; by introducing such subjects, therefore, Self-Consciousness can escape the regress of destruction exemplified by desire, while also ensuring that what lies outside it can be controlled, as the other self can be brought to negate its independence from the subject by offering it total obedience. So, if Hegel's aim is to show that the subject must posit the existence of other minds outside itself, why isn't that goal achieved here, making the rest of the Self-Consciousness section unnecessary?

Beiser's response to this difficulty is as follows:

The need for recognition already seems to presuppose the existence of other rational beings. It is important to see, however, that, at this stage of the argument, the self has still not granted the equal and independent existence of the other. It does not demand recognition from another rational agent that it believes stands on the same footing as itself. What it seeks in its demand for recognition is that the other, whatever it might be, obeys its commands, or at the very least that it not interfere with its activity. For all the self knows at this stage, the other could still be a robot or an animal.<sup>41</sup>

Now, in one way, Beiser is of course right: the self has not yet granted 'the equal and independent existence of the other', in the sense of allowing it equal moral status to itself, or allowing it to be free, as it merely seeks to dominate the other and make it subservient to its will; but it is not clear why such an admission of moral equality is

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<sup>41</sup> Beiser, Hegel, pp. 186-7.

needed to refute the solipsist, where all that seems to be required is that the sceptic allow that there are other subjects beside himself, with minds, feelings, thoughts and so on, and it is not clear why Hegel has not already established that, and thus done all that a refutation of solipsism properly requires.

Beiser might respond, however, by agreeing that a refutation of solipsism does not require a proof of moral equality between subjects as such, but that still the argument presented so far falls short of showing that there are other minds with thoughts, feelings etc: for, to overcome the dialectic of desire (Beiser could say), all the subject needs to do is posit beings that are able to conform to its will, and for this it is sufficient to posit robots or animals, so that the existence of other minds has yet to be established.

However, this may seem to underestimate what Hegel took the dialectic of desire to show, and what he takes the move to the next stage to involve: for, he appears to think that this next stage introduces the idea of subjects as self-negating entities, in a way that objects are not, where it is implausible to suggest that a robot or animal could be self-negating in this way, even if it did whatever I commanded it to do:

On account of the independence of the object, therefore, [self-consciousness] can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it is. Since the object is in its own self negation, and being so is at the same time independent, it is consciousness. In the sphere of Life, which is the object of Desire, negation is present either in an other, viz in Desire, or as a determinateness opposed to another indifferent form, or as the inorganic universal nature of Life. But this universal independent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, is the genus as such, or the genus as self-consciousness. Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

Hegel appears to suggest here, that the other self which the subject introduces at this point must both be aware of itself and subordinate its self to the subject, as only in this

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<sup>42</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 109-10 (Werke III: 144).

way does the subject achieve the satisfaction of overcoming its otherness; but then, it looks very unlikely that a robot or animal could have the kind of awareness of self that is required in order for Hegel to count this kind of obedience as self-negation – for while a robot might do everything I tell it to, or a dog obey my every command, both lack an adequate level of self-awareness for this to count as my hereby getting them to negate their selfhoods. It appears, then, that the subjects Hegel has introduced at this stage must be more than mere robots or animals, in a way that would render the rest of the text redundant as a proof for the existence of other minds.

Beiser has a way of responding to this worry, however. For, he realises that others who have shared his concern with solipsism have often taken the argument to be over at this point;<sup>43</sup> but he accuses them of confusing what Hegel is pointing out from the perspective of the philosophical observer, and what Self-Consciousness itself has grasped.<sup>44</sup> Thus, he argues, while the philosophical observer talks about the self-negating subject as overcoming the dialectic of desire, Self-Consciousness itself thinks it can get satisfaction if it can simply make the living things outside it do what it wants, as one might get a dog to collect dead birds on a hunt, or a horse to ride as one commands, for in this way one can establish one's control over the world, where this simpler notion of control doesn't have to involve any element of self-negation (to see a dog as doing what one wants, one doesn't have to think its own selfhood is negated in so doing).

However, even if Beiser is right about this, it is still not clear how he can prevent the argument against solipsism from ending prematurely, before the conclusion of the master/slave dialectic. For, why won't finding itself in the life-and-death-struggle be enough to show Self-Consciousness that there are other subjects, for isn't it only subjects that would be prepared to engage in such a struggle? Why isn't this sufficient to show the subject who experiences it, that the resistance of other conscious beings to one's will comes from the fact that they are minds, just as this is the source of one's resistance to them? Beiser seems to suggest that it is only the

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<sup>43</sup> See Beiser, Hegel, p. 327, note 14, where he refers to Ivan Soll, *An Introduction to Hegel's Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 15-16, and J. N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 96-7 (though I think this should be pp. 94-5).

