

Print Ontology: The 1st Person Apotheosis of the Self

1. Welcome to this third video lecture on Print Ontology. In this video I want to explore the first person orientation to ontology and religion, starting with the 17th century Lutheran mystic Jacob Böhme, then moving to German Transcendental Idealism and ending with the American Transcendentalist movement.
2. We have seen how print literacy radicalizes objectivity (1) in Descartes' geometrical method. His (1) analytical (2) deductive rules for thinking explains objects and events in terms of (3) predictable causal mechanisms. (5) The scribal book of nature thus becomes (6) for Descartes effectively a machine, a tool or technology, (7) for immaterial autonomous human subjects or minds to use to attain their freely chosen goals. Thus while systematic, Descartes' ontology is still dualistic. (8) Just how matter and mind can interact, the "mind-body problem" will prove an ongoing loose end. Modern philosophers after Descartes will propose a wide variety of solutions. (9) Spinoza for example will treat (10) mind and matter not as two separate substances but as two (11) distinct attributes of a single substance analyzable as either "God" or "Nature." On the other hand, (12) La Mettrie, a physician as well as a philosopher, will dismiss subjectivity altogether as (13) mere epiphenomenal accompaniments of mechanistic processes that do no explanatory work themselves. For La Mettrie, (14) not only the world but now even the mind of man is to explained in terms of the workings of a machine.
3. However, a parallel radicalization of subjectivity also arose on the fringes of scientific research in mystical circles. (1) Here reality was understood not in terms of (2) quantity but quality, (3) not matter in motion but matter in transformation, (4) whose paradigm was not geometry or physics but chemistry, (5) or, better, its mystical ancestor, alchemy. Alchemy offered not mathematical, mechanical explanations, but qualitative explanations, (6) that were a function of (7) reductions and (8) distillations, (9) purification and (10) putrefaction, (11) fermentation and (12) cathexes (chemical binding) (13) refinement and (14) sublimation,. Mainstream science sought to reduce these transformations to the mechanical models that had so revolutionized physics, but the pace of scientific advance was slower, and resistance stronger in Chemistry and Biology.
4. Alchemy would remain a minority counter-movement throughout the enlightenment. As we noted earlier, Marin Mersenne enthusiastically promoted Cartesian physics precisely

as an alternative to Renaissance alchemy, for he saw in alchemy a far more dangerous threat to traditional Christian doctrine. For in dissociating matter from mind, (1) Descartes had also dissociated science from religious dogma and ritual. Other than the existence of God and the immortality of the human soul, religious beliefs could be neither proven nor disproven, and so could remain legitimate matters of faith. (2) However mystical alchemists like Giordano Bruno did advocate for an alchemical theology that could explain matter in spiritual categories and spiritual categories in terms of material, alchemical processes.

5. Bruno's God was thus not Descartes' nor Deism's transcendent other, clearly and distinctly separate from the material world, (1) but rather an immanent divinity not only continuously active in (2) the world but also responsive to human ritual. Rather than the objective ideal of the scientist as an objective theorist and detached observer, (3) the alchemist understood his scientific research to spiritually transform himself as well as the cosmos. For him, lab work was also religious ritual. Thus the alchemist saw himself to be both scientist and priest, or in Zoroastrian terms, a Magus, and his alchemy, magic. (4) Its telling then that while Galileo was silenced and put under house arrest for his astronomy and physics, Bruno was burned at the stake as a heretic, his alchemy a rival to orthodox spirituality.
6. While alchemy had some medieval precedent, especially in the work of Aquinas' mentor Albert the Great, it was the rediscovery of the Hermetic corpus in fourteenth century Florence that catalyzed this movement as part of the return to the sources of Greek and Roman antiquity characterizing Renaissance humanism. The hermetic writings were ancient Egyptian mystical texts recording a primal wisdom, or "perennial philosophy." It was soon established however that these were not quite so ancient, but rather Hellenistic middle Platonic texts from second and third century Alexandria. However this only reinforced their affinity to Christian metaphysics itself first developed by similarly situated Alexandrian middle Platonist church fathers such as Clement and Origen. Marsilio Ficino translated into Latin these Greek texts delivered to him from Constantinople at the time of its fall to Islam. The contemporaneous invention of the printing press enabled the widespread dissemination of the hermetic corpus across Europe.

