Ontology, Necessity, Self

David Kolb, Bates College

Abstract: *What is the ontology of the self in Hegel and in Heidegger, where "ontology" is used as in analytic philosophy discussions that tend towards reductionism? In different ways Hegel and Heidegger refuse this question (and its goal of one final language and list of ontological commitments). They claim priority and necessity for their accounts of the conditions of the possibility of meaningful experience. But the kinds of priority they claim should be questioned and located in relation to scientific discourse, by distinguishing different kinds of necessary conditions.*

Today I would like to approach Hegel and Heidegger on the self by talking about them in connection with the ontology of the self.[1] What I mean here by *ontology* will become clearer as we go along.

Try saying to Hegel that his dialectic patterns happen in the behavior of magnets and rivers and trees, and that the self-understanding of spirit is an operation going on in brain tissue. That the descriptions in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* picture the behavior of social groups and changes in cultural norms and memes. Hegel's reaction would be complex but not hostile. You would find yourself in a discussion with him about different kinds and levels of categories, and the relation of physical science to his overall logic.

Now imagine saying to Heidegger that his description of the care structure of Dasein is a sophisticated reworking of folk psychology. And that the care structure is the result of what amounts to a software program. That his fourfold is a description of the appearing of a world, based upon neurological and social processes. And that his history of being is open to sociological analysis and historical and economic explanation. You might imagine Heidegger would react to such claims more sharply. You would find yourself in a discussion with him about

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[1] Heidegger attacks Hegel for being overly subjectivistic both in the sense that he remains too Cartesian, and in the sense that he looks for a final self presence of spirit to itself which, in Heidegger's mind, means that the role of finitude and difference has been crushed or overridden by self presence in the traditional metaphysical gesture. I have argued against this critique of Hegel (Kolb 1987), and recently Robert Sinnerbrink has treated the topic clearly and in effective new ways (Sinnerbrink 2002, 2008).

being caught in *das Gestell*, and the need to "step back" from attempts to absolutize one language and one revelation of beings.

Dueling Descriptions

Since the lifetimes of both of these philosophers we have learned much about brain activity and the effects of disruptions in brain activity on perception and consciousness and behavior. This has added fuel to long-standing worries about the relationship between scientific pictures of the world and our everyday talk about intentions, choices, selves, and the like.

There are thinkers, not least some famous Californians and Australians, and Richard Rorty in one of his earlier incarnations, who argued that folk talk about thoughts and meanings could be in principle abandoned even in everyday life, replaced by descriptions that involved only physical scientific entities.

Others, though, argue that folk talk is not dispensable. Daniel Dennett and Wilfrid Sellars would say that we need to take up the intentional stance and avow social and linguistic norms in order to function in a social world. Kant had already argued that there is a practical necessity to view ourselves as free agents, no matter what our science may say. These considerations suggest that the tension between the modes of discussion cannot be easily wished away by eliminating one of them.

So we have (let me call them *descriptive*) languages which talk about different sets of entities. One may mention ideas, purposes, awareness, meanings, concepts, norms, intentions, and so on. The other will talk about the behavior of cells and electrical currents, information flow, and, at bottom, various entities described by physics. One could say that these two languages are using different ontologies.

Different Ontologies

I am using *ontology* here in a sense derived from analytic philosophers who ask "does your ontology include XXX?" [relations, sets, mereological wholes, abstract entities, Cartesian souls, etc.]. An ontology in this sense is the list of approved types of entities affirmed as ultimately real. In most such discussions there is little talk about ontology in an older sense, namely, about the *mode of being* of those beings, which in analytic discussions is often presupposed to be immediate factual

presence, as compared with more active modes of being we find in Whitehead or Bergson or Deleuze, or in Aristotle's doctrine of potentiality.

But if we do ask about modes of being, beyond the factual lists, then other more traditional ontological questions arise: Does Hegel's spirit have its own individuated self-consciousness? In Aristotle's terms, are the movements of the dialectic substantial changes or accidental, or relational, or what? Is Heidegger's Dasein a substance? Or a set of emergent properties? How do we individuate Dasein(s)? What kind of being do the components of the fourfold have, and how do they relate to everyday objects and scientific entities?