<sup>44</sup> See Beiser, Hegel, p. 187: 'To be sure, Hegel has already introduced other rational persons into his argument in chapter IV [in the passage we have been discussing]. But, again, this was only from the standpoint of the philosopher; the self now has to discover from its own experience in IVA what the philosopher has already known in IV. Failure to note the precise status of Hegel's argument in IV has blinded some from seeing the argument against solipsism in IVA, since it seems as if Hegel already presupposes the existence of other minds'.

moral subject, who comes to see that he ought not to subject others to his control, who finally admits that there are other minds; but why isn't the subject who finds his control thwarted by others made just as aware of the existence of other selves?

Beiser might say, however, along the lines of his earlier response, that a subject could find itself in a life-and-death-struggle with an animal or a robot, so that as before we have not yet reached the conclusion of an argument for other minds; or, as previously, he might say that while it is clear to us as philosophical observers that Self-Consciousness is engaged in a life-and-death-struggle, this is not yet clear to Self-Consciousness itself, which may believe it is engaged simply with a creature that resists its will, where this could be an animal or a robot.

However, given the way Hegel characterises the situation in the life-and-death-struggle, I believe neither of these responses are really available to Beiser. For, Hegel is explicit that the subject sees the struggle as a way of proving to the other than he is free, by being prepared to risk his life;<sup>45</sup> but such a demonstration would be pointless if the other were seen as a robot or an animal, and not a mind. Likewise, the subject could not see the other as also risking his life, if the subject thought the conflict came about simply through the clash of desires, rather than as an attempt to secure freedom from domination, where the latter is also something that cannot be attributed to a robot or an animal (if a dog does not do what I want, this is not because it is trying to assert its freedom, but because it wants to do something contrary to what I want it to do, so that everything takes place on the level of desire, not the life-and-death-struggle). As Hegel sets things up, therefore, while I might find myself in a clash of wills with a robot or an animal, and while that might mean that one or other of us ends up dead (I want water from this pool, and so does the lion, for example), this is not the same as the life-and-death-struggle as Hegel conceives it, where this involves the staking of life in a combat with another who is seen by the subject as consciously attempting to limit its recognition, where the freedom of the subject is demonstrated to itself and to the other by its refusal to submit; but to see the other as opposed to me in this way, I must attribute mentality to the other, as no robot or animal that lacked selfhood could be seen as setting out to limit my recognition in this

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<sup>45</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 114 (Werke III: 149): 'And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure being-for-self. The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a person, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness'.

manner (the lion might frustrate my desires in exercising his, but he is not deliberately setting out to limit my recognition in so doing, or in so doing trying to demonstrate his freedom to me, which is what Hegel thinks is going on in the life-and-death-struggle).

It turns out, then, that if Beiser chooses to interpret the text in the Self-Consciousness section as targeted at the refutation of solipsism, then the argument does not carry through as far as he claims, and it is hard to see why Hegel would think the master/slave dialectic is needed for this purpose – which suggests, of course, that Hegel intended to be doing something else with this text.

However, even if we grant to Beiser that the argument does have to run through to the outcome of the master/slave dialectic, his account now faces a second difficulty, which is also one that he acknowledges, but which again I think he fails to address properly. This difficulty concerns the strength of the conclusion of the argument, taken as a refutation of solipsism. For, on Beiser's account as we have seen, the argument is supposed to show that in order to think of himself as free and rational, the subject must grant a certain moral status to others in a way which involves treating them as free and rational like itself, and thus yielding the conclusion that the subject cannot consistently hold on to his sense of self while treating others merely as animals, robots or slaves. This is because, Beiser argues, to see itself as a rational agent, the subject must see itself as a moral agent capable of obeying moral laws and treating others as ends, and the subject could not do this if it did not grant the freedom and equality of others.<sup>46</sup>

But this then may seem to lumber Hegel with what is widely seen as the fundamental weakness of transcendental arguments of this kind, namely that while they may be belief-directed in showing that some belief about the world (such as that there are other subjects) is required as a presupposition for some other belief the sceptic holds (such as that he is a rational subject), this does not show that the former belief is in fact true, and thus that we have established hereby anything about how things are; for this, it would seem, we would need a world-directed transcendental argument, that showed that certain facts about reality must obtain in order to make the

