Transcendental materialism as a theoretical orientation to the study of religion

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*Abstract*

Transcendental materialism is a philosophical perspective that uses German Idealism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and natural science to offer a materialist account of subjectivity and culture. This essay compares this philosophical framework with recent work in the study of religion (Manuel Vásquez) and philosophy of religion (Kevin Schilbrack and Thomas A. Lewis). While transcendental materialism has until now been unconcerned with religion, it offers parallels with this recent work. It differs, however, in its specific understanding of the material dimension of the dialectical relationship between abstraction/conceptuality and practice/embodiment.

*Key words*

Hegel; philosophy of religion; materialism

*Introduction*

A cursory review of philosophy of religion textbooks, readers and anthologies indicates a fairly stable canon. Blackwell’s anthology is a representative example (Taliaferro and Griffiths, 2003). In this collection one finds sections devoted to theism and divine attributes, explanations of religion (including discussions of the holy, psychoanalysis and religious experience), theistic arguments for the existence of God, non-theistic religions, religious values (with a strong emphasis on theistic ethics) and death. This is representative of what goes by the name of philosophy of religion in European and North American schools and universities.

There are two issues with this version of the discipline. First, there is an inclination to understand religion in terms of beliefs or ideas. Second, it privileges Anglo-American philosophy. Thus, philosophy of religion is hampered by too narrow a conception of religion and too restrictive a philosophical canon - it is, more accurately, analytic philosophy of theistic belief. In other words, philosophy of religion is too often philosophical theology. This approach may enable one to adjudicate between some competing religious claims, evaluate the logical coherence of some beliefs or think about the relationship between faith and morality, but it does little to help people think philosophically about the construction of religion as a universal category, the politics of that construction or the role of religion in the world today.

While the philosophical analysis of a narrow set of theological concerns has its place within philosophy of religion, those concerns have dominated the field to the exclusion of nearly everything else. To offer a philosophical engagement with *religion* is to offer philosophical accounts of the nature or function of religious practices and beliefs. Such a philosophy would address issues of religious diversity, the spectre of extremism or the role of religion in contemporary society. Philosophy of religion, in its more narrow form, does not provide the resources for carrying out this work. Philosophical analysis of theological claims is important, but it is not the same thing as philosophy of religion.

Recent work in philosophy and theory of religion seeks to overcome this narrow conception. In particular, Manuel A. Vásquez’s *Beyond Belief* (2010), Kevin Schilbrack’s *Philosophy and the Study of Religion* (2014) and Thomas A. Lewis’ *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion and Vice Versa* (2015), all rethink the relationship between philosophy of religion and other methodological approaches to religion.[[1]](#footnote-1) While these texts do not share the same philosophical tradition, they are similar in their commitment to shifting the way that philosophers (and others) think about religion. Though this shift is beginning to happen, the field as a whole is still dominated by the older version of philosophy of religion described above. The philosophy of religion encountered by undergraduates in syllabi and textbooks, for example, continues to be primarily concerned with questions of divine attributes, proofs for the existence of god and similar questions (Lewis 2015: 4-5; Schilbrack 2014: xi-xii).

Transcendental materialism has important contributions to make to this ongoing effort to rethink philosophy of religion. Drawing on German Idealism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and natural science, transcendental materialists argue for the reality of both subjectivity and culture, but understand both to be facets of nature. A transcendental materialist version of philosophy of religion would thus not begin with or prioritise the logical coherence of beliefs and ideas, but rather focuses on developing a philosophical perspective on religion that is capable of sustaining discourse on the nature and role of religion in the world today. It is not primarily concerned with proofs for or against the existence of God. From this perspective, theism and atheism are boring answers to bad questions. Religion is an integral part of our current social reality and philosophy of religion should begin by acknowledging this reality. Prioritising beliefs risks misunderstanding the nature of what is usually called religion, ignoring practices, rituals and affects.[[2]](#footnote-2) In short, transcendental materialist philosophy of religion seeks to shift from an idealist notion of religion focused on belief and doctrine to a materialist understanding of the framework of practices, rituals and affects within which belief must be located.[[3]](#footnote-3) In doing so, it broadens the range of philosophical perspectives available for critically investigating the nature and role of religion.

In what follows, I will outline the basic features of transcendental materialism, before applying its materialist reading of Hegel to his philosophy of religion. This rereading of Hegel provides a surprising number of connections with the aforementioned work in the study of religion. Like Vásquez, transcendental materialism offers a materialist account of subjectivity and culture. Like Lewis and Schilbrack, it allows philosophy to play a renewed role in the study of religion. Having drawn attention to these overlapping and intersecting themes, I conclude by exploring how transcendental materialism differs from all three in its understanding of the material relationship between abstraction, conceptuality and embodiment.

*An Outline of Transcendental Materialism*

Transcendental materialism is a term adopted by Adrian Johnston, arising out of his interpretation of the work of Slavoj Žižek (Johnston 2008, 2013b, 2014). It draws on German Idealism, psychoanalysis, politics and natural science to offer an account of subjectivity, society and the world. These fields are represented by Hegel, Lacan and Marx respectively. The discussion of natural science comes from a wider variety of sources, with a particular focus on neuroscience that includes the work of Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch’s work on embodiment and mind (1993), as well as François Ansermet and Pierre Magistreeti’s exploration of the connections between Lacanian psychoanalysis and neurobiology (2007). Catherine Malabou has developed a similar approach through her work on plasticity (2005, 2008, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Malabou’s work is less focused on developing a distinct variant of materialism, but her investigations of neuroplasticity and trauma draw on many of the same philosophical, psychoanalytic and scientific sources as Johnston.