Ontology matters. When David Hume looks for his self, he doesn't find it.[2] What Hume fails to find is the presumed self that is the basis of experience, knowing and acting , Descartes's thinking thing.

Hume's ontology is limits his vision. The impressions and ideas that he admits as the contents of experience have no necessary relationships, no internal connections to one another, and each of them could be experienced without experiencing any relation to another item. If a self were an item to be encountered in this manner it would be one immediate simple item among others, one in the chain of impressions. So it would not be a basis or foundation.

Kant opens up a new dimension by pointing out that Hume has not accounted for the possibility of unified temporal experiential unity of the series of impressions and objects. Kant analyzes those conditions of possibility, but what he finds has no content native to it, only a set of forms and activities. The self is a function within those, not an object to be found.

For Hegel also the individual human ego/self is not an immediate object of perception, nor is it an independent ontological foundation for experience. Rather it exists as a moment in a process, part of the movement of spirit where subjectivity is only one moment among others. The triple mediation of the absolute idea importantly includes subjectivity, but not as a foundation -- Hegel refuses *any*

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[2] "When I turn my reflection on myself, I never can perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. It is the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self....But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness. I cannot discover any theory, which gives me satisfaction on this head" (Hume, *Treatise*, Appendix).

immediate given foundations -- and individual egos and subjects can occur only within this larger context and process.

This might seem quite distant from Heidegger, but at a sufficiently abstract level of description, Heidegger and Hegel both say that the self and self-consciousness are not immediate givens, are not foundational objects, but rather occur as aspects of a larger context, event, or process for which the self is not the foundation. Of course those processes are quite differently described, and insofar they have ontological commitments, their ontologies are different.

Quine has famously said that "To be is to be the value of a bound variable." That is, we can determine the "ontological commitments" of a theory or a language by seeing what fields of objects it allows its quantifiers to range over.[3] Others use other tests for ontological commitment. For instance, if, like Sellars, you have reason to espouse substitutional quantification, you would ask what a language's ultimate names are referring to.

However we construct such lists, the question arises whether or not they can be shortened. In most analytic philosophy the question becomes how *expansive* one's ontology *needs* to be. Reductionism is in the air and asks "does a properly regimented language really need to be committed to the existence of XXXs? Can't it reduce or paraphrase and get along with only YYYs?"

Deciding when a language is "properly regimented" is, of course, where the ontological decisions get made, or presupposed. Also there is the problem of deciding if a proposed reduction succeeds or not, often by looking at whether inference patterns are preserved.

And then, there is Wittgenstein, and others, crying a plague on all your houses.

Asking about the ontology of a theory or language can be a helpful way to clarify what is being asserted about what. But it need not insist on reductionism. Nor need it demand that there be one final language with The Ontological Commitments.

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[3] "'How come,' the reader may wonder, 'it is precisely in analytic philosophy--a kind of philosophy that, for many years, was hostile to the very word 'ontology'-- that Ontology flourishes?' If we ask when Ontology became a respectable subject for an analytic philosopher to pursue, the mystery disappears. It

As an analogy, recall that the word *ontology* has also become widely used in computer science, in discussions of data-base design, and in other cases of classification, so that setting out the ontology of your scheme or data base amounts to legislating what objects and aspects of a situation or set of data you will consider important enough to make prominent. This does not imply that there may not be other objects and other aspects. The situation is richer than what your local ontology picks out for its local pragmatic reasons.

Similarly, the ontological commitments of a language or a theory may be limited; what you describe is richer than what your local ontology picks out for its local pragmatic purposes. A further step would be to argue that the world is richer than what *any* local ontology picks out for its local pragmatic purposes.

The Quinean and related approaches, argue that their theories of truth and reference demand the goal of one final perfected descriptive language whose quantifiers range over all and only the truly real entities. Hegel and Heidegger, with their different theories of truth and meaning, would both object to this presupposition that we should aim for one final language with the final list of ontological commitments.

Analytic philosophy often treats the self as a regional question within larger investigations. Some see this task as ongoing and difficult: the emphatic "mad dog naturalist" Alex Rosenberg said in an a recent interview that "Intentionality--the aboutness of propositional thoughts: a half century of the philosophy of psychology and we still haven't figured out how it is even possible" (Rosenberg 2013).