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Beiser, Hegel, p. 190.



latter belief possible, but such arguments are notoriously hard to construct convincingly.<sup>47</sup>

Now, Beiser is aware of this worry, and responds as follows:

It is important to be clear about the precise status and limits of Hegel's argument. All that he has established is that a rational being ought to recognize the equal and independent reality of others, or that the self should give the same status to others as it would have them give to itself. In the end, this is more a moral than a metaphysical refutation of nihilism. The radical nihilist might object that it is still possible for the other to be an automaton. Even though I have to recognize its equal status to myself – even though I am obliged to treat it as I would have it treat me – it is still possible that it is not really equal. Hegel would have to accept this point. But his main objection to it would be that it is impossible to live according to such nihilism. Even if we forever doubt the reality of the other, we still cannot act on those doubts. We have to grant it equal and independent reality to ourselves; for only then do we confirm our own status as free and rational beings.<sup>48</sup>

Responses of this sort are common in the literature on transcendental arguments, and the general issues they raise cannot be entered into fully here.<sup>49</sup> But two specific worries can be raised.

First of all, if the response Beiser offers is in effect that, while the existence of other minds hasn't really been proved, it has been shown that the sceptic cannot 'live' his scepticism as he must be committed to thinking such minds in fact exist, then this seems an odd response to the kind of target Beiser sets up at the beginning. For, that target was supposed to be a form of Humean scepticism taken over by Jacobi, which is generally characterised as conceding precisely that sceptical doubts cannot be 'lived' and that as soon as we leave the study they melt away<sup>50</sup> – but in this

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<sup>47</sup> For further discussion of this issue, see my *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), especially pp. 1-65.

<sup>48</sup> Beiser, *Hegel*, p. 191.

<sup>49</sup> For further discussion, see Robert Stern (ed), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Book I, Part IV, Section VII, p. 269: 'Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of

concession there is a sceptical pill,<sup>51</sup> namely that reason is what leads us into these doubts, which must therefore be abandoned as misleading. Now, it is hard to see how Beiser's version of Hegel's argument really improves on this position, as in fact it turns out to be a re-statement of it: namely, while reason fails to find a proper epistemic support for these beliefs, we cannot live by doubting them, so that in this sense our reason is shown to be idle along with the doubts it generates. But it seems to me that a Humean like Jacobi could have said exactly the same, without needing any sort of transcendental argument to convince him of it, and also without thinking this does much to undermine the fundamental anti-rationalist claim he wanted to make.

Secondly, even if we grant Beiser's point, that to refute the solipsist he does not have to prove the existence of other minds, but just show that in practice the solipsist cannot 'live' his doubts about them, it is still not clear that even this more limited target has been hit by Beiser. For, all he seems to have established by his 'moral' argument is that a subject could not really claim to be a rational unless it got to the stage of limiting its desire and seeing itself as standing under universalisable ethical principles,<sup>52</sup> and it could not do that unless it had grasped the idea of others having ends or of the moral equality between people. But all this seems to show is that the idea of a solipsist who lacked the concept of other people is problematic, as such as a subject could not grasp the kind of Kantian moral perspective which Beiser thinks is necessary to establishing oneself as a subject. But, of course, the solipsist does have such a concept; he just doubts whether it can ever be justifiably applied to the things around him. And it would seem too strong to counter, as Beiser might, that one cannot possess this concept if one always draws back from applying it, so that in the end the solipsist is somehow forced to attribute personhood to others for this reason; for, clearly, there are many concepts we possess that we may not think we have ever yet had occasion to properly attribute to anything in our experience. We might, rather, argue against the solipsist that because the way this concept works, his

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mind, or by some avocation and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther'.

<sup>51</sup> It is of course a matter of much dispute how far Hume intended his position here to be sceptical, or instead to be a defence of a non-sceptical naturalism (see, for example, Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977)). But as Beiser himself emphasises, it is the sceptical side of Hume that was significant to Jacobi and others in this period, as a basis for their anti-naturalism.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Beiser, Hegel, p. 190: '...the master proves his rationality when he finally recognizes the equal and independent reality of the slave. If he does this, that shows that he acts according to universal laws that grant someone else the same rights as himself'.

criteria for applying the concept are misconceived, and that mentality can justifiably be applied to others on the basis of the experience he has of them;<sup>53</sup> but that is to take a line with the solipsist that Beiser does not seem to attribute to Hegel, and which his ‘moral’ transcendental argument does not seem to fit.

