'In these paragraphs is contained the entire mystery of the Philosophy of Right and of the Hegelian philosophy in general.' (1)

This striking claim appears early in Marx's Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State, at a point at which he had concluded the discussion of only paragraphs 261 and 262 of the Philosophy of Right. It seems clear that it is the second of these paragraphs that he has effectively in view in reaching his verdict, and it is in dealing with that paragraph that the theoretical interest of the preceding discussion lies. The two parts of the verdict should be considered separately. So far as the mystery of the Philosophy of Right in particular is concerned, Marx's discussion of paragraph 262 offers only a strong hint, a hint developed later in Critique, as to the direction of his thinking. There is a great deal more in that discussion that bears on the mystery of 'the Hegelian philosophy in general' but it is for all that by no means easy to see precisely what this mystery consists in for Marx. What is immediately obvious is that at the heart of it is the question of the nature of the Idea, the central pillar of Hegel's metaphysics, and of its relationship to what Marx calls 'the ordinary empirical world'.

(2) Beyond that, one comes up against the fact that the portion of text in question offers a number of different versions of the answer. Marx does not advert to, or acknowledge, these differences but proceeds as though pursuing a single line of thought. The difficulty is that the line being pursued changes in unheralded and unremarked ways from one place to another in the text. Thus, the various possibilities are laid down side by side without any movement of reconciliation or decision. This is itself somewhat mysterious in the case of a thinker of Marx's reflexive and analytical power, more mysterious than has generally been recognised in the literature on his understanding of Hegel. His commentary on paragraph 262 of the Philosophy of Right is worthy of, and will repay, close examination.

Marx, in keeping with his practice in Critique, prefaces the discussion of the paragraph by quoting it in full. It will provide an indispensable background for this inquiry if his example is followed:

'The actual Idea is the spirit which divides itself up into the two ideal spheres of its concept -- the family and civil society -- as its finite mode, and thereby emerges from its ideality to become infinite and actual spirit for itself. In so doing, it allocates the material of its finite actuality, i.e., individuals as a mass, to these two spheres, and in such a way that, in each individual case, this allocation appears to be mediated by circumstances, by the individual's arbitrary will and personal choice of vocation.' (3)

The first line of thought to be found in Marx's commentary depends on some formulations that spring with particular directness from Hegel's text, either simply as quotations or as uncontentious glosses. The most significant of them are to be found in the following passages:

'The so-called “actual Idea” (spirit as infinite and actual) is represented as though it acted according to a determinate principle and with a determinate intention. It divides itself into finite spheres, and it does this “in order to return to itself, to be for itself”, and indeed does this in such a way that it is just as it actually is.' (4)
‘...the actual Idea has as its way of being (Dasein) not an actuality developed out of itself, but rather the ordinary empirical world’. (5)

‘The actual becomes phenomenon, but the Idea has no other content than this phenomenon. Moreover, the Idea has no goal other than the logical one, “to be for itself as infinite actual spirit”.’ (6)

These passages will surely seem, even at first glance, to fit together harmoniously enough. Before attempting to state the principle of their unity, however, it may be well to confirm that what is in question here is a persistent theme in Marx’s dealings with Hegel. To begin with, one should note some indications that its origins go back a long way, indeed to the time when those dealings began. Thus, there are youthful foreshadowings that, though admittedly not of great evidential value in themselves, are at least suggestive in the present context. The first is a verse epigram on Hegel: ‘Kant and Fichte like to soar to the heavens, seeking there a distant land, I but seek to grasp properly that which -- in the street I find’. (7) Some six months later Marx was to summarise in a letter to his father his first encounter with the philosophy of the time:

‘From the idealism which, by the way, I had compared and nourished with that of Kant and Fichte, I arrived at the point of seeking the Idea in actuality itself. If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth, now they had become its centre’. (8) That Marx has Hegel’s example in mind at this point is suggested by the fact that he goes on at once to invoke him explicitly, as a great name to set against the others. It seems in any case reasonable to suppose that Hegel provided a significant part of the inspiration for the change in question, a view supported by the congruence between Marx’s new-found goal and that ascribed to Hegel in the epigram.