7. One of the principle prophets of this minority intellectual current was the Lutheran mystic, Jacob Böhme. In his alchemically informed spiritual writings he explored the logic of a radicalized subjectivity, leading to God as a coincidence of subjectivity and objectivity as a pair of opposed forces, dark and light, will and reason, in which the sacred lay in a reciprocal recognition between these two aspects of the divine. Böhme identified three primal forces or principles at work in reality.
 - a. (1) The first principle was that of radical first-person subjectivity itself, freedom without ground or constraint. Primal freedom must be groundless he argued, otherwise it would be determined by something other than itself. So too it must be limitless, for any bound would again be other than itself. Primal freedom was then an infinite expression of sheer will.
 - b. (2) Böhme argued however that such sheer expressivity was blind; it was will without guardrails, desire without an object, teleology without a telos.
 - c. It was the infinite power of radical freedom; pure will.
 - d. This first principle was a turbulent dark abyss, the principle not of being but of becoming. This first principle of radical subjectivity—the principle of freedom, (6) evoked a second, contrary principle, (7) that of radical objectivity that seeks to understand this willful, radical subjectivity, that looks dispassionately and listens quietly for pattern and definition in the turbulence, seeking to cast (8) the light of reason into the dark night of desire, to draw insight from ignorance. If the first principle was bottomless desire, the apotheosis of freedom, (9) the second was the serene apatheia of the detached observer. (10) the apotheosis of intelligence
8. Either principle in isolation however was more demonic than sacred. (1) Absolute Freedom, that is freedom by itself, *ab solus*, recognizes nothing beyond its own blind power. It holds nothing sacred but its own willful expressive impulse. But (2) absolute reason, that is, detached impartial intelligence by itself, with no desire or goals of its own, holds nothing sacred either.
 - a. (3) Both however are recognizably religious logics. (4) Denial of self, detachment, self-surrender to the will of God, radicalized to the point of virtual self-annihilation is found as we have seen in a number of medieval mystics. (5) Eckhart referred to the ground of God as an empty undifferentiated desert

expanse. And he would claim that ultimately the ground of the individual's soul is identical with God's ground, a pre-individuated undifferentiated upsurge of creative energy (*energeia*).

- b. (6) On the other hand, a zealous identification with God's will, a singlemindedness that brooked no dissent had unleashed the wars of religion that were ravaging Böhme's society. For the first principle expressed not only the logic of freedom (7) but also the optimizing logic of purity. Its demonic violence was evident all around him.

Salvation from such demonic violence could only be had by each Christian reform movement recognizing the Christianity of its rivals, indeed in not seeing each other *as* rivals but as brothers and sisters in Christ, not competitors but complements, companions, calling for cooperation in the common work of completing God's creation, building the Kingdom of God.

9. The conflict between these two primal opposites, then catalyzed the emergence of a (1) third principle, that of (2) the mutual recognition between these opposed forces, what he will call (3) the principle of individuation. For individuals are neither laws unto themselves nor mechanical applications of impartial, universal principles but rather (4) unique singularities, defined by the distinctive contingencies of each one's own particular history and context.

Böhme identified the interplay of all three principles the Holy Trinity: the first dark principle of boundless power he named (5) God the Father Almighty, who only comes to know himself through begetting an image of himself, (6) God the Son, the Word of the Father. Father and Son then reciprocally recognize and affirm each other in their common love for each other (6) in the God the Holy Spirit.

10. Böhme presented these three principles successively, but ontologically the dynamic is eternal, for (1) no one principle ever operates without the cooperation of the other two. (2) Only together are these three principles sacred, and only together do they create our world. The (3) logic of this interplay or *perichoresis* of reciprocal recognition is not only (4) the logic of individuation but at the same time, (5) the logic of creativity, individual and divine. Neither blind spontaneity nor sterile detachment, (6) God creatively produces a world of vibrant individuals each of which he holds dear, each of which bears

its own unique signature. (7) Alchemy is about reading these signatures, and working with their individuality, (8) so as to chemically/ritually transmute the base into the sublime.