As Johnston explains in *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism*, ‘transcendental materialism [treats the split between mind and matter] as real and irreducible (while nevertheless depicting them as internally generated out of a single, sole plane of material being)’ (2014: 13).[[4]](#footnote-4) The resulting philosophical perspective is ‘an emergent dual-aspect monism’ (2014: 14). Johnston endorses a strong form of emergentism in which the emerging divide between mind and matter is real, rather than epiphenomenal. While mind and matter share a single plane of material being, mind, in its immanent transcending of nature, exerts downward causation. The notion of downward causality, taken from Žižek, names the possibility of ‘an emergent property coming to exert a reciprocal causal influence of its own on the ontological-physical base out of which it emerged’ (Johnston 2014: 18). Ideas are more-than-material, but they can have real, traceable effects on their material ground (Johnston 2014: 14,18). They are material in the last instance.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is this strong emergentism that prevents transcendental materialism from being a reductionist form of materialism. In understanding subjectivity as natural, it simultaneously rethinks the concept of nature. Rather than a concept of nature characterised by brute determinism, it argues for a form of materialism rooted in the incompleteness of being and nature’s capacity to generate more-than-material realities that are nonetheless still part of nature. Nature thus names all that is; to be non-natural, then, is to not exist.[[6]](#footnote-6) Human subjectivity is nature thinking itself.

To offer a preliminary summary, then, there is a singular plane of material being, which self-differentiates into matter and the more-than-material. The latter category is composed of emergent properties. Some of these emergent properties, such as mind, are strongly emergent. That is, they possess a relative autonomy and are capable of exerting downward causation, shaping the material world that they immanently transcend.

In addition to a strongly emergent notion of mind, transcendental materialism argues that an analogous process happens at the level of the social or cultural. This position draws on Hegel, Marx and Lacan to argue for the reality of abstractions.[[7]](#footnote-7) As Johnston puts it in his ‘principle of no-illusons’, ‘as real qua non-illusory, such abstractions are causally efficacious and… far from epiphenomenal. In Hegelian phrasing, thought of the concrete apart from the abstract is the height of abstraction’ (Johnston 2013b: 94). Put in different terms, transcendental materialism places the distinction between nature and culture within nature itself (a cultural version of the two natures Johnston discusses with reference to subjectivity). Culture is the immanent transcending of nature in its giveness (Johnston 2014: 14).

This account of reality is neither straightforwardly realist nor constructivist. Rather it provides a material account of social constructions through combining strong emergentism with an analysis of the reality of abstractions. It is not that our knowledge does not ‘correspond’ to an independently existing natural reality, but that this natural reality is not fixed and is altered through our knowing and acting. Johnston makes this point by invoking Žižek: ‘“the axiom of true materialism is not ‘material reality is all there is,’ but a double one: (1) there is nothing which is not material reality, (2) material reality is non-All”’ (Žižek 2012: 742 in Johnston 2014: 15). Johnston and Žižek are here offering an ontological appropriation of a Lacanian notion. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan introduces the logic of the non-All in the course of a discussion of sexual difference (Lacan 1999: 80).[[8]](#footnote-8) This logic describes a state of incomplete wholeness. This incompleteness is not framed positively, as the existence of something that is not material, but as a negative possibility. The flux and contingency of reality does not indicate something outside or transcending material reality, but is part of the structure of materiality itself.

This same move toward understanding the interaction of thought, embodiment and social context appears in recent religious studies research. Graham Harvey, developing the work of Harry Garuba on animist materialism (Garuba 2003), argues that ‘Concepts are not (merely) mental abstractions but materially, physically affective actors in social situations’ (Harvey 2013: 138). Harvey’s work adds to that of Vásquez and others who seek to ground the study of religion in a materialist understanding of the world. Transcendental materialism provides epistemological and ontological justifications for the notion that mental abstractions are material and affective actors. Read alongside anthropological and sociological work in the study of religion, it thus expands the philosophical resources available for understanding the nature and function of religion.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Understanding how strongly emergent properties become part of a more-than-material world requires further examination of some of the philosophical resources of transcendental materialism. Specifically, Hegel offers an analysis of religion as a mode of cognition and a critical reading of religion as an institutional reality. In understanding religion as a mode of cognition as well as an institution, Hegel shows that philosophical analysis of concepts as materially, physically and affective actors are advance through an understanding of religion.

*Hegel and Philosophy of Religion*

While there has been a considerable amount of work on Hegel’s theological significance (for example Desmond 2003; Hodgson 2005), relatively little attention has been paid to Hegel as a thinker of religion as such (exceptions include Di Giovani 2003; Lewis 2011). Shifting attention from Hegel’s theology to Hegel’s philosophy of religion brings into focus the role religion plays in the larger philosophical framework Hegel develops across his corpus.