For more substantial evidence of the interpretation of Hegel now being considered, one must, however, look to the period after the writing of Critique. In the Economic and Philosopic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx asserts on Hegel’s behalf that ‘the subject comes into being only as a result’ and that ‘this result, the subject knowing itself as absolute self-consciousness, is therefore God, absolute spirit, the self-knowing and self-moving Idea’. (9) A little later, again in the context of expounding Hegel, there occurs this passage:

‘...the abstraction which comprehends itself as abstraction knows itself to be nothing; it, the abstraction, must relinquish itself, and so arrive at an essence which is its exact opposite, at nature. Hence the entire logic is the proof that abstract thought is nothing for itself, that the absolute Idea is nothing for itself, that only nature is something.’(10)

These statements from Critique and Manuscripts may be seen as contributions to the theoretical working out of Marx’s youthful vision of Hegel as seeking to grasp what he finds in the street, or indeed of his own Hegelian aspiration to seek the ideal in actuality itself. Their most prominent feature is the spirit of dynamism they exude. What underlies and unites them, one might suggest, is the sense of a vast, indeed cosmic, process of becoming. This is the process in and through which the Idea comes to be ‘just as it actually is’. It is entirely consistent with such a view that the Idea should be thought of as initially ‘nothing’, an abstraction devoid of content. It becomes something by taking on the form of the actual, in particular by ‘relinquishing’ itself as nature. Since it can achieve fullness of existence only by doing so, it also seems appropriate to think of it as essentially a result. The cosmic
process of becoming is a teleological one in so far as it is animated and guided throughout by a specific intention and goal, the self-creation of the Idea. Clearly it is a thoroughly non-heavenly, this-worldly and, it seems natural to say, ‘immanent’, conception of the Idea that is at work here.

Some further light may be shed on this conception by noting a comment Marx adds to the first of the passages from Critique quoted above. Immediately after referring to the ‘actual Idea’ returning to itself, he remarks: ‘At this point the logical, pantheist mysticism appears very clearly’. (11) To appreciate the force of ‘logical’, it will be helpful to introduce a refinement of terminology. In Hegel's most discriminating usage, what relinquishes itself as nature, and ultimately as spirit, is said to be not the Idea as such but rather the Idea as it figures in logic, or simply the ‘logical Idea’:

‘The Idea reveals itself in its purest form in thought, and it is from this angle that logic approaches it. It expresses itself in another form in physical nature, and the third form which it assumes is that of spirit in the absolute sense’. (12)

This scheme provides the structure of the Encyclopaedia, Hegel's fullest statement of his system; that is to say, his most systematic attempt at a definition of the Idea. Thus, the three volumes of that work are entitled successively The Science of Logic, The Philosophy of Nature, and The Philosophy of Spirit. It is specifically the Idea as it is regarded in logic that may properly be described as ‘abstract thought’, the abstraction which ‘knows itself to be nothing’ and ‘has no goal other than the logical one’ of being for itself as ‘infinite actual spirit’. Marx is, of course, familiar with this point of terminology, and makes explicit use of it. Thus, shortly after the section of Critique being examined here, he remarks that Hegel's ‘sole interest’ is in ‘rediscovering the Idea simply (schlechthin), the logical Idea, in each element, be it that of the state or of nature’ (13) What underlies this remark, it may be suggested, is the conception of the ‘the Idea simply, the logical Idea’ as having acquired a content as nature and as the spirit whose highest manifestation is the state, and as being ripe for rediscovery in that content. The position set out in the passages from Marx quoted above may now be said to have a logical character just in virtue of the central significance for it of the logical Idea.