Others think they can solve that problem. One of the currently most productive ways of trying to account for intentionality and meaningfulness is a strategy pioneered by Sellars. He holds to a strict naturalistic ontology; the fundamental entities are those revealed by the best science. The scientific image is non-teleological, materialistic, and nominalist, invoking simple entities with very few properties. What Sellars calls the "manifest image", roughly speaking, our everyday notions of intentional entities, people, psychology, and society, is to be accommodated in the following way: reference to universals, social norms,

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became respectable in 1948, when Quine published a famous paper titled "On What There Is." It was Quine who single handedly made Ontology a respectable subject" (Putnam 2004, 78-79).

intentionality, meaning, subjectivity, self consciousness, and other pesky non-nominalist "entities" are not to be taken as designating fundamental entities beyond scientific ones. Rather they designate performances and normative activities; they arise from the avowal and reification of metalinguistic moves and community conventions, so that everything which might offend the scientific naturalist can be said to be 'real' but involves only twisted self-referential and self-acknowledged normative performances by complexes of fundamental scientific entities. (Sellars 1956, Kolb 1979)

In a Sellarsian vein, some interpreters, such as Mark Okrent, William Blattner, and others influenced by Hubert Dreyfus, take up Heidegger's analysis of practice and blend it with externalist or holistic theories of reference and with ideas about extended mind taken from Antonio Damasio and others, and come up with a pragmatic Heidegger, non-reductionist but naturalistic, where talk of Dasein and the fourfold become descriptions of the happening of meaning without referring to any "odd" entities. Something roughly similar appears in readings of Hegel by Terry Pinkard and others.

Descriptive vs. Transcendental

I said earlier that Hegel and Heidegger's descriptions of the process or event of meaning and intentionality, insofar they make ontological commitments, are committed to different ontologies. So what kind of ontological commitments do they make?[4]

Heidegger is not defending dualism, nor is he a romantic thinker leading us to a deeper rooted level of self and nature lurking below our poverty-stricken technological world, although many wish that he could do that. In describing Dasein and the care structure Heidegger does intend to undermine popular and philosophical conceptions of the self as monadic, or disembodied, or as relating to

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[4] If we wonder what Heidegger's ontology might be, one possible answer might be the modes of being such as present at hand, ready to hand, artworks, things, not to mention Dasein itself. The list seems to expand and contract in various works. But this is wrong. The modes of being that Heidegger talks about are not separate sets of beings. The same entity can be ready to hand or present at hand, as when the hammer breaks or the artwork becomes a commodity. One could legitimately say that the item's meaning-significance-mode-of-revelation changes at these points. But if there were no continuity between the artwork and the commodity, Heidegger's critique of the art business would fall flat. The river that was once nature and now a damned-up- servant is still in some sense the same river. Getting at that sameness is difficult for Heidegger.

the world through a veil of representations. Removing these conceptions of the self clears the way for understanding our ecstatic relation to time, and a new goal of authenticity. In that sense the discussion of Dasein challenges the everyday folk understanding of the self.

But Dasein is much more than a sophisticated reworking of folk psychology. It is a new description of the involvement of humans in opening up fields of meaning and intelligibility, including those in the sciences. Dasein's description is a work of phenomenology and it shares the double status of Husserl's results: it at once both describes an experience and shows the conditions of the possibility for experience. Dasein and the care structure and the fourfold can be found in our everyday experience and also provide deep conditions and structures that make experience possible.

And then, making the turn and going on from Dasein we arrive at the more purely transcendental event, the place, or giving of being.

Heidegger would strongly object to anything he does being called transcendental, but he is talking about necessary conditions for the revealing of beings. These are not Kantian formal structures of subjectivity, but they are necessary and universal. Self and subjectivity emerge in different epochal tunings, which are revealed to Daseins whose self-interpretation also changes.

So, in place of the dispute between science and folk ontologies of the self, Heidegger makes a three-fold distinction among (1) descriptive languages (which include both scientific and folk), (2) the experiential and yet transcendental structures of Dasein, care, and the fourfold, and (3) the purely transcendental event, giving, place, topos, truth of being.

