

Comparing Epicurus to German Idealism

Post by "Cassius" of September 21, 2021 at 7:38 AM

In our 20th discussion last night Martin mentioned Hegel and perhaps Schopenhauer, and I am beginning to realize I have a significant gap in my understanding of the place of what I gather is known as "German Idealism." I have in the past tended to think of that more in terms of some kind of "romanticism," but I gather there is much more of an issue as to its relationship to "Platonic idealism" that is worth being more clear about. I think I have a fair understanding of at least part of Nietzsche, and that probably he's more of a rebel against "German idealism" than a proponent of it, but at that point (and maybe not even at that point) I am lost.

So I'd like to start this thread about German Idealism so we can after some discussion perhaps come to some tentative thumbnail conclusions about how it relates to Epicurus.

At first glance, my working presumption is that if German idealism is a variant of Platonic idealism, then Epicurus would have very little good to say about it. Is even that a fair starting point for a tentative framework? Would Epicurus reject German idealism less strongly, or more strongly, than he rejected Platonic idealism?

Post by "Cassius" of September 21, 2021 at 7:54 AM

German idealism

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

[200px-Deutscher Idealismus.jpg](#)

The four principal German idealists: [Immanuel Kant](#) (upper left), [Johann Gottlieb Fichte](#) (upper right), [Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling](#) (lower left), [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#) (lower right)

German idealism was a [philosophical movement](#) that emerged in [Germany](#) in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It developed out of the work of [Immanuel Kant](#) in the 1780s and 1790s,^[1] and was closely linked both with [Romanticism](#) and the revolutionary politics of [the Enlightenment](#). The best-known thinkers in the movement, besides Kant, were [Johann Gottlieb](#)

[Fichte](#), [Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling](#), [Arthur Schopenhauer](#), [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#), and the proponents of [Jena Romanticism](#) ([Friedrich Hölderlin](#), [Novalis](#), and [Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel](#)).^[2] [August Ludwig Hülsen](#), [Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi](#), [Gottlob Ernst Schulze](#), [Karl Leonhard Reinhold](#), [Salomon Maimon](#) and [Friedrich Schleiermacher](#) also made major contributions.

The period of German idealism after Kant is also known as **post-Kantian idealism**, **post-Kantian philosophy**, or simply **post-Kantianism**.^[3]

Fichte's philosophical work has controversially been interpreted as a stepping stone in the emergence of **German speculative idealism**, the thesis that we only ever have access to the [correlation](#) between [thought](#) and [being](#).^[4] Another scheme divides German idealists into [transcendental idealists](#), associated with Kant and Fichte, and [absolute idealists](#), associated with Schelling and Hegel.

Meaning of idealism[[edit](#)]

Main article: [Idealism](#)

The word "[idealism](#)" has multiple meanings. The philosophical meaning of idealism are those properties we discover in objects that are dependent on the way that those objects appear to us, as perceived subjects. These properties only belong to the perceived appearance of the objects, and not something they possess "in themselves". The term "idea-ism" is closer to this intended meaning than the common notion of idealism. The question of what properties a thing might have "[independently of the mind](#)" is thus unknowable and a [moot point](#), within the idealist tradition.

Post by “Cassius” of September 21, 2021 at 8:03 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Would Epicurus reject German idealism less strongly, or more strongly, than he rejected Platonic idealism?

After reading through those Wikipedia notes it is clear that German idealism is strongly linked to Platonic idealism and thus it's probably very fair to say that Epicurus would reject both.

As yet I have no handle, however, on which of the two Epicurus would reject most strongly. My bet is that he would reject German idealism more strongly, if only on the grounds that after so much scientific knowledge had been added over thousands of years they still wanted to "double

down" on Plato, but that's just a guess.

As Martin also observed last night in a phrase which I will quote from Jefferson's formulation "Nonsense can never be explained."

[Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 5, 1814: "The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them; and for this obvious reason, **that nonsense can never be explained.**"]

Post by "Eikadistes" of September 21, 2021 at 8:17 AM

He would have utterly **rejected** the German Idealists.

In general, they supported revelation over reason, faith over experience, and mind over matter. The school develops after Kant distinguishes "phenomena" from "noumena" or the "thing-in-itself" and postulates that we can never really know the "thing-in-itself", thus, faith and revelation become useful tools in a world that is completely mysterious. There's also a tinge of political Nationalism in the German Idealists that frequently see gets misdirected at Nietzsche.

Then, right in the middle of their movement, the Indian *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita* get translated into European languages and light the "noumena"-obsessed Germans on **FIRE**. To students of Vedanta, Kant's "noumena", the "thing-in-itself" sounds like the Hindu "atman" or "Self". These Idealists got prescribed a second dose of Idealism.

Then Hegel comes along and places Plato's crown on himself as the new King of Idealism.

German Idealism has a lot in common with Platonism, Pyrrhonism, and Academic Skepticism. This is particularly true when we consider that the agnostic Indian texts that influenced Pyrrho were, for the first time, being introduced to Europeans in their own language, so there's a common influence besides the obvious influence of Plato.