To bring out the appropriateness of 'pantheist', it will be helpful to note another feature of Hegel's usage that is fully acknowledged by Marx. Indeed, it is present in the passage quoted above in which 'God', 'absolute spirit' and 'the self-knowing and self-moving Idea' are treated as equivalent expressions. What is of particular concern here is the equivalence of ‘God’ and the Idea’. It is consistently maintained by Marx in expounding Hegel, as in the comment elsewhere in Critique that ‘to see a particular empirical being (Dasein) posited by the Idea’ is ‘to encounter at every level an incarnation of God’. (14) The practice is explicitly warranted by Hegel himself: 'God and the nature of the divine will are one and the same thing: it is what we call in philosophy the Idea'. (15) Putting this the other way around, the Idea is what in religion is called God. In the light of this equivalence, it becomes clear that Hegel's God, as depicted so far, is essentially the God of pantheism. That the cosmic subject is integrally bound up with 'the ordinary empirical world', being 'nothing' without it, suggests as much of itself. It is true that, as Marx acknowledges, it is, in its fullness of existence, strictly a result, and hence, the empirical world has to figure as an arena of God-making. Thus, it is an inherently dynamic, indeed historical, version of pantheism that is in question. This does not, however, affect the basic point. Pantheism, as usually conceived, is essentially the doctrine that God is, somehow or
other, to be identified with the totality of what there is, with the universe considered as a unified whole. Hegel's God, as presented thus far by Marx, meets this condition without difficulty. For in that presentation the content of the divine is exhausted by the two realms of nature and human society, and God is to be conceived as immanently engaged within those realms in the task of self-creation. Admittedly, what is divine cannot be wholly constituted by them in that there is a ghostly residue, a purely formal, but foundational, element, the religious counterpart, so to speak, of the logical Idea. (16) If, however, one now adds this element to what has to be included in the enumeration of what there is, God and the universe may be thought of as being identical and as constituting the totality of existence, in line with the traditional doctrine of pantheism. Thus, 'pantheist' is no less apt and illuminating than 'logical' in characterising Hegel's position as it has emerged so far from Marx's account.

The value of the term is, however, not yet exhausted. For our portion of text also points towards a pantheist reading of Hegel that is undynamic and unhistorical. Thus, it asserts that in Hegel 'empirical actuality (Wirklichkeit) is accepted as it is and is also declared to be rational'. (17) The second part of this assertion has surely to be taken as a reference not to paragraph 262 of the Philosophy of Right but rather to what is undoubtedly the best-known thesis of that work, the so-called Doppelsatz. This is the claim in the Preface that 'What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational'. (18) In the Introduction to the Encyclopaedia Hegel was to observe that 'These simple propositions have seemed shocking to many', but only, he goes on to explain, on the basis of a misunderstanding. For 'what is there is partly appearance and only partly actuality', and actuality has to be distinguished from 'contingent existence' and from various other ontological determinations. (19) The implication Hegel wishes us to draw is that, if we take account of the many-layered character of this ontology, it will be clear that he was not seeking to confer the authority of being rational on everything that, in some sense or other, exists. What is actual is indeed rational but this, it appears, is a matter of conceptual necessity, of a condition that must be satisfied for anything to count as truly 'actual'.

Whatever the ultimate merits of this explanation, the point to note at present is that Marx has to be accounted, at least in one strand of his thinking, among the readers of the Philosophy of Right who have failed, in Hegel's eyes, to understand the message. The blurring of distinctions that signals such failure is already present in the portion of text that is our prime concern. Thus, the reference to 'empirical actuality' is itself somewhat discordant in view of Hegel's desire to distinguish actuality from whatever is merely empirical. It is for him, one might say, a theoretical, not an empirical, concept. Moreover, the formulation that actuality 'is declared to be' rational seems insensitive to the internal, conceptual connection that is involved. Much more decisive, for present purposes, however, is the following assertion later in Critique; 'That the rational is actual proves itself to be in contradiction with the irrational actuality which at every point is the opposite of what it asserts, and asserts the opposite of what it is'. (20) The specific form of irrationality in question at this point is the role of the Estates in Hegel's doctrine of the state. In the light of his Encyclopaedia explanation, however, it appears that the rationality of the actual cannot be contradicted by any such irrationalities of mere existence, and indeed to speak of an 'irrational actuality' is itself a contradiction in Hegelian terms. That Marx seems oblivious to this aspect of the situation suggests that on occasion at least he
takes the Doppelsatz thesis in just the way Hegel sought to correct. It is an understanding that may fairly be characterised as undynamically pantheist.