There are three elements to Hegel’s account of religion that deserve particular attention. First, he understands religion as a mode of cognition that is a moment in a wider movement from consciousness to absolute knowing. The *Phenomenology of Spirit*’s section on religion has to be read in light of Hegel’s claim that ‘the true is the whole’ (1977: §20,11).[[10]](#footnote-10) By this Hegel means that the absolute is a result, not as a terminus, but as a perspective from which thought grasps the movement of thinking in its individual moments and as a whole. Angelica Nuzzo makes this point (though in relation to Hegel’s *Logic*) arguing that the ‘absolute’ of absolute knowing is adjectival. Knowing is absolute in the sense that philosophy arrives at an absolute method that grasps the logic of the movement of thinking itself (Nuzzo 2005: 188). Jeffrey Stout makes the same point with regards to the *Phenomenology*, describing the goal of the book as the development of ‘a conception of knowledge that does not need to go beyond itself’ (Stout 2015: 167).From this perspective religion is a mode of cognition between the modes of morality and philosophy, as indicated by the structure of the *Phenomenology* itself. The task of philosophy is to understand the specificity of this mode in the scope of the larger movement of thought.

Second, this mode of cognition is the apex of what Hegel calls representation. This means that, at least in the *Phenomenology*, religion is not primarily a set of beliefs or doctrines, but a distinctive mode of cognition - representational thinking (1977: §678:412). Hegel presents religion as the moment in the formation of spirit when substance enters into relation with its own self-alienated content. ‘…self consciousness alienates itself from itself and gives itself the nature of a thing, or makes itself a universal self’ (1977: §755,457). The self-emptying of self-consciousness generates an externalisation made subject. Put succinctly, religion is the subject’s affective relation to its own self-generated mediation. A similar point is made in the *Philosophy of Mind*’s discussion of representation when Hegel describes how imagination’s ‘self-sprung ideas’ come to have a kind of representational existence: ‘but as the creation unites the internal idea with the vehicle of materialization, intelligence has therein *implicitly* returned both to identical self-relation and to immediacy’ (1990: §457,211).

Religion is not the only form of representation. Art is also understood in terms of representation and, for Hegel, religion and art are closely linked. Indeed, the second major section of the *Phenomenology*’s discussion of religion is ‘Religion in the form of art.’ Religion is distinguished from art in not only including the sensorial, but encompassing ideas and feelings as well (Lewis 2011: 156-158). For Hegel, these representations share the same truth as philosophy, but in a form that does not distinguish between content and that content’s presentation as an object (Hegel 1991: §3, 26).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Third, Hegel understands this notion of cognition in its social and political context. As summarised thus far, the understanding of religion as a distinct mode of cognition only captures one side of the ‘reality of the concept of religion’ (Hegel 2008: 335). The other side, the cultus, is the practical relationship that facilitates the affective relation to mediation constitutive of subjective spirit. So, religion is not only a matter of the affective relation to mediation, it is also a matter of the historical, cultural and material conditions of that mediation. While Hegel’s subjective account of religion is oriented towards absolute knowing, the objective account is oriented towards the state (understood as an independent and sovereign ethical community rather than straightforwardly referring to the nation state [Pelczynski 1984: 55]). As he writes in the 1831 lecture on ‘The Relationship of Religion to the State’: ‘in what we refer to as “the people” the ultimate truth does not have the form of thoughts and principles, for what is to count as right for the people can only be so esteemed to the extent that it is something determinate and particular. For the people this determinate character of right and ethical life has its ultimate verification only in the form of an extant religion’ (Hegel 2008: 460).[[12]](#footnote-12) Here, one can extend Hegel’s observation beyond ‘the people’ in his diminutive sense to people more generally. While philosophy can conceive of ‘the ultimate truth’, remembering that this truth is absolute knowing as method, it must also be rendered determinate and particular in order to be actualised. The conceptual truth of philosophy is rendered determinate through religious representations, allowing an affective relationship to this truth in a way that philosophy does not provide. This immediacy is politically expedient. For Hegel, the religious mode of cognition facilitates the cultivation of the state’s values. There is a distinction to be made between religion and religion*s*. The former is a mode of cognition that includes religion*s*, but is not limited to ‘world religions’ or spirituality.

While Hegel’s account of religion’s relation to the state may not hold today, his larger point is that religion understood as a mode of cognition is embedded in social relations and material practices (the cultus). While that point is true for all thought, religion is significant in its enabling of affective relationships to representations of concepts. For Hegel, religion and philosophy are oriented to the same ‘truth’ of absolute knowing, but relate to that ‘truth’ differently. Philosophy is abstract and conceptual, whereas religion is embodied and affective.

*Developing a Transcendental Materialist Reading of Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion*

While the preceding section lays out fundamental aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, developing a transcendental materialist reading of Hegel’s understanding of religion is a constructive enterprise. Johnston, along with Žižek, shows how Hegel’s philosophy has materialist aspects (his treatment of nature and the emergence of subjectivity) as well as resources for developing materialist philosophy that are not straightforwardly materialist (the idea of the true as the whole, for example). The transcendental materialist reading emphasises these aspects in order to reorient Hegel’s philosophical framework. The result is not an exegetical analysis of Hegel’s text (though close readings are part of this approach), but an attempt to continue one strand of Hegel’s project: developing an understanding of subjectivity and its various modes of cognition.

