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On Sebastian Rödl's "Self-Consciousness and Objectivity", Or, The Refutation of Absolute Idealism

SEBASTIAN RÖDL | Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism | Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2018 (<https://href.li/?https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674976511>)



By Robert Hanna

Sebastian Rödl's recent book, *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism*, just like Robert Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust* (Brandom 2019), Irad Kimhi's *Thinking and Being* (Kimhi 2018) and Robert Pippin's *Hegel's Realm of Shadows* (Pippin 2018)—all of these books appearing within the last two years, like so many oranges tumbling out of a dropped shopping bag—is another first-rate example of what I have called "Pittsburgh/Chicago-neo-Hegelianism-with-a-serious-dash-of-neo-Aristotelianism" (see [Hanna 2018](https://virtualcritique.wordpress.com/2018/12/18/on-irad-kimhis-thinking-and-being-or-its-the-end-of-analytic-philosophy-as-we-know-it-and-i-feel-fine/) (<https://virtualcritique.wordpress.com/2018/12/18/on-irad-kimhis-thinking-and-being-or-its-the-end-of-analytic-philosophy-as-we-know-it-and-i-feel-fine/>)). Rödl's book, in turn, strongly encourages me to expand that handy label into "Pittsburgh/Chicago/*Leipzig*-neo-Hegelianism-with-a-serious-dash-of-neo-Aristotelianism".

Here are the basic thoughts presented in Rödl's book, alongside my running (and occasionally a bit cheeky) interpretative commentary on them:

The objectivity of thought is its self-consciousness. It cannot be true, then, that the objectivity of thought requires that what is thought be distinct from the act of thinking it. It must be an error to suppose that thought, in order to be objective, must be something other than itself. As the objectivity of thought is its self-consciousness, thought, precisely as it is objective, thinks nothing but itself. This essay will unfold that idea. (ch. 1, p. 12)

In other words, self-consciousness, as an activity, and objectivity, are literally identical, even though many philosophers, both classical and contemporary, hold that *self-conscious thinking per se* and *the objects of self-conscious thinking* are distinct things.

Thought is objective. That is to say, it is self-conscious: a thought is the first-person thought of itself. Therefore what is thought cannot be isolated from the act of thinking it; it cannot be understood as the attachment of a force to a content. (ch. 2, p. 36)

In other words, because self-consciousness, as an activity, and objectivity are literally identical, then there is no real distinction, as Kant, Frege, Husserl, and many other philosophers, both classical and contemporary, hold, between

(i) judgemental or propositional *attitudes* intentionally directed to propositions, or “force”,

and

(ii) the *meanings* of judgements or propositions, or “content”.

Judging that things are so is taking it to be valid so to judge. If this is true, then there is no such thing as questioning its truth. If it is true, then it has no contrary. As it is known in any judgment, there is no such thing as a judgment that places itself in opposition to it. Now there are people who are prepared to say that it is one thing to judge and another thing to think it valid so to judge. They will use these words. This does not mean that they reject what I say. It does not mean that there is such a thing as rejecting what I say. If what I say is true, then they only seem to say something, while their words, used in the manner in which they intend to use them, bear no meaning.

This may seem an unbearable arrogance: not only do I proclaim that my opponents are wrong; I say that they do not even manage to state a view. I am not content to beat my enemies, I desire to annihilate them. For who are you, if you do not have a view? The reproach depends on an assumption: that it is easy to say something, while difficult to say something true. The reproach is ill-conceived if the converse is true, if it is difficult to say something, while no achievement at all to say something true. This is how it would be in a science, should there be one, that aspires to say, say only, what has no contrary. This is how it would be in a science of self-consciousness. (ch. 3, pp. 40–1)

In other words, to judge is to judge *truly*; and when anyone tries to deny this, they fail to judge or think anything meaningful, or even to be a judge or thinker in the proper sense, even if this seems to be an unbearably arrogant view to hold—well yes, it certainly seems to be.

Judgment is objective; equivalently, it is self-conscious. (ch. 4, p. 58)

In other words, judgement (or thinking) is the activity of self-consciousness that is literally identical to objectivity; but is this just a truth-by-stipulation, or can we meaningfully argue against it?

The science of judgment has no contrary. (ch. 4, p. 59)

In other words, there is no such thing as a meaningful philosophical theory that denies the truth of Rödl's theory of self-consciousness and objectivity.