11. So too, this world itself mimetically imitates its creator. We are not mindless cogs in a machine devoid of subjective qualities, meanings and purposes. Nor is the world a turbulence of opposed freedoms, where human life is ultimately absurd. Rather reality is a meaningful cosmos peopled by individuals who in mutually recognizing each other all flourish and bloom. The world is not external to us, it is *our* world, our common home. As images of God, humanity and indeed all life mirrors the divine interplay of responsive self-expression and expressive responsibility to one another. True knowledge does not lie in geometrical demonstrations of mere matter in motion, or in the willful expressivity of autonomous subjects but in the relational give and take, each empowering and being empowered by one another the in an alchemical understanding of each individual's own signature way of being in the world.
12. As we saw in earlier videos, objective science with its demonstrated success in prediction and control would come to define knowledge in the Enlightenment. Alchemy's appeal to a mystical wisdom of creativity and meaning, seeking to understand and relate rather than to explain and control, would remain an undercurrent, explored on the side by leading astronomers such as Kepler and Newton as well as by early pioneers in chemistry and biology such as Swedenborg and Goethe. But geometrical reason's mechanistic model of science would reign supreme.
13. However absolutized subjectivity did enjoy a philosophical resurgence at the birth of the industrial age in transcendental idealism. Fichte, building on Kant, would argue that (1) objectivity itself was ultimately the material expression of free subjectivity, or in other words that objectivity is not separate from subjectivity but rather (2) matter is the medium in which subjectivity expresses itself, or in religious terms, (3) that creation is the ongoing expression of divine creative subjectivity.
14. "In the beginning was not the fact, but the act." So does Fichte announce his first person orientation to reality. (1) The cosmos is not the global effect of an ultimate Cause, as we saw in Aquinas, but the global expression of an ultimate subject. However, like Böhme, Fichte argued that (2) action required resistance on which to act, for without resistance,

action can find no traction, like trying to walk on ice. Analogously (3) subjective expression however free, requires an objective medium in which to express its freedom.

- a. (4) But in contrast to Böhme, for Fichte, absolute freedom, pure Will, was at the same time pure Reason -- (5) not detached and abstract theoretical reason of course, but (6) engaged and concrete practical Reason. (7) Not theoretical reason, but Freedom, reason on the march, so to speak, was the true sacred, indeed the Christian sacred, rationally understood. But whereas Böhme focused attention on the origin of freedom, in an archeology of desire, Fichte would focus on freedom's culmination, in a teleology of expression.
15. Fichte followed Kant in distributing this principle of practical reason to all rational subjects. In our rationalizing *nature*, through working it using technology, (1) we participate in God's own creative activity, and (2) ultimately usher in the millennium, the Kingdom of God, the harmonization of the life of reason, or virtue, with reason's fulfillment, or true happiness. As one can see from his paean to technology in the final pages of "The Calling of Humanity," Fichte could be dubbed the first transhumanist.
 16. Later transcendental thinkers would further extend and transform this first person understanding of reality. Where (1) Böhme had approached the sacred from the logic of desire and its transcendence in (2) mutual recognition or love and (3) Fichte would approach the sacred through freedom, the logic of practical reason and technology. (4) Schelling would approach the sacred as the force of life, understanding all reality along a continuum of subjectivity, including even the world itself as a living organism. (5) For Schelling, humanity is ultimately the cosmos itself come to self-consciousness. In his later writings Schelling would trace the history of religion along a developmental trajectory of such rational self-consciousness, beginning with animism and culminating in Christianity. (6) Religious myth, symbol and ritual were interpreted as expressions of the sacred force of life in its ongoing evolution to full self-consciousness.
 17. In the early twentieth century Carl Jung would psychologize this orientation, identifying the developing force at the heart of reality as a collective unconscious that finds expressions in psychological archetypes to be found in religions throughout history and around the world as well as in dreams and psychiatric disorders.

18. Schopenhauer on the other hand, would fully reduce radical subjectivity back to radical objectivity. We saw in an earlier lecture how (1) Descartes had begun modern print ontology by differentiating oral dialogue into radical objectivity and radical subjectivity. As we saw earlier in this lecture, (2) Fichte would later ground both objective and subjective reality in a cosmic transcendental subjectivity and (3) Schelling would in turn, ground transcendental subjectivity in the primordial unconscious force of life. Yet, while unconscious, Schelling argued it was still reason in action, spirit coming to self-consciousness. Schopenhauer on the other hand, (4) would ground life in irrational biological instinct and (5) ground instinct itself in objective causal forces.
19. Force and instinct were not manifestations of a primitive subjectivity, but rather (1) conscious thought and desire were themselves all subjective representations of (2) objective instinctual biological *forces*. His philosophy would remain still-born however until the industrial revolution transformed human life sufficiently to make material force a compelling model for all reality.
20. Schopenhauer was renowned for preaching a cultural pessimism: (1) A pessimist, he claims, it an optimist in full possession of the facts. A couple other quotable quotes that also illustrates how Schopenhauer still expresses a first person orientation even if subjectivity is itself reduced to objective force: (2) “There is only one inborn error: that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy.” (3) “It is difficult to find happiness within oneself, but is impossible to find it anywhere else.” and (4) “A man can be himself only so long as he is alone; and if he does not love solitude, he will not love freedom; for it is only when he is alone that he is really free.”
21. Schopenhauer was also renowned for preaching atheism. But it was not that he held nothing sacred. He found inspiration in (1) Buddhism and the (1) Upanishads only then reaching Europe by returning Christian missionaries, particularly Jesuit missionaries. Buddhism’s first three “Noble Truths” that (2) life is suffering, that (3) suffering is caused by desire and that (4) liberation from suffering is found in the extinction of desire paralleled his own “pessimism.” Schopenhauer found liberation from suffering however not in spiritual practices of asceticism and meditation but in the disinterested aesthetics of art for art’s sake. Absorbing oneself a beauty independent of any use or purpose could