Having outlined the basics of Hegel’s philosophy of religion and highlighted materialist aspects, it is now possible to develop these further. I argue that transcendental materialism understands religion as an embodied mode of cognition by which subjects relate to transcending abstractions. It is important to note that this approach understands religion *as a mode of cognition*. That is, it offers an account of how subjects relate religiously to abstractions. Some of those abstractions will fall within the admittedly contested category of world religions and others will not. As with Hegel’s own work, the use of religion to refer both to the mode of cognition in which subjects religiously relate to transcending abstractions and religion in the vernacular sense creates confusion. Transcendental materialism is more interested in the first Hegelian sense than the second. The two senses are related, though, as seen in Hegel’s discussion of Christianity in both the *Phenomenology* and elsewhere in his work. Religion, in the sense of Christianity or world religions, is paradigmatic of religion as a mode of cognition.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hegel offers a philosophical understanding of this paradigmatic example that understands it in relation to the wider movement of thought. For the purposes of transcendental materialism, understanding this particular mode of cognition helps develop a fuller account of materialist subjectivity in its affective and cognitive dimensions. Subjects may also relate religiously to sports teams or to political movements. They may relate to these abstractions in other ways as well as or instead of religiously. Regardless of these other examples, transcendental materialism adds a new set of conceptual resources for thinking about those practices and beliefs currently classified as ‘religion.’

This effort is at odds with Johnston’s initial explorations of transcendental materialism, which have been hostile to religion (Johnston 2008, 2011, 2012). While Davis Hankins (2015) uses transcendental materialism in his reading of the book of Job, he is mainly concerned with the implications of Johnston’s use of Lacan rather than the implications of materialism for thinking about religion as such. Despite the ‘principle of no-illusions’ referenced above, then, there has yet to be a substantive engagement with religion as anything more than epiphenomenal. Understanding religion as an embodied mode of consciousness by which subjects relate to transcending abstractions begins the work of developing a more informed, critical transcendental materialist perspective on the reality of religion.

There are three key ways that transcendental materialism develops Hegel’s discussion of religion. First, religion is an embodied mode of cognition. Describing religion as embodied does not imply that there are forms of thought that are not embodied. Following Varela, Thompson and Rosch, all forms of thought are embodied in the sense that thought cannot be understood apart from the body (1993: 27). Rather, emphasising the concept of embodiment draws on the Hegelian distinction between religion and philosophy. Philosophy is a mode of cognition that seeks to think concepts in their abstraction. Religion engages these abstract ideas as they are embodied. The distinction is not absolute, but emphasises different moments in the movement of thought.

In the *Philosophy of Mind*, the section on representation is preceded by a discussion of feeling (1990: §446,192-§447,195). For Hegel, representation is an affective, and thus subjective, connection to the concept. Representation, as a mode of cognition, is *of* something. Michael Inwood explains that this is the difference between referring to *her* representation of God or *the* concept of God (1992: 257). This example can be clarified by combing the two: it is *her* representation of *the* concept of God. This example does not require ‘the concept of God’ to take on a universal meaning. It only specifies that the concept is objective and external while the representation is subjective and internal.

For Hegel, religion transitions into philosophy in understanding this relationship. This is a communal activity in which the community becomes aware of itself as the externalised other. Being and thought are divided into a ‘here and beyond’ (1977: §765,463) which philosophy erases. Here, Hegel’s formulation can be altered. While the here and beyond is erased, the externality remains. Understanding the self-emptying of substance’s generation of a mode of cognition, in which the subject relates to its own truth as external, is to grasp the religious moment of subjectivity. What transcendental materialism allows us to understand, not only at the level of subject, but at the level of culture, is that this truth *is* external. It is transcending, rather than transcendent. It is external, but not beyond. In Lacan’s terminology, it is extimate (Lacan 1992: 139).

Another Hegelian point follows from this discussion of embodiment. Religion is a mode of cognition, which is to say that it is one of many modes. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* traces a variety of modes of consciousness: sense-certainty gives rise to self-consciousness leads to scepticism gives birth to reason leads to spirit in its aesthetic, religious and philosophical forms. There is a tradition, usually critical of Hegel, which sees this progression as teleological. This misunderstands the structure of the *Phenomenology*. Hegel seeks to draw out how each mode leads to the next, but not in the sense of discarding earlier modes. Philosophy does not mean the annulling of sense-certainty, but understands sense-certainty as a moment of the whole of the movement of thought. Likewise, religion is a persistent mode of consciousness. It is not supplanted by philosophy, but philosophy does provide tools for understanding the nature and function of religion as a mode of engaging with reality.