[Thomas] Nagel and [Adrian] Moore link point of view and the first person. And this is right: I think sensibility in the first person originally. This does not show that sensibility stands in the way of objectivity. It shows that it is internal to the objectivity of judgment. (ch. 5, p. 82)

In other words, those contemporary Analytic (or for that matter, non-Analytic, including Kantian) philosophers, like Nagel and Moore, who think that consciousness, or the first-person point of view, is distinct from objectivity, or the impersonal/ third-personal point of view, are wrong, because self-consciousness, as an activity, is literally identical to objectivity, and consciousness is internal to self-consciousness.

Explaining a valid judgment is the same act of mind as recognizing its validity. (ch. 6, p. 93)

In other words, to explain how a judgement or thought *really can* be true is literally identical to recognising that it is *actually* true, even though many philosophers, both classical and contemporary, hold that explaining truth is one thing, and grasping truths is another distinct thing.

The thought of the power of judgment is the thought of the modality of the judgment, which is internal to judgment.... A power confers necessity on its act. My thought that I must judge what I do, that I cannot judge the contrary, is the thought of my judgment as an act of the power of judgment. The power of judgment is the cause that renders valid judgment necessary. (ch. 7, p. 105)

In other words, to judge or think is to judge or think not only *truly*, but also *with necessity*, even though many philosophers, both classical and contemporary, hold not only that there is a fundamental difference between

(i) judging or thinking *per se*,

and

(ii) judging or thinking *truly*,

but also that there is another fundamental difference between

(iii) judging or thinking truly according to the modality of *contingency*,

and

(iv) judging or thinking truly according to the modality of *necessity*.

How can what is known provide for its own comprehension as known? ... [In] the very structure of knowledge revealed in Chapter 8—knowledge is grounded in what is known—we find knowledge: knowledge of the principles of judgment as such. These principles are not specific judgments, to be laid alongside other judgments. They are known in any judgment, in the thought of itself as valid that any judgment is. They are the science of judgment. In these principles, thought and being are known to be the same. Knowledge of these principles is original, or absolute, knowledge. (ch. 1, summary of chs 8 and 9, p. 17)

In other words, to judge or think is not only to judge or think *truly*, but also *to know*, even though many philosophers, both classical and contemporary, hold that a judgment's or thought's *truth* is one thing, and *knowledge*, as sufficiently justified true belief (judgement, thought), is another distinct thing.

Science seeks principles of judgment in which the power of knowledge determines itself. Its activity is empirical knowledge, judgment with contrary. **Philosophy** is the articulation of the self-consciousness judgment; its activity is absolute knowledge, knowledge without contrary. The identity of empirical and absolute knowledge thus is the identity of philosophy and science. (ch. 10, p. 156)

In philosophy, we articulate absolute knowledge, the concept of sufficient grounds, the logical principles of thought. The works of Aristotle and Hegel are the unsurpassed achievements of the effort to articulate self-consciousness. (ch. 10, pp. 156–7)

In other words, although many philosophers, both classical and contemporary, hold that empirical natural science is one thing, that formal a priori science—say, logic and mathematics—is a second distinct thing, and that philosophy, as the science of the material (synthetic) a priori is a third distinct thing, sadly they are all wrong, because Aristotle, Hegel, and Rödl all recognise that all knowledge is absolute (self-)knowledge, which is the same as philosophy.

Judging anything at all, in the thought of the validity of judging as we do, we reject [that self-consciousness and objectivity exclude each other]. Judging anything at all, we recognize the difference of self-knowledge and knowledge of nature to be their identity, their identity, their difference. (ch. 10, p. 158)

In other words, not only are self-conscious judging or thinking, as an activity, and objectivity, as the natural world, literally identical, but also judging or thinking is literally the same as judging or thinking truly, and literally the same as knowing, and self-knowledge, but also sort-of different, yet still literally identical: *amen*.



Thus Rödl, alongside my running interpretative commentary; but let us now take a critical and more synoptic look at what is being presented in *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*.

Aside from various superficial differences in mode-of-presentation and rhetoric, Rödl's book on the one hand, and Brandom's, Kimhi's, and Pippin's books on the other, share pretty much all the same basic philosophical thoughts; Rödl's and Kimhi's books, in particular, explicitly eschew the explicit defence of theses and arguments in favour of the gnomic, oracular Wittgensteinian method of dispelling confusion and achieving insight by critical clarification (pp. 12–13); Rödl's and Brandom's books, in particular, explicitly trace historico-philosophical connections between absolute idealism and contemporary Analytic philosophy; and all four books are, in my opinion, *wrong about basically everything*.