Heidegger would be bothered by questions about ontological commitments because they presuppose modes of discourse and categories of thought which he is trying to step back behind to a mode of thought and a performance of language that is prior to traditional ontological and metaphysical questions. This new mode is not itself to be located or interrogated by the traditional questions, because the new mode is uncovering and trying to bring to language something that locates and conditions them, something that cannot be defined in their terms. Traditional metaphysics and ontology proceed in ignorance of the event or dispensation of

meanings of being. Every revelation of being is finite and any ontology in the sense we have been using the word is derived from such a finite revelation.

These levels "above" or "behind" descriptive language do not provide mechanisms or refer to entities that would replace either scientific or folk talk about the self. There may be different relations between scientific and folk languages of the self, depending on the epoch and granting of being. Folk language relates differently to the scientific language in the era of Newton than it did in the era of Aristotle. For Heidegger that is a local issue; indeed, for him, ontological commitments in the Quinean sense are always local issues.

When we turn to Hegel we see something like the Heidegger's three levels, but they combine differently.

Hegel's phenomenology shows structures and oppositions within consciousness, only to aim beyond them to the pure thought that locates those oppositions of subject and object within the overall movement of thought. Along the way the individual self is revealed to emerge only within spirit, the we that is an I and the I that is a we. Like Heidegger's talk of Dasein and care, then, Hegel's talk of spirit aims to correct common misapprehensions of the self, while at the same time providing conditions of possibility for the happening of experience and meaning.

Hegel's philosophy of nature and philosophy of spirit talk about what provides a basis for and what realizes subjectivity. While there is purity in the logic that is not found in the other parts of the system, there is not the same kind of step back and one way relation that is found in Heidegger's history of being and event. Hegel's three levels interpenetrate in mutual realization.

Hegel is willing to take up standard philosophy of mind questions, but he would say that while you can give answers to these questions in the terms that they propose, the answers and their terms are not stable. He believes that in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in his *Logic* he has a mode of thinking and discourse in which these more traditional categories and questions have a place but are overreached. Their categories, examined on their own, transit into more adequate categories, in which the oppositions and alternatives proposed in the traditional

questions are revised, and gone beyond. This is reminiscent of Heidegger's step back, but it is more like a step *through*.

Hegel's highest level discourse differs from Heidegger's. Heidegger insists that his talk about the "giving" of being and the event of meaning does not involve mysterious entities churning away behind history. His third and highest or transcendental level makes no ontological commitments. It stands alone, giving but not receiving; there is no mutual relation.

Hegel's levels of discourse all support one another. The triple syllogism at the end of the Encyclopedia makes that point. Taken together, the system does seem to make many ontological commitments. But we need to examine this more closely.

First, could we say that there is only one ontological commitment in Hegel, to spirit? We could, but we would need to add many qualifications; we are far from Quine. Spirit is not a single immediate entity that can be referred to, but is an ongoing process within which individual entities are revealed.

There is also the standard worry that affirming Spirit implies an ontological commitment to a Big Being or a Cosmic Self. Although some of Hegel's language suggests this, a more careful examination of his social notion of intersubjective recognition, and of the place of the categories of subjectivity in the third part of the logic, shows that there is no postulation of a single big consciousness.

When Hegel taught his philosophical system he taught it in many different courses on many different subjects. The absolute knowledge which the system is to impart is a social possession, not a huge summation or mystical experience in the mind of any one philosopher. And even to the extent that it is in the mind of one philosopher this is because of the social possession which is being surveyed by that individual.

Also, if you demand this Big Entity, a Cosmic Self or such, then you have an entity that evolves in a dialectical fashion. Ok, but why does it do that? Is it that the big entity just has as a matter of fact this pattern of action and evolution? Then you have a huge brute contingent fact which hardly has the scientific rigor which Hegel desires. Conceivably, it would seem that the big entity could have had other patterns of action and development.

You don't want that result. So with Hegel you develop the logic which if it works shows that the dialectical pattern of development is necessary, that it's the only way you can fully think being. So you have your necessity. But now you no longer have need of the Big Entity. Now that you have the dialectic built into the being of any entities, as well as thought, so the being of every different thing will express these patterns, and the community of things will develop its own complications and interactions and interdependencies. The Big Entity is superfluous.