Combining these first two points, in light of the preceding outline of Hegel’s philosophy of religion, means that religion is a mode of cognition by which one affectively relates to an objective and external concept. This affective mode is not irrational or non-rational, but simply a different point in the movement of rational thought. Indeed, rationality is dependent upon affect, both in term of the normal functioning of the subject (Malabou 2013: 30) and the actualisation of conceptuality. The previous section demonstrated that the embodied and affective nature of religion is key to Hegel’s understanding of religion’s relation to the concept. The transcendental materialist reading developed here makes explicit the dialectical nature of the relationship religion facilitates between practice and concept. It affirms the objective and external reality of concepts, exploring the life of the concept as a material, physical and affective actor. In this affirmation, the materialist reading of Hegel allows for an exploration of downward causation not found in Hegel’s writing, while preserving the role of religion in the larger movement of thought. Thus, this transcendental materialist understanding of religion does not only improve philosophy’s capacity to think about religions, it expands philosophy’s capacity to conceptualise the movement of thought itself. As Lewis argues, philosophy too often casts religion as reason’s other (2015: 53-55). A materialist reading of Hegel pushes even further - conceiving religion as reason’s other not only misconstrues religion, it fails to adequately conceptualise *both* religion and reason.

Finally, this mode of consciousness is distinguished as a mode by which we engage with transcending abstractions. This term refers to strongly emergent aspects of human communities. These are aspects of culture that shape individuals biologically and socially. In Bruce Wexler’s terms, they are self-perpetuating ‘higher-order cognitive structures’ and ‘social emotional structures’ that are part of the biological determination of subjectivity (2008: 144). Concepts of race, gender and religion may be socially constructed, but they are nonetheless objective features of many cultural realities. Varela, Thompson and Rosch make a similar point in the development their enactivist approach: ‘cognition depends upon the kinds of experience that come from having body with various sensorimotor capacities’ and ‘these individual sensorimotor capacities are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context’ (1993: 173). Transcendental materialism provides a materialist account of how the more-than-material emergent realities play a role in this context by offering a philosophical framework for grasping the force of their downward causation. For example, Wexler’s research describes the interpersonal nature of the neurobiological processes by which the human brain develops in relation to its ‘human-made environment’ (2008: 142-144). Transcendental materialism locates that human-made environment within nature itself and argues that concepts are part of that environment. It provides a philosophical translation of scientific insights while situating those insights in a larger ontological perspective.

The biological, psychological and cultural context is thus natural, in both its human-made and non-humans aspects. Hegel understands religion as an affective relation to concepts that transcendental materialism locates within the human-made environment. This affective, religious relation to the concept crosses the boundary between the human-made and biological. This context, including its conceptual dimensions is not chosen by the subject. Religion is part of a human-made environment to which the subject adapts and religion is part of the adaptation to the environment. The subject does not select those concepts that structure her world. The affective relationship is not freely willed or intended. Hume’s distinction between fiction and belief is helpful at this point. Hume argues that ‘the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment of feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure’ (Hume 2007: 47). For Hume, this conviction that exceeds mere fantasy arises from ‘feeling or sentiment’ (2007: 47). Like Hegel, Hume connects belief to imagination, sensation and memory (2007: 49). The transcendental materialist reading of Hegel’s philosophy of religion makes this involuntary aspect of religion clear.[[14]](#footnote-14) The affective relationship to representations may be cultivated through rituals and practices but is not the result of an isolatable choice. The function of religion depends on the downward causation of abstraction on subjectivity, including at a biological level.

Shifting an understanding of religion from fiction to belief (in the Humean sense) has political implications. As Alberto Toscano points out in *Fanaticism*, many contemporary critiques of religion ‘often rely on the idealist, asocial view that the say of religious representations and ideologies over human affairs can be terminated by a mere change of consciousness’ (2010: 182). Though Vásquez does not sharing Marx’s goal of critiquing religion, he agrees that religion must not only be discussed in terms of belief, but the material (including biological) conditions of belief. Following Toscano (2011), if contemporary critiques of religion are primarily concerned with correcting erroneous accounts of the world or subjectivity, that critique will remain inaccurate and ineffective. Analyses that reduce religion to dogmatic forms of belief or propositional statements fail to engage with the complexity of religion as a feature of reality.

Thus, a transcendental materialist reading of Hegel’s philosophy understands religion as the embodied mode of cognition by which subjects relate to transcending abstractions. Religion is understood within the framework of immanent naturalism (Johnston 2014: 306) or ‘non-reductive naturalism of an auto-denaturalizing nature’ (Johnston 2012: 333) in which religion is an essential part of a material, self-transcending process. In comparison with other naturalistic accounts, for example in the work of Daniel Dennett (2007), transcendental materialism offers a more nuanced account of religion. While Dennett provides a relatively informed discussion of rituals and the interaction of practice and ideas, his conclusions are shaped by the conviction that the focus on a supernatural God renders religion problematic. In understanding religion as both mode of cognition and as a set of institutions or traditions, Hegel shows that religion as a mode of cognition is not only at work in religions. It is one aspect of political communities; it is the means by which one identifies with the more-than-material realities that shape material existence. This point is well made by Mark Juergensmeyer’s concept of ideologies of order (1994: 31). Religions are not the only source of frameworks that provide a description of things seen and unseen while authorising members of the group to enact a particular vision of the world. Acts of self-sacrifice and violence that are considered laudable in the service of the nation state become condemnable when performed in the name of a god.