It might be said, however, that Beiser rather sells himself short here, and does not do full justice to the resources of this sort of reading. For, the weakness of his conclusion arguably comes from the way in which he sees the case against solipsism working, in a belief-directed rather than world-directed manner, by showing that we must take there to be others that are equal and free like ourselves, even if perhaps there are not. However, if we modelled Hegel’s position on something more like Fichte’s, it may seem that we could make the argument more world-directed. For, as we have seen, Fichte can be read as claiming that the existence of other minds is a necessary condition for self-consciousness, as without such minds there would be no summons, so that ‘[t]he human being (like all finite beings in general) becomes a human being only among human beings’.<sup>54</sup> This position seems stronger than Beiser’s, because nothing here turns on whether the sceptic can ‘live’ his doubts; rather, it appears that his doubts are simply refuted, by proving that a fact about the world (viz the existence of other minds) is a necessary condition for his own self-consciousness. Now, Hegel could perhaps be read in a similar way, namely as saying that unless other minds existed equal to my own, I could not possibly have become the kind of self-consciousness that I am, able to get beyond the standpoint of desire, to live peaceably with others, and to treat them as my equals.

While perhaps more satisfying as a refutation of solipsism than Beiser’s approach, this more Fichtean argument faces difficulties, however.<sup>55</sup> The first is a difficulty that arguably afflicts Fichte’s own position, namely that it either leads to a regress, or begs the question.<sup>56</sup> For, the obvious worry here is that if being summoned

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. [reference deleted for refereeing], and also Anita Avramides, *Other Minds* (London: Routledge, 2001), especially pp. 217-53.

<sup>54</sup> Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, p. 37.

<sup>55</sup> I am leaving aside any controversy about whether Fichte’s own position should be interpreted in this world-directed rather than belief-directed manner (where Fichte’s talk of ‘positing’ may in fact suggest the latter as much as the former). Cf. Beiser, *German Idealism*, p. 345: ‘[Fichte’s] argument also suffers from serious ambiguities. Sometimes Fichte seems to aim for the strong conclusion that I really know that there is someone outside me who is a rational being like myself; but at other times he appears content with the weaker conclusion that we ought to assume that there is such a being.’

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Klaus Brinkmann, ‘The Deduction of Intersubjectivity in Fichte’s *Grundlage des Naturrechts*’, in Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (eds), *New Essays on Fichte’s Later Jena ‘Wissenschaftslehre’* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 5-17.

by another self-consciousness is indeed a necessary condition for becoming self-conscious, then how did the first self-consciousness emerge? Fichte himself is fully aware of this problem, and answers it in a manner that few have found satisfactory, namely by treating God as a kind of first summoner.<sup>57</sup> But even if one did find this satisfactory in Fichte, there is no evidence that Hegel himself offered a solution to this difficulty at all, making it hard to see how the argument could be made to work in Hegelian terms, and so suggesting that this was not the way in which he intended his position to be taken.

A second difficulty concerns the argument itself: for, if we take solipsistic worries at all seriously, it is not clear that the Fichtean argument can settle them. Thus, on the one hand, Beiser does seem concerned by the threat that others might really be robots or automata;<sup>58</sup> but on the other hand, it is hard to see how Fichte's argument could show how this possibility is ruled out. For, while it might show that we could not be subjects in a world of mere objects which exhibited no subject-like behaviour towards us, it is difficult to accept that it shows that this would not have been possible in a world of robots that behaved towards us just as subjects do, but who in fact have no inner life and are automata. It may perhaps be true that we could not have heard the summons, if we saw others as robots in this way: but this takes us back again to a belief-directed rather than a world-directed transcendental argument. Or, more ambitiously, one might try to argue that there just could not be such robots, as anything that behaves just like us must have an inner life like ours as well: but this sort of logical behaviourism is generally found to be implausible. Or one might argue, as Fichte seems to do, that unless the summoner was itself a rational being, it wouldn't go in for any summoning, as only such a being would see any purpose in summoning;<sup>59</sup> but, even if this is correct, it still leaves open the possibility of a distant