In order to bring this out one should note that while ‘the Idea’ is what in philosophy is called ‘God’, it also, for Hegel, conveys ‘the proper philosophical meaning of “reason”’ (21). This too is a feature of Hegel’s terminology of which Marx is aware, as is sufficiently shown by his use of the phrase ‘universal reason’ where the context would lead one to expect ‘the Idea’. (22) Thus, we are licensed to regard ‘reason’ and ‘God’, through their connection with ‘the Idea’, as being themselves interchangeable terms for many purposes. Hence, to hold that all that exists is rational amounts in religious terms to holding that God is already fully present and realised in all things, without the need of any cosmic process of self-creation. It accords well with this conception that Marx should declare in The Holy Family that ‘if the Christian religion knows only one incarnation of God, speculative philosophy has as many incarnations as there are things’. (23) This undynamic pantheism of being rather than becoming is particularly significant in the context of his practical grounds for rejecting Hegel’s philosophy and will later come up for discussion in that context.

To speak of pantheism, however the term is understood, will not suffice to convey fully the character of Marx’s account. For in the portion of text that is our immediate concern, there are indications of another view, one that is quite at odds with ‘pantheist’, and that, it should be added, sits uneasily with ‘logical’. These indications have primarily to do with the emphasis placed there on the ‘alien’ (fremd) character, the ‘otherness’, of the Idea in relation to the empirical world. The main expository remarks in this vein are as follows:

'Actuality is not expressed as itself but as another actuality. The ordinary empirical world does not have its own spirit but rather an alien one as its law.' (24)

'Family and civil society…owe their being (Dasein) to a spirit other than their own; they are determinations posited by a third party, not self determinations.' (25)

'… empirical actuality… is not rational because of its own reason but because the empirical fact in its empirical existence (Existenz) has a meaning other than itself.' (26)

This line of thought is sustained elsewhere in Critique:

'The various powers [of the state] are not determined through their “own nature” but through an alien one.' (27)

'Hegel wants to write the life history of the abstract substance, the Idea, so that human activity etc. must appear as the activity and result of something other.' (28)

The theoretical implications are, however, most fully developed in Manuscripts. In the course of commenting on a passage from The Philosophy of Nature, Marx writes:

'Externality (Äußerlichkeit) is to be taken here in the sense of alienation (Entäußerung), an error, a defect, that ought not to be. For what is true is still the Idea. Nature is only the form of its other-being (Anderssein). And since abstract thought is the essence, what is external to it is in its essence merely external.' (29)

The central concern in these remarks is, as before, the relationship between the Idea and the empirical world. The contrast with the previous interpretation may be marked in a traditional way by saying that what we have now is a 'transcendent', rather than ‘immanent’, Idea. For the conditions normally associated with transcendence seem clearly to be met here. The Idea is in its substantial existence both utterly distinct from, indeed alien to, the empirical world and utterly superior to it as the source of its
being and significance. The label in question is in any case one that Marx is willing to apply quite casually to Hegel’s philosophy, as in a reference in Manuscripts to ‘the old philosophical and especially Hegelian transcendence.’ (30) In truth it may be said to capture his most enduring view of the matter. Thus, it is surely the transcendent reading that is being invoked in what may be thought to be his best considered, indeed valedictory, judgement on it. In the 'Afterword' to the first volume of Capital he refers to Hegel’s transformation, ‘under the name of the Idea’, of ‘the process of thinking’ into an ‘independent subject’, the ‘creator (Demiurg) of the actual world’.

(31) The claim that Hegel’s Idea is essentially an independent creator serves quite adequately to capture the strand of thought in Critique at present being considered.

