



Immanence–Transcendence and the Godly in a Secular Age

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Abstract

The terms *immanence* and *transcendence* have played a significant role in philosophical thought since its inception. Implicit in the notions of immanence and transcendence, as typified within the history of ideas, is often a separation and division between the human and the godly. This division has served to generate ontologies of *isolation* and set up epistemologies that can be both binary and divided. The terms immanence and transcendence thus sit at the heart of contemporary onto-epistemic accounts of the world. As such, in seeking to examine the nature of what is, this paper traces a line through the history of ideas in an attempt to clarify the connections and dissonances in the notions of immanence and transcendence. This is done for the purpose of demonstrating what philosophical and religious accounts may offer in attempting to create a sound account of the godly and thus the world in a secular age.

Keywords: Immanence; Transcendence; Religious accounts

Introduction

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

—John 1:14

Reflections on immanence and transcendence occur both explicitly and implicitly throughout the philosophical cannon. Indeed, to discuss the metaphysical structure of human existence at all is to touch, directly or indirectly, upon the notions and relationships between immanence and transcendence. A point perhaps best exemplified in modern philosophy by Charles Taylor. Taylor’s (2007) seminal text *A Secular Age*, constitutes a touch stone in our discussions of the notions of the immanent and transcendent [1]. Thus, Taylor’s work provides a backdrop for our attempt to explore what philosophical and religious accounts can offer in attempting to create a sound account of the godly and thus

the world in a secular age?

Definition of Terms

The terms immanence and transcendence have a long and varied history in Western thought, tracing back to conceptual divergences in the works of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, ultimate truths and essences were thought to exist *outside* the world, by contrast, for Aristotle such entities were deemed to reside *within* the world [2]. Here we see what might be deemed the inception of a split between what is immanent and what is transcendent. This fundamental division has persisted throughout the evolution of western philosophical thought, and is instantiated today in prevalent cultural and social practices, ranging from religion to clinical sciences. In such practices a division exists, more broadly, as a tacit assumption about the structure of the *world*, the structure of *being*, and specifically the structure of *being human*. The terms immanence and transcendence have, throughout history, been used in a wide variety of contexts within philosophical,

religious, poetic and artistic endeavours. Upon reviewing the historic usage of the terms, it becomes apparent that while the particular conceptualisation and terminological description of immanence and transcendence differs across disciplines, its central and fundamental meaning remains essentially the same.

The term *immanence* derives from the Latin “in manere” *to remain within* (Webster, 1975). Immanent, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) refers to that which is *indwelling* or *inherent* (p. 679) [3]. While, according to the shorter OED on historical principles, immanence can also refer to the philosophical and metaphysical state of *the divine as existing and acting within the individual or the world*. As Brown writes, that which is “permanent, pervading and sustaining the universe” (p. 1314) [4]. The term immanence is also used to refer to an action performed entirely contained *within* a domain; for instance, a mental action undertaken within the mind. As Brown notes, immanence refers to something “that is performed entirely within the mind of the subject and produces no external effect” (1993, p. 1314). Immanence, in this sense, also refers to a quality that is present throughout something, for example, love can be said to be immanent to human nature.

Immanence is usually contrasted against the term transcendence. According to the OED *transcendence* may be defined as, “The action or fact of transcending, surmounting or rising above; ascent, elevation (*obs.*); excelling, surpassing; also, the condition or quality of being transcendent, surpassing eminence or excellence. The attribute of being above and independent of the universe; distinguishable from being *immanent* to the universe. Elevation or extension beyond ordinary limits; exaggeration, hyperbole” (OED, 2016). Transcendence, then, is a verb that describes a process of emergence, a rising above, which necessarily then implies that *something* is transcended. This action can be contrasted against nouns such as *the transcendent* or *the transcendental*, which typically refer to a distinct order of existence or domain of being.