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, p. 38: 'The summons to engage in free self-activity is what we call up-bringing [Erziehung]. All individuals must be brought up to be human beings, otherwise they would not be human beings. In connection with this, the question inevitably arises: if it is supposedly necessary to assume that there was an origin of the entire human race and therefore a first human couple – and this is surely a necessary assumption at a certain point in one's reflection – then who brought up the first human couple? They must have been brought up; for the proof given here is a general one. A human being could not have brought them up, for they are supposed to be the first human beings. Therefore, another rational being (one that was not human) must have brought them up – obviously only to the point where humans could start bringing up each other. A spirit took them into its care, exactly as is portrayed in an old, venerable document that generally contains the deepest and most sublime wisdom and presents results to which all philosophy must return in the end'.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Beiser, *Hegel*, p. 187 and p. 191.

<sup>59</sup> Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, p. 35: 'Thus the external being that is posited as the cause of the summons must at the very least presuppose that the subject is capable of understanding and

programmer, where everything around us is an automaton. And just as these difficulties seem to afflict Fichte's position, so they would seem to afflict Hegel's, taken as an attempt to rule out the robot scenario. Of course, the sane option here may be to say that Hegel had no real truck with such issues, and so these problems are no concern of his; but this would be to agree with the point I have been trying to make in this paper, that we would do better not to see Hegel as addressing the problem of other minds at all.

### III

It seems, then, that the attempt to construe Hegel's argument in the master/slave dialectic as a refutation of solipsism in the end misfires, firstly in relation to the contextual considerations it invokes, and secondly in terms of the argument itself. I would argue, therefore, that we would do better to look elsewhere for an understanding of this section, both in terms of how it relates to Hegel's concerns, and in terms of how the argument of the section is meant to work.

I can do no more than sketch this alternative here, but put very briefly: whereas Beiser sees the Self-Consciousness section as trying to undermine scepticism about other minds, I see it as trying to undermine views of freedom, which would take the existence of others as incompatible with that freedom.<sup>60</sup> The aim is not, then, to overcome epistemological worries and to break 'outside the circle of consciousness',

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comprehending; otherwise its summons to the subject would have no purpose at all. The purposiveness of the summons is conditional on the understanding and freedom of the being to whom it is addressed. Therefore, the cause of the summons must itself necessarily possess the concept of reason and freedom; thus it must itself necessarily possess the concept of reason and freedom; thus it must itself be a being capable of having concepts; it must be an intelligence, and – since this is not possible without freedom, as has just been shown – it must also be a free, and thus a rational, being, and must be posited as such'.

<sup>60</sup> Solomon argues strongly against this sort of approach, where he writes: 'The second preliminary point to make is that the Master-Slave parable is not, as Marx and Sartre later reinterpret it, about "freedom." The title of the section, in fact, is "Independence and Dependence"; "Freedom" does not appear until the following section (on "Stoicism, Scepticism and Unhappy Consciousness"). Freedom is a concept that emerges from the master-slave confrontation; it is not its object; the slave does not long for his freedom, and the end of the story is not, though it might warm our liberal hearts, the "liberation" of the slave' (Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, pp. 427-8). I find this objection curious, because on the one hand it seems clear that the issues Hegel raises under the heading of 'independence and dependence' are ones to do with freedom as we and he would usually understand it (and where in related texts he uses terms like *Freiheit* much more explicitly and with little strain), while on the other hand when he comes to talk of freedom in the 'Stoicism, Scepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness', he is using freedom in a more intellectual sense, namely the freedom of a consciousness which holds that '[I]n thinking, I am free, because I am not in an other' (Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 120 (*Werke* III: 156)).

but to show that, far from limiting and checking our freedom as it may at first seem, it is only by recognizing others as equal to ourselves that we can in fact realise that freedom. On this sort of account, therefore, Hegel begins by trying to show that the conception of freedom embodied in desire, which involves the pure exercise of one's will on the world, is self-undermining, as the subject gets drawn into a regress of destruction, and thus a kind of dependence on objects rather than any form of independence, as it needs a new object on which to exercise its will once one has been destroyed. The subject then turns to trying to impose its will on subjects, which have the capacity for self-negation and thus can halt the regress of desire. But this then leads to the life-and-death-struggle, out of which the one-sided recognition of mastership emerges, which is in turn shown to be unsatisfactory to the master. Thus, the master assumes that it has achieved more independence than the slave, because the slave must acknowledge it and do its bidding, without the master having to give anything in return;<sup>61</sup> but here it is led to see that it remains dependent on the slave in its interactions with the material world, while it realises that what the slave gives it in recognition is of little value, so it is here exercising a control that is worthless to it.<sup>62</sup> Having believed, therefore, that it would have greater freedom if it did not have to recognize others as equal to itself, and hence as limiting its desires, the master can in the end be brought to acknowledge that this limitation does not in fact take anything away from it that it will truly desire, once it realises that as a master it cannot be properly satisfied anyway.<sup>63</sup> Hegel thus establishes what I would take to be his primary goal here all along, namely that the plausible-seeming antinomy between