To return to Hume’s language, transcendental materialism treats religion as belief rather than fiction. Moreover, it understands religion as an important feature of this process of auto-denaturalisation and mobilises religion as a framework for understanding the relationship to a number of transcending abstractions, not only those traditionally categorised as ‘religious’. Again, this understanding of religion has significant political implications. In Hegel’s lectures on ‘The Relationship of Religion to the State’ he claims that ‘A people that has a bad concept of God has also a bad state, bad government and bad laws’ (2008: 333). An updated version of Hegel’s thesis might read ‘A people that has a bad concept of religion, has also a bad state, bad government and bad laws’. The inability to grasp religion as a mode of cognition by which people relate to determinate and particular representations of concepts (whether any particular individual has an abstract understanding of those concepts) is an inability to understand the material processes through which communities relate to the more-than-material.

*Transcendental Materialism and Recent Materialism and Recent Philosophy of Religion: Rethinking Belief*

This transcendental materialist reading of Hegel’s philosophy of religion adds to a body of recent work arguing that Hegel has more to contribute to thinking about religion than was once thought (Lewis 2011, Adams 2013b, Nuzzo 2013). As Lewis shows (2011), these recent readings show that Hegel’s philosophy of religion anticipates themes in the contemporary study of religion. While Lewis is more concerned with the work of Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard, the same claim can be made for a materialist reading of Hegel. For Hegel, the cultus, with its embodied practices or rituals, enables an alternative framework for thinking about the relationship between ideas, abstract thought and embodiment. While critiques of Hegel’s contribution to problematic understandings of religion are certainly needed, focusing on Hegel’s idealism often misses this connection to issues of embodiment and practice. For example, Vásquez points to Hegel’s treatment of ‘extra-mental reality as nothing more than the gallery of externalisations in the *Geist*’s self-propelling march toward full rationality’ as contributing to the myth of disembodied and decontextualised rational mind’ (2010: 40-1). Ironically, it is in his discussions of religion that Hegel shows the necessity of the embodied and contextualised for the actualisation of the concept.

Vásquez’s critique of Hegel notwithstanding, there are parallels between his materialist theory of religion and this rereading of Hegel. Vásquez has developed a theory of religion that explores religion from a ‘non-reductive materialist epistemological framework’ in which ‘religious phenomena are not merely derivative; just like any sociocultural and phenomenological reality, they are supervenient materialities, which exert downward determination’ (2010: 14). He draws together recent work from sociology, anthropology, ecology and neuroscience to develop this theory over and against a notion of religion determined by the idealism and textualism of Protestant Christianity. Just as Johnston develops a materialist account of subjectivity by philosophically interpreting work from other disciplines, Vásquez arrives at a parallel account of the same processes at the level of both subjectivity and the social or cultural.

Vásquez provides a complex depiction of religion as a feature of human society that can be partially explained by evolutionary theory and neuroscience, but that cannot be fully explained by such. he theorises religion from the perspective of a materialism in which material generates features that exceed materiality. ‘Transcendence is immanent, part of our own untotalizable but still binding materiality’ (2010: 269). To paraphrase a point made earlier, nature’s self-transcending is an immanent process. The transcending of materiality is a process that can be understood through materialism and which has material consequences. Vásquez is concerned with how people become capable of these experiences, emotions and ideas through training and education. They are not the result of acts of will or isolatable choices. The result is a theory of religion concerned with ‘an analysis of the natural… conditions that make religious claims possible and binding as well as the material effects that these claims have in everyday life’ (2010: 163).

There are thus striking parallels between Vásquez’s account of materialism and transcendental materialism. While he critiques Hegel for a simplistic idealism and ignores the ways that German Idealism can contribute to the formulation of a materialist account of subjectivity, Vásquez endorses a theory of religion that draws on the strong emergentism of Varela, Thompson and Rosch’s *The Embodied Mind* (1993). He is similarly concerned with the formation of subjectivity in relationship to biological processes, especially the plasticity of the brain, and the ways in which religion exerts downward causation on the materiality of the subject, allowing religion to enact the possibility of its own experience.

Johnston’s account of transcendental materialism complements Vásquez in two key ways. First, Vásquez offers a fairly detailed treatment of sociology, anthropology and phenomenology, but transcendental materialism extends the range of resources available for thinking about the materiality of religion. Phenomenology has understandably played a key roll in philosophy of religion, but with the emergence of new, materialist theories of religion, other philosophical resources are available and can enrich the philosophical dimension of the study of religion. Second, Vásquez contrasts his materialist account with those that focus on belief. This positioning seeks to correct a traditional over-emphasis on belief (in terms of dogma more than the Humean sense mentioned above). Alongside the contrast with belief is an opposition to abstraction. This position is understandable - he is pushing back against reductive accounts of religion and attempting to foreground the embodied and practical aspects of religion. Yet, when he affirms the centrality of ‘knowing-how’, for example, over abstraction or representation (2010: 183-184), he separates the two in an unhelpful way. If abstractions are material, physical and affective actors as described above, they are an aspect of knowing-how as well as contributing to the world that knowing-how navigates. While Vásquez is not using the terms abstraction or representation in the Hegelian sense described above, in drawing a division between knowing-that or conceptual knowledge and knowing-how or habitus he obscures the relationship between the two. Vásquez aims to develop ‘a constructive exchange… between a biological non-reductive realism and social constructivism’ (2010: 184). Transcendental materialism argues that such an exchange, if it is to fully explain strong emergentism, requires understanding the ways in which transcending abstractions move between the socially constructed and the biological.