Immanence then, in a general sense and in contrast to transcendence, is commonly used to describe that which is indwelling. Drawing on broader philosophical writings that explore the godly, we both broaden and rupture the simplistic and enclosed account of the immanent in order to proffer a new way of conceiving of the experiential inner as connected to the greater conceptual whole. This allows for a shift from basic orthodoxies, such as the belief that ‘mind is matter’, to a complexified and interrelated account of mind and matter, which recognises that both mind is *in* matter and matter is *in* mind. In Nietzschean terms, our primary task is the trans-valuation of immanence and transcendence in the service of offering a redefined account of *what is*.

Transcendence: What is Latent within an Immanent Order

Immanence is addressed in a philosophical context by thinkers such as Bergson, James, Whitehead, Fichte, Schelling, Tillich, and perhaps most importantly, Hegel. These thinkers, when considered together, advocate for a view of transcendence that *emerges from* an immanent order, suggesting that transcendence is a function or latent potential *within* the subject. In order to explore these concepts, a genealogy of immanence is required.

Pantheism

It would be impossible to offer a history of immanence and transcendence without considering pantheism’s philosophical and religious significance. Pantheism would become the measure by which later conceptions of immanence and transcendence were compared. In Pantheism, immanence has been used to describe God’s pervasive presence in the world. The term is primarily used to describe the universal constitution of particulars [5]; as such, God is indistinguishable from the world—the world is God and God is the world—as the poet Pope expressed in his eighteenth-century essay *On Man* [6]:

All are but parts of one stupendous whole whose body nature is, and God the soul; that, changed through all, and yet in all the same; lives through all life extends through all extent spreads undivided, operates unspent; breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part, as full, as perfect, in hair as heart: as full, as perfect, in vile man that mourns, as rapt seraph that adores and burns; to him no high, no low, no great, no small; he feels, he bounds, connects, and equals all (1734, p. 103).

As Pope beautifully illustrates, the pantheistic conception of immanence differs starkly from the transcendental theism implicit within the Abrahamic religions that were to follow; such theism, in envisaging God as distant and otherworldly, limits the presence of God in the world. A pantheistic view, by contrast, has been seen to re-enchant the natural world, God being no longer absent but rather, is either contained-within or is co-extensive with the world.

Spinoza’s Pantheism

Perhaps the most notable conception of Pantheism is that present in the works of Spinoza and captured in his famous aphorism ‘*deus sive natura*’, popularly translated as *God or Nature*. Spinoza contends that these terms should be understood as being interchangeable and symmetric, God is Nature and Nature is God, as outlined in *Ethics* (1677/1934). In *Ethics* Spinoza conceived of God as one universal substance co-extensive with all other substances; Spinoza thus conceived of God as a universal out of which

all particulars were constituted. God, as such, was held to have infinite attributes, only two of which were known to human experience: thought and extension, which could only be known in a finite way. Spinoza described *extension* as that attribute of God accounting for the presence of all extended things in the physical world, present in space and all of its contents (1677/1934). The second attribute, *thought*, referred solely to the created substance of mind. For Spinoza, God was therefore a substance of infinite attributes whose expressions were perceivable through finite manifestations within the world. However, it is important to note that ultimately for Spinoza, “the mind and the body are one and the same thing, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (Spinoza, 1677/1934, proposition 21 of part II) [7]. Spinoza asserts that while substance may be conceived of in one of two ways, as physical or as mental, it is nonetheless of a single nature. He hereby defends a *Monist* conception of reality: all is God. This line of thought would later prove crucial to the popularisation of immanence within modern philosophy, in particular via Deleuze’s (2001) integration of Spinoza’s work into his notion of *pure immanence* [8].

At Spinoza’s peril, his account of God’s immanent nature contrasted starkly against the orthodox Christian and Judaic conception of God as a transcendental being who, through the doctrine of creation, created the world *ex nihilo*. Indeed, as a result of his philosophical position, Spinoza was excommunicated from his Jewish faith. This occurred on account of Spinoza’s blatant heretical defiance; the Abrahamic God was held to exist outside of and separate from—rather than entwined with or embedded within—the world. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas demonstrates the necessity of this orthodoxy in relation to the Christian myth of creation [9]:

Creation is signified by mode of change; and on this account it is said that to create is to make something from nothing. And yet ‘to make’ and ‘to be made’ are more suitable expressions here than ‘to change’ and ‘to be changed’, because ‘to make’ and ‘to be made’ import a relation of cause to the effect, and of effect to the cause, and imply change only as a consequence (1485/1989, p. 243)