The same will be true on the level of the self. You don't need a big self because the dialectical patterns will emerge and govern the constitution of individual selves through their activities of recognition and interaction. In fact a Big Self gets in the way because it makes more puzzling the relations between individual and social self-awareness. So Hegel is not committed to a unified Big Entity.

But doesn't Hegel, like Quine and unlike Heidegger, attempt to devise one final perfect language revealing the ultimate ontological commitments? Isn't that what the *Logic* and the system are supposed to do?

Not exactly. The third part of the logic, the logic of the concept, does provide a set of dialectical patterns (universal, particular, individual; the modes of judgment and syllogism) which describe the mode of being of spirit. Yet, this last part of the logic does not replace the earlier parts and their various ontological categories. It includes them, as the section on method in the Absolute Idea makes clear.

In the rest of the system the universal/particular/individual, judgment and syllogism patterns are used for insight into the being of natural and cultural entities, but not as ontological commitments to some entity behind the scenes, The Universal or The Particular. The universal is never encountered except in the particular individuals, this tiger, not universal Life or the genus *Panthera*; that factory worker, not Labor as a universal. The universal in one situation is the genus for this particular species of animal, the universal in another is the government; the particular in one situation is a kind of granite rock, and in another is a trade union. The active citizen is an individual, the nation state is a particularized universal. Patterns of the interrelation of universal/particular/individual are used to understand entities in nature and society, not to name entities behind the ordinary. Descriptive

commitments are to the local vocabulary's entities, but with their mode of being now thought in new ways.

For Hegel the logic provides not a final ontology but the self-awareness of the categories of thought that make possible the varying finite ontologies on the different levels of nature and spirit. Those are located in a process where they have their appropriate places and functions. The earlier categories remain in use in their appropriate contexts, just as in the other parts of the system historically distinct cultural products, or categorically distinct chunks of nature, or various kinds of artworks continue to exist and be used and be talked about in their own terms. Those terms and those works and those beings can be located within the larger movement. But they are not replaced or reduced to a final language. What surrounds and locates them is not a final list of beings but an ongoing understanding of what it means for any listed entity to be.

Each of our two thinkers believes that he has attained a mode of thinking that we could in general terms call "transcendental", though neither thinker would accept that word. Both Hegel and Heidegger claim a priority, in different ways, above or beyond disputes about rival ontologies of the self. Instead of the duality of science vs. folk ontologies, we now have a duality of ontological disputes vs. their general "transcendental" or necessary conditions.

Two Kinds of Conditions

But scientific and causal talk also claims to provide the conditions needed for the existence of selves. We ask how scientific causal talk about the self relates to the prior discourses Hegel and Heidegger offer about the role of subjectivity.

I want to suggest that they fit together by mutually enveloping each other. This isn't a very good spatial metaphor, but the key to this mutual envelopment is to distinguish two kinds of conditions.

Here is a quotation from a text by Gabriel Catren that lists the "the various *transcendental* conditions of scientific research."

> Among these conditions we can include: the...conditions that make the emergence of localized and temporalized cognitive entities possible;...the physiological conditions of sensible intuition; the technological conditions of

> instrumental observability and experimental verifiability; ...the 'categories' of human understanding, the available 'imaginary' schemata that allow us to connect these categories with sensible intuition, the formal and linguistic structures that convey theoretical reason, and the technical and conceptual operations of analysis, synthesis, abstraction, selection, coarse-graining, decoherence, and renormalization.... (Catren 2001)

This muddies the discussion; we need to distinguish between conditions of the actuality of something and conditions of its possibility. One tells you what kinds of real world processes are needed to support and make XXX happen; the other tells you conditions make XXX what it is.[5]

Kant provides an example of this distinction when he describes what he takes to be the transcendental conditions for there being consciousness and affirmations of meaning to objects, while he remains agnostic about what it is that makes these conditions actual.

So talk about transcendentally necessary conditions of possibility of experience or meaning must be separated from talk about the (sufficient but perhaps not necessary[6]) conditions of its actuality, which give accounts of the genesis of entities, including selves.