Post by "Cassius" of September 21, 2021 at 8:23 AM

Nate is there a way to summarize in even broader terms - maybe in Plato's own terms - how they were extending Platonic views?

when you say:

[Quote from Nate](#)

In general, they supported revelation over reason, faith over experience, and mind over matter.

I think that could be stated pretty exactly about Plato himself, right?

In what "general" ways were the German idealists seeing themselves as different?

[Quote from Nate](#)

postulates that we can never really know the "thing-in-itself", thus, faith and revelation become useful tools in a world that is completely mysterious.

Is that not also something that could be said of Plato too?

Although being well aware that in many cases things that are complex can't be reduced to simple terms, probably it's still helpful for generalist students of Epicurus to try to reduce them to "outline" form so we can at least get a handle on the categories to discuss.

Post by "Eikadistes" of September 21, 2021 at 8:46 AM

Quote

In what "general" ways were the German idealists seeing themselves as different?

Ultimately, their goal was to synthesize the the school of the Rationalists with the competing school of Empiricists, so Plato may have only been an influence through the reach of Descartes' Rationalism. That being said, Kant mentions Plato by name in his introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, so I think Plato is a major influence:

"The light dove, cleaving the air of her free flight, and fleeing its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space. It was thus that Plato left the world of the senses, as setting too narrow limits to understanding, and ventured out beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of the pure understanding."

I'd call German Idealism an extension or expansion of Plato, not a *revival*, but an *addition*.

Post by “Cassius” of September 21, 2021 at 8:56 AM

[Quote from Nate](#)

I'd call German Idealism an extension or expansion of Plato, not a revival, but an addition

Yep that's my question. An *addition* of *what*?

Post by “Eikadistes” of September 21, 2021 at 10:19 AM

The *addition* we see in the Germans' form of Idealism is their response as faithful Christians to the undeniable success of Empiricism during the Enlightenment period. German Idealism provided modern Christians with a narrative to protect their faith while also accepting the observations that came from a camp of thinkers who were deeply skeptical of religious narratives. It allowed Idealists to interface with the observations of science while simultaneously marginalizing those findings as *mere "phenomena"* which cannot speak to the "true nature" of reality. Platonism didn't provide them with the defenses they needed to reject materialism since science by the 18th-century had advanced significantly, so they had to adapt new ways of explaining how Jesus the Christ could still exist in a world of machines.

As philosophical questions about the "Mind" were enthusiastically answered by materialists who grounded the unique, subjective experiences of life into universal, biological processes, Transcendental Idealists subsumed both "Mind" and "Matter" beneath the single banner of "Spirit". By the late 18th-century, Idealism was no longer adequate to explain the difference between air and oxygen, to explain how lightning was a discharge of electricity, to explain the similarities between fossils in the ground and living creatures: only chemistry, physics, and biology were robust enough for that. Kant (among others) saw the need to justify how God can still operate in a world of physical interactions. Like Gassendi with Epicurus, Kant stitched one philosophical world together with another, but, in this case, *backwards*.

If we turn our attention from Europe to America, we observe a similar trend in Ralph Waldo Emerson, who eventually rejected the orthodox philosophy of Harvard's school of divinity and incorporated Vedantic philosophy to help explain his position: both the mind, full of religious sympathies, and matter, which constitutes the beautiful, beneficent world of nature, are facilitated by the Spirit. This can also explain why ancient Hindu philosophy was so well received by Emerson, Schopenhauer, and others: the primary focus of ancient Indian

philosophers was to reconcile Dualism and Monism. They provided extensive arguments to explain how they interface with each other, and this is exactly the sort of philosophy needed during the modern debate between Descartes' Dualism and the Monism of both Idealists and Materialists.

Post by “Cassius” of September 21, 2021 at 10:28 AM

That is extremely well written Nate thank you!

I particularly think your link between the Europeans and Emerson (transcendentalism) is helpful. It's been my experience (or at least viewpoint) that the word "transcendentalism" has too favorable a connotation at least in USA thought processes. They talk a lot about "nature" (Walden Pond?) and yet don't seem to be pointing to nature as much as they point to something that they allege "transends" nature.

It would be helpful to articulate in very clear terms to what extent it is fair to consider both them and the German idealists as essentially one with Platonic rejection of the "real world" in favor of the world of "ideas."

In regard to how this works with the transcendentalists I bet [Joshua](#) will have comment so I will tag him.

Again, not trying to oversimplify, but I always want us to drag these difficult ideas into the open at least in the form of "outlines" so that we can at least point the way to help people with a framework of understanding the issues and the differences with Epicurus.

Post by “Joshua” of September 21, 2021 at 11:52 AM

We briefly discussed George Santayana's essay on Lucretius maybe a year or so ago. His essay was in fact taken from a book called *Three Philosophical Poets*—Lucretius for the materialist or "natural" view, Dante for the supernatural, and Goethe for the Romantic. I have not read these other two essays. It might be worth looking over them as they relate to this conversation.

I *have* read nearly everything of significance that came out of American Transcendentalism—the major figures as well as the lesser lights, including their diaries and journals, and the letters they exchanged. This was my major obsession in college, and I can still read these authors and find them occasionally refreshing. I'm more likely now to find them unhelpfully obscurantist.