Here Aquinas suggests that in order to make something from nothing, God must dwell outside of the *something* of the world; he must exist among an order of beings definitionally separate and apart from the world. This belief remains foundational to, and continues to constitute, a central tenet of the philosophy of Christendom and the Abrahamic traditions. Verily, orthodox Christian transcendent metaphysics contrasts starkly with the pantheistic immanent conception of the worldly as the godly. This view, however, possess significant parallels with Gnostic interpretations

of Christianit; for instance, in Section 77 of *The Gospel of Thomas*, a text circa 200CE, it reads:

it is I [Jesus] who am the light, which is above them all. It is I who am the all. For many do the all come forth, and unto me do all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up a stone, and you will find me there. (p. 135)

This Gnostic view constitutes a crucial point of debate within Abrahamic traditions and philosophy, a debate which turns precisely upon whether God is transcendent or immanent in nature and form [10].¹

Hegel and the Godly

These points of discussion touch upon the important and difficult debate surrounding the use of the term immanence and its relationships to its counter-term, transcendence. The distinctions made above, such as, Spinoza’s notion of God as nature, or its juxtaposition within orthodox Christianity through Christ’s doctrine, that God is a purely transcendent being, still raise important questions that need to be resolved in attempting to outline the role of the godly in a secular age. For this we may turn to the works of Hegel.

Hegel’s work, in particular the views put forth in his early theological writings, are similar to those of Spinoza. Hegel shares the belief that God is immanent and larger than any personal God, a point summarised by Swinburne (1871/2002) [11] when he states in *Hertha*, “I am that which began; Out of me the years roll; Out of me God and man; I am equal and whole” (p. 107).

Nevertheless, there are critical differences that arise within the work of Hegel and Spinoza. The first difference is that for Hegel (1805/2008) [12], God (or the Absolute) is both immanent and transcendent. This is to say that Hegel puts forth a pantheist view and contends that God and the world are interrelated, with the world being in God and God being in the world, while also allowing for God to have transcendent properties beyond the immanent nature of the world. This view of pantheism is different from pantheism, a world view put forth by the likes of Spinoza, Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius, yet the two are often confused.

According to Hegel, all history can be understood as a failed attempt of spirit (*geist*) to seek absolute knowledge as a

1 This is a debate that endures in the long history of religious scholarship as exemplified by Sandbeck (2011), who provides a basic typology of immanence and transcendence. Sandbeck critiques the notable works of Mark Taylor and John Caputo who have separately explored God’s immanence and transcendence from a Christian perspective offering differing accounts.

means of overcoming a state of alienation and estrangement from itself. Spirit in this sense can relate to God, or in Hegel's terminology the *Absolute*. Hegel bases his view of history on two fundamental positions. The first position is that this Absolute is spirit. For Hegel, all substances are constitutive aspects of the single realities whose nature is spiritual. In *Philosophy of Mind* (1817/1971) [13] Hegel states that:

The absolute mind, while it is self-centered *identity*, is always also identity returning and ever returned into itself: if it is the one and universal *substance* it is so as a spirit, discerning itself into a self and a consciousness, for which it is as substance (p. 292).

Thus, according to Hegel, absolute spirit is a co-extensive structure with the spirit (*geist*, i.e. mind) of humanity. Hegel purports that God's self-realisation occurs through the vehicle of human self-realisation, thus the realisation of God and of man is conjoined, so that spirit in the godly sense is connected to mind in the human sense. As Wordsworth (1854) [14] states, "Our destiny, our being's heart and home, is with infinitude, and only there; with hope it is, hope that can never die, effort, and expectation, and desire, and something evermore about to be" (p. 507). Subsequently, according to Hegel, the process of knowing moves from God as being immanent in nature to God being immanent in human consciousness. Thus, for Hegel God moves to a state of transcendent self-awareness through the immanent self-consciousness of the human subject. This point by Hegel then constitutes a second fundamental position, which is that spirit is a process that requires self-knowledge and understanding. Hence knowledge of the Absolute emerges historically and gradually from a dialectical dynamic of thought in a self-revising, reflexive and reflective manner. Verily, for Hegel it is not just man who is alienated from God but importantly it is also God or the Absolute who must overcome the state of estrangement from the self to fulfil its telos, that being self-understanding or absolute knowledge. Thus, according to Hegel (1948/1971) [15], the goal and function of the Absolute is to create a state whereby it is fully able to apprehend its nature through an absolute knowledge; a point that Hegel reinforces when he states that the Absolute, "recognises itself in everything in heaven and earth, and sees that there is no out and out other than besides itself" (p. 2).