Hegel, with his elaborate descriptions of nature and psychology, includes an account of both the possibility and the actuality of spirit's self grasping, with reference to current science. So even at his most intransigent, Hegel can find room for the two kinds of discourse, causal/scientific and transcendental/logical. The question of transcendental conditions of possibility for consciousness and

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[5] It might appear that in making the distinction between conditions of possibility and conditions of actuality reiterates Aristotle's distinction between formal and efficient causes. Isn't the condition of possibility just an Aristotelian essence? And the condition of actuality a set of efficient causes? Not quite. First of all, the Aristotelian efficient cause is not a modern scientific cause. The efficient cause in Aristotle shares and transmits a form. And given Aristotle's priority of actuality over potentiality, the form has to be active in the causing agent, really or intentionally. This implies that the world cannot contain new forms for there is nothing that could cause them. So Aristotelian efficient causes cannot sustain a notion of emergence in the strong senses in which that has been used lately. Likewise, the condition of possibility and the Aristotelian essence are not identical, for the condition of possibility need not be active before experience is instantiated or activated.

[6] There is no necessity that the precise conditions of the actuality of this XXX be the same as those of another XXX; we can, for instance, imagine experience and meaning being realized in a variety of biologies and perhaps in machines.

experience is subsumed into the logic, while the question about the conditions of actuality of consciousness and experience takes its place in another part of the system. An overarching unity of a kind is achieved in the logical self comprehension of the process of the self-awareness of spirit.

On the other hand, Heidegger maintains a step back and a priority for the thought that seeks the conditions of possibility for ontological and causal discourse. While he describes at great length the elements of the care structure, the fourfold, the event, and so on, Heidegger ignores questions about the conditions of their actuality. He presumes that any response to those questions will be in terms of some local and finite revelation of being, and therefore not be necessary in the same way that the Dasein and the history of being are necessary.

Both thinkers show two kinds of discourse (about conditions of possibility and conditions of actuality). Each of these discourses surrounds and comments on the other, but they move in different planes and each is prior but along different axes.

If we soften both thinkers, breaking up their totalizing of eras and epochs of spirit, and diluting the purity of their prior transcendental levels of discourse, then we might get something like a Heidegger as read by the Dreyfusards[7], and a Hegel as read by Pinkard and others (Kolb 1991, 2010). These are not *so far* apart and if you compare them you will find that Hegel's detailed analyses of stages of spirit and language and thought can assist the pragmatism of a softened Heidegger.

So we have moved from the confrontation between scientific and folk ontologies to a different duality, between *descriptive* discourse with ontological commitments, scientific or folk or other, that among other tasks can describe conditions of actuality, and on the other hand "ontological/transcendental" discourse that describes conditions of possibility. (Hegel and Heidegger figure that prior discourse differently, and that affects their conceptions of the descriptive side of the dichotomy.)

There is one last consideration. By highlighting this new distinction perhaps I have given science an edge in its confrontation with folk language about the self, at least to this extent: by arguing that the prior transcendental discourses make no

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[7] Heidegger would argue that the Dreyfusards reduce Being to Meaning, and so lose the ontological difference and its question of the truth or place of being.

ontological commitments to entities (with some qualifications in Hegel's case) I am saying that folk language about the self cannot be strengthened by transcendentally discoverable commitments to irreducibly subjective entities. I've banished the Superheroes who were defending the folk side. So the science side has a better chance of winning, at least in terms of ontology, even if folk talk is normatively necessary -- in other words, I've opened the door to something like Sellars' strategy.

But recall that I've also suggested, though not argued here, that the transcendental side encourages the possibility of a pragmatic multiplicity of languages and commitments on the descriptive side. So neither does the science side keep its One Perfect Language Superhero. Arguing over the issue of one vs. many languages we would be back to arguing about the notion of ontology and metaphysics, where Hegel and Heidegger have much to contribute. If we were arguing instead for or against the primacy of science over folk talk, then we would work through the nature of explanation, of causality, the status of modal statements, the possibility of emergent properties, and so on. In those debates Hegel would still have things to say, while Heidegger would step back.

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