In order to understand transcendental materialism’s potential contribution on this second point, it is useful to consider Vásquez and Schilbrack’s differing positions on abstraction, conceptuality and belief. In a discussion of asceticism, Vásquez argues ‘what matters is not abstract representation but the usefulness and efficacy of a particular strategy’ (2010: 183). The ascetic performs his or her religious duties until they have been mastered. This point misses that the know-how of the ascetic is deeply intertwined with, though not subordinate to, a whole series of abstract representations. Indeed, as Vásquez argues elsewhere in his book, this is an example of materiality giving rise to the more-than-material which in turn transforms material relations. To undervalue the moment of abstraction and/or representation is to risk slipping back into a one-sided account of religion. The goal should be to not privilege either side of the equation. It is key to take account of abstract representations, representations which have taken on a level of independence from material reality, because those representations impact material reality. Likewise, it is important to intervene at the level of know-how and practice because know-how and practice can exist in tension with and can disrupt abstract representations. In short, the two are dialectically related. It is also worth noting that the affirmation of abstraction as amoment in a larger pattern of cognition does not mean that abstraction is a key element of any particular individual religious subject. If, to return to Hegel, religion involves a social component (even in contexts where religion is primarily practiced privately), then the affirmation of abstraction applies to the life of the community rather than just the individual.

Schilbrack comes closer to describing a dialectical relationship between practice and abstraction or representation, but there is some ambiguity about the nature of the relationship between the two. In his discussion of the role of practice in cognition, Schilbrack describes religious practices as providing opportunities for investigation or cognition (2014: 36, 43, 44). Elsewhere he argues that these practices are cognitive (2014: 32) and that participating in these practices can be an exercise in abstract, creative and imaginative thought (2014: 39). Transcendental materialist philosophy of religion, as developed here, resists this understanding of religious practices as themselves modes of abstract thinking, but understands them as importantly connected to the abstract thinking of philosophy. This definition of religion does insist on religious practice as a mode of cognition, however. While it is correct to critique the reduction of religion to belief or dogma, or the attempts to force religions into a belief/practice binary, it is equally important to recognise the complex philosophical concepts transmitted through what was once dismissed as ‘mere’ practice or primitive religion. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro makes this point in *Cannibal Metaphysics*, ‘Couldn’t one shift to a perspective showing that the source of the most interesting concepts, problems, entities and agents introduced into thought by anthropological theory is in the imaginative powers of the societies - or, better, the peoples and collectives - that they propose to explain?’ (2014: 40). Viveiros de Castro’s point is easily transferred from anthropology to philosophy. The problem is not the imposition of abstract conceptuality on non-conceptual religions, but beginning with an inadequately creative vision of conceptuality.

For Schilbrack, all religions entail belief insofar as all religions involve taking the world the to be a certain way. Discussing this view in terms of dispositionalism, he argues that belief is not a specific mental activity but a more general taking things to be the case. ‘No religion lacks a cognitive element of fails to proffer a vision of the nature of things’ (2014: 73). This understanding of a mode of relating to conceptuality outside of the philosophical (and theological, narrowly construed) allows one to affirm that religious practices are not merely surface manifestations of some essential idea (Vásquez 2010: 89-90) while still holding that conceptuality is an important part of religion.

This view of conceptuality reiterates the earlier point that the concept of the concept should extend beyond abstract conceptuality. Conceptuality, as Wexler and Noe both argue (Wexler 2008, Noe 2010), must be conceived in such a way as to acknowledge that the body and world beyond the brain are an integral part of thought. Schilbrack makes a similar point with regards to religion. ‘[O]ne can see the religious participants’ interactions with the implements and environment of a ritual not as thoughtless and not as merely expressions of thought done elsewhere, but rather as the enabling or constitutive parts of a cognitive process’ (2014: 43). Vásquez affirms the same idea, arguing that ‘aspects of religious experience… may be emergent effects of the complex and fluid interplay among ecological, neurosomatic and sociocultural factors (2010: 107). For Schilbrack, ‘religious practices can serve as occasions of thoughtful inquiry when they provide the physically, linguistically, and socially extended cognition that enables participants to ask and answer questions about the features and the conditions for their normative paths’ (2014: 45). From the Hegelian perspective, religious practices are not only occasions for this kind of inquiry, but the paradigmatic example of how embodied and ‘socially extended’ thought allows for the concretisation of the abstract.

Transcendental materialism thus offers a materialist account of how belief and representation are ways of relating to abstract concepts non-abstractly. One can object to an emphasis on dogma without objecting to the conceptual aspects of religion. Conflating the two objections shows an inadequate grasp of cognition, not only with regard to religion. A variety of perspectives from the study of religion, philosophy of mind and neuroscience have all shown that the boundaries between ritual, practice and cognition are much blurrier than once thought (Vásquez 2010, Wexler 2008, Noe 2010). Again, while not following Schilbrack’s description of religious practice as a form of abstract thinking, his broader point that ‘the affective and cognitive aspects of religion are not simply vehicles for the cognitive but also contribute to it’ (2010: 19), should be endorsed. Johnston, appropriating a familiar Kantian expression, makes the same point: ‘Affects without ideas are blind (the dynamic movement of the affective or emotional is shaped and steered by the intellectual or cognitive), while ideas without affects are empty (the structured kinetics of the intellectual or cognitive are driven along by juice flowing from the affective or emotional)’ (Johnston 2013a: 121).