In his early work Hegel (1948/1971)² argues against traditional religious perceptions of God as a fundamental and permeable outsider, meaning a God above, beyond, or outside of history, in a sense, God as a divine stranger [15]. For Hegel the infinite is immanent in the finite. The infinite grounds the finite and the infinite expresses the finite. Thus, the Absolute's mode of immanence according to Hegel is transcendent in both form and nature. This point rejects the

pantheist projection of the pure immanence of God and is an example of Hegel's historically infused philosophy, one which synthesise the ideas of the pre-Socratic philosophical tradition—with a particular focus on the work of Heraclitus and Parmenides—spurring him to develop an idea that would move through the history of philosophy. Hegel's account of the development of spirit through history has proven to be one of the preeminent ideas that would influence thinkers as diverse as Marx, Zizek and Butler.

In his lectures on the history of philosophy with reference to Heraclitus, Hegel declares that "there is only one that remains, and from out of this all else is formed; all except this one is not enduring. This universal principle is better characterised as becoming, the truth of being; since everything is and is not" (Hegel, 1805/1995, p. 283) [16]. Hegel (1805/1995) goes on to explain this: "Heraclitus thereby expressed that everything is becoming not merely does origination belong to it, but passing away as well; both are not independent but identical" (p. 283). Hence Heraclitus presents the notion that reality is in a state of relentless flux, a state of constant becoming. This opposes the perspective of Parmenides who for Hegel represents reality as a state of unchanging unity, as evidenced in his lectures on the history of philosophy. Parmenides (as cited in Hegel, 1805/1995) asserts that "the all is immutable, for, in change, the non-being of that which is would be asserted, but being only is" (p. 261). Hegel conceptualises these two thinkers into a kind of dialectical synthesis, wherein he envisions reality as a state of multiplicity that may be comprehended or perceived as a state of unity; which is to say that the contradictions are but two parts of a sole course, two parts that while diametric actually comprise a unified whole. Therefore, the Absolute is an inherently stable structure constituted by immutable elements that are in fact unstable. Thus, that which is impermeable, constant, and always, is comprised of those things that are permeable, changing, and inherently unstable. Hegel views all of history as an attempt to bridge the alienation of a projected form of the externalised God. Thus, Hegel highlights how in the very origins of philosophy, Heraclitus understood that both immanence and transcendence are not independent, but interrelated principles of the same process.

Hegel (1948/1971) contends in his early theological writings that estrangement of spirit was caused by what may be known as a negative religion. According to Hegel, negative religions are those that present and portray God as an unreachable, distant, divine stranger—a concept somewhat synonymous with the old testament and Judaic traditions that present God as removed and distant from the world. Estrangement then for Hegel is caused by three types of basic alienation that need to be overcome to allow spirit to fulfil Hegel's second fundamental proposition: that the recognition of the Absolute's own universality is a

2 Written 1795–1800.

key function of the Absolute. The three forms of alienation of which Hegel (1948/1971) speaks are: (1) alienation from nature, (2) alienation from oneself and (3) alienation from one's fellow human beings. Hegel (1814/2004) [17] posits that such alienation from nature occurs because God is located outside of nature in many of the religious traditions that dominate the world (p. xii). Therefore, man must turn away from nature to locate the divine. For Hegel (1805/1995), this turning away from nature causes man to fall into a hostile environment, abandoning spirit and taking on a purely survival-based form of existence, leaving man simply as an animal (p. 557). Resultantly, for Hegel, God is transcendent and external and man becomes alienated from himself. Instead of looking inward to know oneself, whereby one might find knowing and peace, the gaze of man is inherently directed outward to some transcendent realm where meaning, purpose and understanding may be attained from afar (Hegel, 1805/1995). In short, the light of knowing is not sought within as an immanent state of knowing made manifest by an immanent material that allows for a transcendent quality or form to emerge, but rather knowledge is projected outward into the realms of the Absolute made manifest through an external God. This enslaves man to be dependent upon a distant stranger for the light of knowing. The subsequent loss of freedom continues to alienate man, not just from himself but also from others, as man yearns to be free from this distant and strange God and to do this man must separate himself from others.