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 115 (Werke III: 150): 'Since to begin with they are unequal and opposed, and their reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved, they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependence consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman.'

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, pp. 116-7 (Werke III: 152): 'In this recognition the unessential consciousness is for the lord the object, which constitutes the truth of this certainty of himself. But it is clear that this object does not correspond to its Notion, but rather than the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself. On the contrary, his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness and its unessential action.'

<sup>63</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind: Part III of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, translated by William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), §435Z, p. 176 (Werke X: 225-6); translation modified: 'the master's self-consciousness is brought, by the community of needs and the concern for its satisfaction obtaining between him and the slave, and also by beholding the sublation of the immediate individual will objectified for him in the slave, to recognize this sublation as the truth in regard to himself too, and therefore to submit his own selfish will to the law of the will that is in and for itself.'

freedom for the individual and the acknowledgement of the freedoms of others,<sup>64</sup> and indeed of our dependence on others, is in fact spurious, and can be overcome – as Hegel puts it in the *Encyclopaedia*, ‘I am only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized by me as free. This freedom of the one in the other unites men in an internal manner, whereas need and necessity bring them together only externally’.<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, Hegel will argue, it is only once this antinomy has been overcome that the individual can have a will that has within it moments of particularity and universality,<sup>66</sup> which Hegel thinks is required if the will is to be free; and no such universality can be achieved by an individual that takes to recognition of others to undermine its freedom, rather than to be constitutive of it – hence the centrality of the Self-Consciousness section to Hegel’s project.<sup>67</sup> As I see it, then, the Self-Consciousness section is primarily a defence of what might be called ‘the sociality of freedom’, which has nothing to do with the epistemological problem of other minds.

Now, aspects of my kind of account do indeed surface even in Beiser’s, as when in discussing the master/slave dialectic, he comments that ‘[t]hus Hegel proves the wisdom behind Rousseau’s famous lines: “He who believes himself a master of others is more a slave than they”’,<sup>68</sup> with the implication that the freedom that the master takes himself to have achieved is spurious, and he is no more free than the slave. However, as we have seen, Beiser insists on subordinating this kind of point to the goal of proving the existence of others, so that this becomes the ‘moral’ argument for the reality of other minds. Once this argument is seen to fail, and to be irrelevant to Hegel’s real concerns, then Hegel’s attempt to prove Rousseau’s dictum would

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, edited and translated by M. J. Petry, 3 vols (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978), vol 3, appendix, Lectures on the ‘Philosophy of Spirit’ (1825), p. 332/333: ‘All this still lacks the determination of universality, since it still has the form of immediate singularity. It is still the case that in that I recognize another as being free, I lose my freedom... Desire is still predominant, and in so far as self-consciousness has any interest or desire, it takes what others possess to be a limitation on its freedom’.

<sup>65</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §431 Addition, p. 171 (Werke, X: 220); translation modified.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §§5-7. For further discussion of Hegel’s position here, see my ‘Hegel, British Idealism, and the Curious Case of the Concrete Universal’.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie*, edited by Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1940), pp. 233-4 (partially translated in *Hegel’s Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, translated by T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 173:

‘More precisely, this connection of freedom and our nature implies that the universality of consciousness constitutes freedom. If I know myself as universal, I know myself as free... The will is free by having something universal as what it wills; in this universal I have my essence, my essential being, and therein I am equal with myself. And this implies that others are equal to me too, because they are just as universal as I am. I am free only inasmuch as I allow the freedom of others and am recognized as free by them’.

<sup>68</sup> Beiser, *Hegel*, p. 190. The Rousseau reference is to *The Social Contract*, Book 1, Chapter 1.

seem to be enough of a target; it can then come into focus as the main ambition of this section, and Beiser's anti-solipsistic reading can be set aside, along with all the problems for Hegel that it seemed to raise.