*Conclusion*

Hegel is an unlikely ally in expanding our notion of what it means to work with concepts. His understanding of the relationship between philosophy and religion cannot be accepted without alteration and it arguably continues to privilege a notion of abstract philosophical thought that is unaware of the embodied nature of that activity. The transcendental materialist reading of Hegel reworks some of these problematic tendencies while still affirming the relative autonomy of emergent subjectivity and culture. If Schilbrack is right to argue that philosophers will not be interested in religious practices until they are able to view such practices as a form of cognition (2014: 32), Hegel offers a framework from which to carry out this work.

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1. Unlike the other two, Vásquez is not explicitly working to rethink this relationship. Nonetheless, his work engaging contemporary philosophy of mind as it pertains to religious practices and beliefs offers an important starting point for new forms of philosophy of religion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For the purposes of this essay, I am leaving aside the larger question of whether or not the category ‘religion’ is stable or useful. Philosophy of religion has important contributions to make on this point (see Lewis 2015 and Schilbrack 2014 for defences of the category). If one wants to deconstruct ‘religion’, the transcendental materialist understanding of religion as a mode of cognition can function as a starting point for this project. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the shift from idealist to materialist analysis of religion see Toscano (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Materialism is a term that is often used loosely and with a number of qualifiers (dialectical, historical, speculative, etc.). For the purposes of this essay materialism refers to the methodological commitment to a philosophy that includes naturalist and empiricist elements without being straightforwardly naturalist or empiricist (Johnston 2013b: 91). Matter, plane of material being and materiality refer to physical world that is at the centre of this methodological commitment. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The phrase ‘in the last instance’ plays off Louis Althusser’s discussion of the relationship between structure and superstructure in Marx (2005: 111-113). Using Engels’ correction of cruder understandings of the economic implications of Marxism, Althusser discusses the tension between ‘*determination in the last instance by the (economic) mode of production*’ and ‘*the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific effectivity*’ (2005: 111). While the economic mode of production provides the basis for superstructures, the latter cannot be easily reduced to this material base. The two exist in relation as a whole, but the material base is determinative in the last instance. I am arguing that a similar relationship exists between matter and mind. Mind, like other emergent properties, has relative autonomy, but is determined in the last instance by its material base. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Working in a separate philosophical tradition, Sally Haslanger offers a similar conception of nature: ‘If we endorse a broad naturalism that takes the world to be a natural world that includes as part of it social and psychological events, processes, relations and such, then it would seem that to be non-natural… is to be nonexistent’ (Haslanger 2012: 213). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While Marx uses the term abstraction in a technical sense, I use the term in this essay to designate features of social reality that achieve a degree of independence and are capable of exerting downward causation. The connections between this broad sense and Marx’s more technical usage are outside the scope of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. While Lacan’s treatment of sexual difference in *Seminar XX* is notoriously difficult, Bruce Fink (1995: 108-113; 2002) offers a clear introduction to the place of the non-All within this discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. That is not to suggest that transcendental materialism is the only philosophical framework that can contribute to this work. Recent ‘new materialisms’ are yet another set of philosophical perspectives that have much to offer to this conversation (Coole and Frost, 2010). Some of the implications of new materialism for philosophy of religion and theology have already been considered in Crockett and Robbins (2012). I focus on transcendental materialism to highlight further philosophical resources for thinking about religion rather than as refutation of other attempts to reinvigorate materialist philosophy. For Johnston’s critique of Jane Bennett’s materialism see the final chapter of *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism* (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. References to the *Phenomenology* are to the paragraph number followed by the page number. While Miller’s translation capitalises a number of nouns (Spirit, Absolute Knowledge, etc.), I argue that making these proper nouns distorts the nature of the categories to which they refer. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a more detailed analysis of representation and the study of religion, see Lewis (2011). Magnus (2001) provides an analysis of religion as representation in relation to art. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. During the gap between the *Phenomenology* (published in 1807) and this later lecture, Hegel moved to Berlin to take up a new academic post. The time between this move in 1818 and his death in 1831 is known as the Berlin period. While his philosophy continued to develop during this time, his focus on religion as a mode of cognition is a consistent theme (Dickey 1993: 309). Though in his earlier work Hegel had concerns about the political implications of Christianity (Hegel 1975), there is a consistent logic underlying the understanding developed in the *Phenomenology* and his later work. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. There is precedent for this understanding in Marx’s position that ‘the criticism of religion is the premise of religion’ (1978: 53). Marx is not only arguing that ‘religion’ must be critiqued, but that ‘religion’ is a way of relating to abstraction. Understanding ‘religion’ helps one understand religion as a mode of cognition. For more on Marx and the critique of religion see Toscano (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The focus on belief has been widely criticised in the study of religion, but this materialist understanding of religion introduces a distinction between belief and dogma that circumvents some of these critiques. Belief in the Humean sense is not the same as belief in the sense critiqued by Vásquez, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)