This oppositional state creates a kind of distance and opposition among the fraternity of human beings, as according to Hegel it is within others that man encounters the Absolute. Paradoxically this godly Absolute state also offers one possible solution to man's alienation and estrangement. Within Hegel's (1805/1995) work the mystery of that which lays immanent within one's self can be discovered. In Hegel's early theological writings, the projection of spirit to a distant and transcended ground is only a by-product of man's inability to manifest an awareness of the god-like aspect within oneself. In his early work this god-like aspect was not reason but was spoken about as love, as evidenced in the spirit of Christianity and the fundamental love upon which that philosophical and religious tradition is based: "he placed reconciliation in love and fullness of life and expressed himself to that effect on every occasion with little change of form. Where he found faith, he used the bold expression. (Luke 7: 48) 'thy sins are forgiven'" (Hegel, 1948/1971, p. 239). Thus, for Hegel (1948/1971), the negative religions (1832/2008) were simply a manifestation of man's unrealised potential of recognition of the Absolute within the self:

Love has conquered' does not mean the same as 'duty has conquered', i.e. subdued his enemy: it means that love has overcome hostilities. It is a sort of dishonour to love when it

is commanded ... love itself announces no imperative. It is no universal opposed to a particular, no unity of the concept, but a unity of spirit, divinity. To love God is to feel oneself in all life, with no restrictions, in the infinite (p. 247).

Thus, the panentheist view put forth by Hegel stands in contrast to the extrinsic values of a transcended theology and religion, and offers some hints towards a reconceptualised notion of the Godly within a secular age. This reference to a world that is not clearly demarcated into the realms of the immanent and transcendent is of particular relevance, as the Godly within a secular age requires the establishment of a this-sided metaphysics, where transcendence is available within the immanent materiality of the world. Further, Hegel's focus on love offers a highly relevant point of contact for considering the essential feature of a secular account of the Godly, as it is love that in some ways operates as a humanised form of a deeper wisdom of relations.

The Immanent-Frame and Modernity

Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007), explores the notion of immanence and its historic role in the formation of the contemporary secular age, in order to articulate the problems faced for the subject under modernity [1]. Taylor offers a conception of the *immanent frame* in order to describe a process by which the disenchantment of the world has occurred, brought about by the onset of industrialisation and modernity. Taylor utilises the immanent frame as a terminological tool, defining immanence as necessarily and categorically distinct from transcendence. For Taylor, to be trapped within the immanent frame is to find transcendence inaccessible; the modernist subject is confronted with a cauterised and mundane reality, one in which the dimensions of transcendental enchantment have been irreparably severed.

According to Taylor (2007), the onset of industrialisation and modernity irredeemably constricted our understanding of the self and selfhood which, while previously understood as a porous and open structure, had come to be replaced with what Taylor terms the *buffered self* (1989) [18]. The buffered self is defined by its loss of contact with external spirits; these spirits are severed from human connection as they threaten to occupy and possess the human form, as well as inspire it. The process of buffering within modernity sees the emergence and coming-to-dominance of a disciplined, rigidified and atomized being; one which is in character separate and understood to be constituted solely by a natural, rather than supernatural, order or relationship. Thus, according to Taylor, the immanent frame describes a world which is understood without reference to any outside structure, in particular without reference to any outside godliness.