It is a claim that takes one to the verge of depicting the situation in religious terms. In those terms it would have to be acknowledged that it is with the God of theism that one has now to deal. For that God is in large part to be defined by just the characteristics that were attributed to the transcendent Idea. Such a God is indeed fully independent of, and infinitely superior to, the created world in all its manifold imperfections. That the theistic God should also be conceived of as 'alien' is a possibility allowed for in at least some versions of the doctrine. A striking presentation of it is given by Hegel himself in his account of the 'unhappy consciousness', a form of religious consciousness he seems to associate in particular with medieval Christianity. (32) For Marx too, not surprisingly given his time and place, Christianity provides the primary model of theism. He is, moreover, eager, at least on occasions, to associate this model with Hegel, indeed to treat Hegel as in some sense a Christian philosopher. Thus, in Critique the religious equivalent of the Idea is taken at one point to be the first person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father. (33) After the reference to the Hegelian transcendence in Manuscripts, Marx went on to undertake to demonstrate ‘on another occasion’ the 'historical nemesis' that overcame this transcendence in the realm of theology. (34) A few months later he was to redeem this undertaking in The Holy Family, a work in which the relationship between Hegelian philosophy and Christian theology is a key motif. Thus, at one point he remarks that the chief objects of his criticism, ‘Bruno Bauer and Company’, had arrived at Hegelian idealism, and thereby the ‘restoration of the Christian theory of creation in a speculative Hegelian form’. (35) It seems fair to conclude that the connection with Christianity is a significant theme of Marx’s dealings with Hegel. A question arises rather obviously at this point as to how a body of thought can be at once pantheist and Christian. The issues are best explored, however, by reverting to the language of philosophy so as to consider them in terms of the Idea.

A way forward may be found by considering the implications of the term ‘alien’. It is, to begin with, not easy to see how the Idea can be conceived of as alien in relation to the content without which it is ‘nothing’. That content might more readily be seen as integrally bound up with its existence in any substantial sense, its existence as ‘something’. There scarcely seems enough conceptual room here for the notion of the alien to take root. This impression is enhanced if one assumes, as seems obligatory, that what is alien must count as an independent existence in relation to its other. The independence of the Idea in that sense is hard to square with its crucial dependence on what is empirical in order to become ‘just as it actually is’. More generally, one might wonder how the Idea as pure abstraction can conceivably be alien to, and thereby in tension with, a particular content. It might rather be thought of as endlessly accommodating of, and adaptable to content, a point that Marx in effect makes rather
frequently himself in complaining of the supposed arbitrariness of Hegel's procedure in relating the Idea to objects in the world. (36) Thus, it might be supposed that the relation of being alien is more naturally conceived of as holding between distinct contents, rather than between a given content and a pure form.

The sense of incongruity here is sharpened if one takes account of the reference in Manuscripts to ‘externality’ as ‘alienation’ with the implication of error or defect. How, it might be asked, can that through which the Idea achieves its sole aim and goal, the purpose of its existence, be understood in such a way? So far as the Idea is concerned, what Marx calls externality must surely be said, if one is to use evaluative language, to be an unqualified good, indeed the highest good, in that it furnishes the potential for, and ultimately the realisation of, fulfilled existence. Marx’s evaluative language has another significant implication. In saying that externality 'ought not to be' he may surely be taken as implying that it might not have been, on the common, and intuitively plausible, assumption that 'ought not' implies 'can refrain from, or avoid'. Now the entire external world comes to figure as mere contingency. This, however, at odds with the terms in which Marx expounds Hegel elsewhere, as in the passage quoted above where he asserts that the Idea 'must' relinquish itself as nature. In doing so he is, one might add, faithfully reflecting Hegel's own practice which notoriously, and to a degree that has seemed excessive even to sympathetic readers, insists on the necessity of all relationships involving the categories of the system.

It seems that what we have to deal with here are opposed metaphysical visions, an opposition expressed most sharply in the relationship they postulate between the Idea and the world. On one side there is a conception of the Idea as essentially emergent, being partly constituted by the things of the world and coming to its truth and fullness of existence only in and through them. On the other, it stands in no such relation of ontological dependence and has no need of involvement in any such cosmic process, being entirely self-subsistent, eternally complete, a starting point rather than a result. It is, one should note, hard to see what could be the point of characterising this conception as 'logical'. For it leaves no room for the distinctive role of the logical Idea as the formal subject that of necessity, out of its own emptiness, initiates the process of self-creation. The language of religion will serve to sharpen the opposition here. On the first, ‘pantheist’, view, the central truth is that, as Hegel has epigrammatically expressed it elsewhere, 'Without the world God is not God'. (37) On the second, ‘theistic’, one, the created world is in no way essential to God’s being, but is itself the product of a gratuitous act of divine benevolence and freedom, and to that extent is indeed purely contingent. It may provide an arena of divine agency but is by no means to be understood as the indispensable vehicle of divine fulfilment. It is natural to wonder how such incompatible views can be maintained in a short portion of text. Reflections on the subject would, however, be premature in that even taken together these views by no means exhaust its resources. For it contains elements of yet another position that stands in contrast to each of them.