Obviously, the mere fact that four very clever philosophers working in high-status philosophy departments at high-status universities share pretty much all their basic philosophical thoughts, does *nothing* towards proving the truth of what they all agree about, just as using one copy of a newspaper to confirm the truth of what is claimed in another copy of the same edition of that newspaper, does *nothing* towards proving what is claimed in that edition.

But over and above that, here is an argument which demonstrates that absolute idealism in general, and Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig-neo-Hegelianism-with-a-serious-dash-of-neo-Aristotelianism in particular, especially including Rödl's *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*, are all false.

All forms of absolute idealism are false because they ontologically and explanatorily reduce objectivity, reality, and truth to self-consciousness, judgement, and concepts, by the literal identification of these otherwise importantly distinct facts or cognitive items, and thereby yield an ontological and epistemic hyper-rationalist, super-conceptualist, necessitarian, self-consciously objective and objectively self-conscious mega-mentalism.

Yes, I said MEGA-mentalism, which directly implies the existence of a single mega-MIND.

According to this absolute idealist way of looking at thinking and things, then:

The Real = The Rational = The Conceptual = The Necessary = Self-Thinking Thought = Absolute (Self-)Knowledge = The One and Only Self-Consciously Objective and Objectively Self-Conscious Mega-Mind.

Now what Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig-neo-Hegelianism-with-a-serious-dash-of-neo-Aristotelianism actually *adds* to classical Hegelian absolute idealism is the *further* thesis that the one and only self-consciously objective and objectively self-conscious mega-mind is *not* God's mind, but instead a *social-institutional mega-mind, or super-community*, that flows

from *all actual and possible human communities* precisely insofar as they are

(i) logically, linguistically, and judgementally mediated,

and also

(ii) organically unified via the mutual recognition and spiritual solidarity of its logically-guided, language-using, and judgement-making members, as (neo)liberal democratic nation-States.

Hegel's version of super-communitarianism also identified the mega-mind with God's mind on the one hand, *and also with* the not-so-damned-liberal, not-so-damned-democratic nineteenth-century German nation-State on the other hand. And we all know where *that version* catastrophically and tragically went in the first half of the twentieth century, from the folks who brought you World War I and World War II.

But of course the Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig version of absolute idealism is fully post-World War II, and therefore also fully and triumphalistically *Anglo-Americanised*, democratised, and *neoliberalised*, not merely nation-Statished.

So according to the Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig version of absolute idealism,

The Real = The Rational = The Conceptual = The Necessary = Self-Thinking Thought = Absolute (Self-)Knowledge = The One and Only Self-Consciously Objective and Objectively Self-Conscious Mega-Mind = The Anglo-Americanised Democratic Neoliberalised Nation-Statished Super-Communitarian Mega-Mind.

From the point of view of the history of late modern philosophy—by which I mean European and Anglo-American philosophy since 1781, the date of the publication of the first or A edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*—then, this means that Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig version of absolute idealism is to be most accurately understood as essentially a post-World War II version of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century British neo-Hegelianism centred at Oxbridge (e.g. J.M.E. McTaggart, F.H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, et al.) and its American-pragmatism-inflected counterpart centred at Harvard and Yale (e.g. Josiah Royce, Brand Blanshard, et al.) in the recent and contemporary context of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century post-classical Analytic philosophy.

Granting all that, and to lay all my critical cards on the table now, here are three individually sufficient, and also collectively knock-down-rationally-decisive, reasons for the inherent falsity of absolute idealism, whether Hegelian or neo-Hegelian, and especially including Rödl's version of Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig-neo-Hegelianism-with-a-serious-dash-of-neo-Aristotelianism in *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*.

First, every version of absolute idealism entails the thesis of Conceptualism—which says that all intentional or representational content is necessarily and sufficiently determined by our conceptual and judgemental or propositional capacities—but Conceptualism is demonstrably false (see Hanna 2015, esp. ch. 2).

Second, consider the real possibility of *a fully self-conscious hallucination*, i.e. of a fully self-conscious but also *non-objective* judgement/thought. For example, consider the real possibility of a terribly clever and self-confident madman who's not actually G.W.F. Hegel, yet altogether sincerely and fully self-consciously judges/thinks "I'm Hegel". Then *either* (contrary to hypothesis) that is NOT actually a judgement/thought, *or else* (consistently with the hypothesis) it is indeed a judgement/thought, hence an objective judgement/thought, and EVERY such madman is Hegel—and both alternatives are patently absurd.