give one at least momentary relief and rest from the vortex of desire and the rigors of productivity in industrial capitalism.

- a. Schopenhauer took the Upanishads to themselves be a form of “atheism,” in that they rejected theism in favor of identifying (6) ultimate objective reality with the all-encompassing, impersonal Brahman and rejected personal immortality in favor (7) of identifying ultimate subjective reality with eternal, transcendental Atman. Furthermore, for the Upanishads cosmic (8) objectivity and cosmic subjectivity coincided in an ultimate reality that could be referred to as either, but literally transcended both. (9) It was similar to Schelling’s notion of ultimate reality as a sacred “indifference point” between both objectivity and subjectivity.
22. At the beginning of the twentieth century Sigmund Freud would model Schopenhauer’s objective (1) instinctual energy on industrial steam power, analyzing human subjectivity as the (2) product of two instinctual forces or what he would call “drives:” (3) sex or the momentum of the force of life and (4) aggression, or death, the inertial drag on life from the inorganic objective world from whence life originally arose. These primal sexual and aggressive energies would often lie below conscious awareness, (5) repressed and rechannelled, vented and sublimated by (6) individuals over the course of their lives and by (7) society through cultural institutions (8) like religion. A later video lecture explores in greater detail Freud’s industrial model of the self.
 23. Finally, a word on the American reception of Transcendental Idealism. American Transcendentalism would translate German (1) transcendental idealism into naturalistic categories and (2) its transcendental subjectivity into individual free expression. Connection to the divine was to be found in wild nature without and in artistic creativity within. Indeed nature was revered by the transcendentalists as an unmediated expression of original, divine creativity. (3) Nature was not so much below human reason as above it, closer to the divine as a purer expression of God, unfiltered by human civilization.
 24. In tapping into our own individual creativity we were both imitating the divine and joining God in completing his work of creation. But whereas Kant and Fichte argued for a principled freedom, a practical reason in action so to speak, American transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau would focus on the (1) creative imagination, (2) personal freedom and (3) individual self-reliance. In the words of Robert

Bellaah transcendental idealism's principled autonomy was transformed into an (4) expressive individualism skeptical of universal moral principles in which everyone was encouraged to follow the beat of their own drummer.

25. In seeking to commune with nature, the American Transcendentalists would focus less on nature's beauty than on its sublimity, that is, not on the beautiful patterns to be found in meadows and landscapes but on the infinite power and grandeur expressed in mountain and waterfall, as well as the abundant wildlife, the vast forests and the expansive fertile plains of the "New" World, pristine, untouched by human civilization. Europe and Asia were spent, used up by thousands of years of human technology; America were fresh and pristine virgin wilderness. Thus whereas Schopenhauer, and Freud, saw themselves as "realistic" world-weary pessimists, Emerson and his disciples exhibited all of the optimism and can-do utopianism of "the American Experiment"
26. Thus whereas wilderness had been seen in the "old" world as the realm of the demonic, calling for human domestication and rational subjugation, for the transcendentalists, the wilderness was transcendent, an unmediated expression of the creative, infinite divine will itself. For them, the sacred was to be found there, not only in our own wild inner world of feeling and desire, but also in wild nature without. Indeed a walk in the wild was the transcendentalist's sacred ritual for reconnecting to the sacred within, the individual's wild and raw authentic self.
27. In the next video we will explore religion and thought in a second conjugation of subjectivity, the second person orientation of the romantic movement and its critique of the industrial revolution that was increasingly building steam.