The direction in which to seek this third position is indicated in the remark cited above that, in Hegel's hands, 'the actual becomes phenomenon'. That is to say, it is specifically to the ontological status of the world and its objects that one should look. Elsewhere in our portion of text Marx had said that the actual relationship of state and individual is expressed by speculative philosophy (der Spekulation) as appearance (Erscheinung), as phenomenon. (38) This use of ‘appearance’ and ‘phenomenon’ as
effectively equivalent is fully in keeping with the tradition of classical German philosophy from which both Hegel and Marx derive. (39). In Hegel's practice at least, neither implies a devaluing in any significant sense of the objects to which they refer. As Marx had noted in a passage quoted earlier, the phenomenon supplies all that the Idea has by way of content, and that is surely a sufficiently estimable role to play. Moreover, 'appearance' is Hegel's standard term for the perceptible forms assumed by essence, its worldly embodiments, and there is nothing derogatory in that usage either. Thus, he insists that essence 'must appear (erscheinen)' and that it is 'not behind or beyond appearance but since the essence is what exists, existence is appearance'. An important distinction emerges, however, when he warns that appearance 'must not be confused with mere semblance' (Schein). (40) Here, as so often in his philosophy, he is seeking to retain a link with ordinary usage, the association of Schein with what is superficial and deceptive, a 'shining'. In this respect too his practice is fully in keeping with the philosophical background against which his thought developed. (41).

The important point for present purposes is that Marx by no means confines himself to the language of 'appearance' and 'phenomenon' in expounding Hegel but also, indeed more typically, uses that of 'semblance'. Thus, with reference to the same relationship of state and individual as before, he goes on to say that, in Hegel's account, it is presented as a 'seeming (scheinbar) mediation'. (42) Elsewhere in Critique he remarks that the body of the object is, for Hegel, 'really only a semblance'. (43) In Manuscripts the theme is sustained and developed. Thus, the 'product', that which is 'posited', is said to be given the role of 'an independent, actual essence (Wesen) by Hegel, but only 'as a semblance'. (44). Taking the theme further, the object for Hegel is said to be merely 'the semblance of an object, a will-o'-the-wisp (ein vorgemachter Dunst)'. (45) Still more decisively, in the vein this opens up, one should note the repeated insistence that in Hegel's philosophy the object is a 'nullity' (Nichtigkeit). (46) It seems fair to conclude that, at least in one strand of Marx's reading of Hegel, the ontological status of objects in the world is devalued as drastically as might readily be conceived. This makes an obvious contrast with the other strands in it. Neither the view that the empirical world is partly constitutive of God nor the view that it is God's creation have any tendency to imply that it is a nullity, and ordinary pantheists and theists would surely unite in denying such a conclusion. On the other hand, a reader of Hegel might well be reminded at this point of his account of the philosophy of Spinoza: 'The world is determined in the Spinozist system', Hegel declares, 'as a mere phenomenon without genuine reality (Realität)', or, to put the point emphatically, 'there is no world' (47). Elsewhere he describes Spinoza as maintaining that 'there is no such thing as what is known as the world', and that 'in and for itself it is nothing (Nichts)' (48). Hegel proposes that this position should, in virtue of its denial of the world, properly be called 'acosmism'. (49) In the strand of Marx's reading of him being considered, that label, it may be suggested, applies with equal warrant to his own philosophy.