Third and finally, if absolute idealism were true, then necessarily, whatever the Anglo-Americanised Democratic Neoliberalised Nation-Statified Super-Communitarian Mega-Mind judges/thinks and then says is logically valid or sound, semantically true, epistemically justified, ontologically objective, and morally permissible or right, *just is* valid/sound, true, justified, objective, morally permissible/right, and politically permissible/right.

But, self-evidently, *every* human community, whether actual or possible, and no matter how organically-unified, supersized, and triumphalistically anglo-americanised, democratised, neoliberalised, and nation-Statified, *can* judge/think and say things that are *invalid/unsound, false, unjustified, merely subjective, and morally-and-politically impermissible and wrong*.

A judgement/thought is not valid/sound, true, justified, objective, morally permissible/right, and politically permissible/right *just because* a community, even a super-community, judges/thinks and says that it is valid/sound, true, justified, objective, morally permissible/right, and politically permissible/right; on the contrary, if it is any or all of those things, then that is because it is the case on grounds that are objectively independent of—even though this does *not* mean *noumenally* independent of—judging/thinking and saying itself.

If the contrary were the case, as absolute idealism holds, then validity/soundness, truth, justification, objectivity, moral permissibility/rightness, and political permissibility/rightness would be all fully open to *unconstrained arbitrariness*.

Analogously, as Socrates pointed out (or at least clearly implied) in the *Euthyphro*, if we are to have a rationally defensible theory of the gods, then we must hold that *the gods command x just because x is right on grounds that are objectively independent of the gods' commands themselves*, and we must reject that *x is right just because the gods command x*, because otherwise the gods' commands would be fully open to unconstrained arbitrariness.

Another way of seeing this third critical point is to recognise that absolute idealism, whether Hegelian or neo-Hegelian, entails *super-psychologism about logic, super-relativism about truth and reality*, and either a *divine-command* or *super-communitarian-command version of ethics and politics*, all of which are patently false.

Therefore, all of those individually sufficient reasons for the falsity of absolute idealism, whether Hegelian or neo-Hegelian, and especially including Rödl's version of Pittsburgh/Chicago/Leipzig-neo-Hegelianism-with-a-serious-dash-of-neo-Aristotelianism in *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity*, collectively add up to a knock-down-rationally-decisive *refutation of absolute idealism*.

And one final remark: I do think that Rödl's book is *at least as good* as Brandom's, Kimhi's, and Pippin's books, which in one sense is very high praise indeed; it's just that I also think that they are all wrong about basically everything, which is always a risk when doing philosophy.



References:

Brandom, R. (2019), *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Hanna, R. (2015), *Cognition, Content, and the A Priori: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Kimhi, I. (2018), *Thinking and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Pippin, R. (2018), *Hegel's Realm of Shadows: Logic As Metaphysics in The Science of Logic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).



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Author's Note: *The above essay has a little back-story. One and half years ago, I was invited by the journal **Idealistic Studies** to do a review of Sebastian Rödl's 2018 book, **Self-Consciousness and Objectivity**, with a due date for submitting my review of 25 July 2019. As I worked my way through the book, I decided it would be much more philosophically interesting to do a critical*

*essay about it and about contemporary absolute idealism more generally, than just to do a bog-standard review; so I did the critical essay and submitted that to **Idealistic Studies** in early-ish July, two weeks in advance of the due date.*

*A few days after that, I also posted a downloadable pdf version of the working draft on my Academia webpage. And then a week or so after that, **Against Professional Philosophy** (APP) published a conversation between Matt Andersson and me about it, "[The Fantasyland of Contemporary Absolute Idealism](https://href.li/?https://againstprofphil.org/2019/07/22/the-fantasyland-of-contemporary-absolute-idealism/)" (<https://href.li/?https://againstprofphil.org/2019/07/22/the-fantasyland-of-contemporary-absolute-idealism/>). But almost two months later, I still hadn't heard back from Idealistic Studies: not a word, not a peep, not a sausage, in short—The Silence of the Absolute Idealists; I wonder why?*

*Then I got this email from **Idealistic Studies**:*

"Dear Robert Hanna,

As you say, your review is somewhat "cheeky" and rather more of a critical essay than a book review, and we were looking for a book review. So we will not be publishing your essay in Idealistic Studies, Book Reviews.

Thank you for time and effort. I wish you the best with your work.

best, ...



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