For Taylor, arriving at a point where reference to the external is unrequired creates a situation in which the immanent indwelling qualities of an individual come to be considered as sufficient to the total-understanding of that individual; neither reference to God, nor reference to any other enchanting forces within the world are required in the formation of the modern self. Taylor claims that such a buffering of self leads to an impoverishment and diminishment of the world:

We touch here on one of the deep sources of the moral attraction of immanence, even materialism; something we can already feel with Lucretius. There is a strong attraction to the idea that we are in the order of nature (2007, p. 547).

A similar point is expressed by Emerson when he states that, ‘We lie in the lap of immense intelligence which makes us organs of its activity and receivers of its truth’ (1903, p. 410) [19]. It is in this sense that Taylor argues the history of modernity is synonymous with the development of and then a retreat into a closed immanent frame. It is worthwhile considering the three ways in which Taylor claimed the immanent frame’s closure both occurs and is sustained: (1) egomania, (2) godforsakenness and (3) the disembodiment of religion.

First, the relationship between the closure of the immanent frame and egomania is poignantly described by Taylor as encountering the “atonal banshee of emerging egomania” (2007, p. 552). For Taylor, the atonality of this banshee mirrors the way in which our present cultural milieu is shaped by the rabid forces of production and consumption, which are driven by false needs and induced by a media-industry saturated with themes of individualisation and the virtue of immediate-gratification. These values are made to represent the natural and orderly way of things and are thereby disseminated insidiously. The banshee’s deafening cry, however, is pointed as it occurs precisely to obscure our connectivity and to thereby persuade the individual subject of their utter separateness from the world.

The second means by which the immanent frame is closed is through a process Taylor terms *Godforsakenness*, whereby the cosmological meaning and enchantment of the world generated by a supreme being, is replaced by a simple, and in principle comprehensible, natural order. There is a notable difference between this process, the turn to a *simple* and *natural* order under *Godforsakenness*, and the pantheistic approach described earlier. The natural is decidedly not a site for transcendence in such a worldview, rather, the natural involves the diminishment of the enchanting capacity of the world; which is evident in the rise of reductive understandings of reality. This is most notable in relation to the godly with the invigoration of secular atheism.

The third and final dimension by which the immanent frame is closed involves the disembodiment of the spiritual. Here Taylor describes the fecund and rich ground provided by a socially-embedded, community-orientated religious life that is typically enacted through embodied and collective ritual. He describes how modernity’s process of disembodiment of spirituality has meant the supplanting of such a communal religiosity with a conception of the sacred and the Godly as merely internal. This process creates an excarnation of flesh, the rendering down of the godly from what was transcendent and ultimately incomprehensible, to a mere cognitive faculty, a utilisable skill or psychic-technology.

Thus, for Taylor, whichever path the closure of the immanent frame takes, it constitutes a reduction of the vertical or transcendent plane of the modern individual; and furthermore, a relegation of the individual to a kind of horizontal existence, a flattening of the world. On Taylor’s conception, the flesh becomes the battleground when trying to free the human subject from a reductive materialism. Yet, it does not matter whether a society offers the individual an inaccessible transcendent realm or a flattened immanent present, both present as two-sides of the same problem. Rather, what is required is a rupturing of the assumed dichotomy of immanence and transcendence, and consequently a potentiation of a unified field of these two distinct domains, that become resolved as an entwined unity encapsulated as the *immanent-transcendent*.

Conclusion

The terms immanence and transcendence have played a significant role in philosophical thought since its inception. These terms are highly relevant today, as the Godly has been banished, at least from the Western tradition in all areas of study and research bar religion itself. Yet, the ailments of modernity seem to be intrinsically tied to the human transcendent function. Thus, a great challenge of modernity is in some ways to rupture the immanent frame with a capacity and capability for transcendence, without forsaking the immanent materiality of the world. In reviewing key philosophical insights and reflections upon the question of immanence and transcendence as pertaining to the Godly, we begin to see that these terms must be reimagined as a unified whole; the immanent and transcendent must become the *immanent-transcendent*. This view brings the Godly into the everyday, and makes the sacred and transcendent, the natural and the supernatural, indwelling dimensions of both the human being and the world itself. Thus, the transcendent becomes immanent and by way of this a new orientation of relation emerges which positions the self, the other, the world and the Godly as an interconnected and interrelated process.

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