The large issue of Hegelian acosmism, as it arises from Marx's account, is one to which nothing like full justice can be done here. Nevertheless, an attempt should be made to go beyond establishing its presence in that account in order to uncover something of its supposed theoretical motivation, so far as that may be ascertained from Marx. The question to be asked is why it is that Marx's Hegel should wish to deny the world. The answer suggested by the section of Critique that is our prime
concern has itself a Spinozan cast. This is so in the sense that the underlying metaphysical impulse is assumed there to be essentially that which Hegel attributes to Spinoza in propounding his ‘acosmism’. That description is invoked by Hegel in the context of defending Spinoza against charges of atheism and pantheism. 'At the very least', Hegel points out, 'a philosophy that maintains that God, and only God, is should not be passed off as atheism'. (50) Moreover, he argues:

‘If we accept a view that is widely held, and understand pantheism to be the doctrine that considers finite things as such, and the complex of them, to be God, then we shall be forced to acquit Spinoza’s philosophy of the charge of pantheism, because no truth at all is ascribed to finite things or to the world is a whole in that philosophy’. (51)

In our portion of text the Hegelian Idea is conceived on a scale sufficiently large, indeed cosmic, as to match that on which the God of Spinoza functions. That much is suggested by the reference to pantheistic mysticism, even if the reference does not otherwise belong with the particular line of thought being pursued at present. It fits with the other indications of this largeness of conception that Marx should describe the Idea as seeking, through its dealings with the finite, to 'enjoy and bring forth its own infinity'. (52) It should also be noted that the only possible ground of acosmist leanings that is identified in Marx’s commentary on paragraph 262 is the Idea’s assumption of the role of subject. It is this that leads what he calls the 'actual subjects', such as the family and civil society, to become ‘unactual’ moments of the Idea. (53) Thus, the Idea seems to operate here more or less in the manner of Spinoza’s God as a monopolist absorbing all existence into itself and thereby draining ontological validity from anything else. Hence, it might be suggested that there is a cosmological inspiration of a broadly Spinozan kind at work. It will bring this suggestion into sharper focus if one considers an alternative basis for acosmism that may also be found in Marx’s dealings with Hegel.

To do so is to re-introduce another major figure in the history of philosophy into the picture. Some years before Hegel's defence of Spinoza appeared, Fichte had defended himself against a charge of atheism in just the same terms, by claiming that properly speaking he should rather be called an ‘acosmist’. (54). The possibility to be considered is that there may be, so to speak, a Fichtean as well as a Spinozan strain of acosmism at work in Marx’s thinking about Hegel. The key source will, however, have to be Manuscripts rather than Critique. Marx sets the scene there with the claim that, for Hegel, ‘man is posited as being equivalent to self’ and that this self is 'man as an abstract egoist, egoism raised to its pure abstraction in thought'. (55) It is a claim that accords rather better with conventional views of Fichte than of Hegel. These are, moreover, views that Marx seems content to fall in with, both earlier in his career, as in a reference to 'Fichte’s world-creating ego (Ich)', and later, as in one to 'the pure egoism of Fichte’s ego'. (56). The description of Hegel's self as an abstract egoist is not in itself particularly telling in the context of the present inquiry. What is significant is the fact that elsewhere in Manuscripts this self assumes precisely a Fichtean world-creating role. For in the course of the discussion the focus of Marx’s interest seems to move away from the Hegelian subject as itself a cosmic reality, whether eternally complete or engaged in self-creation. Instead the Idea, 'which has given the Hegelians such terrible headaches', is briskly said to be 'from beginning to end nothing other than abstraction, i.e., the abstract thinker’. This abstraction or abstract thinker is then depicted as resolving ‘to let nature which it concealed within itself only as an abstraction, as a thing of thought (Gedankending), to issue freely
from itself’ (57). Shortly afterwards the theme is restated with a flourish. In Hegel’s scheme, nature, Marx declares, ‘lay enclosed in the thinker’, who, in releasing it, ‘believed he was creating essences (Wesen) out of nothing, out of pure abstraction, in a divine dialectic’. (58) Marx leaves us in no doubt that in his view this conception is mistaken, and indeed is wholly fantastic. The conception itself is, however, closer to the Fichtean world-creating ego than to the Hegelian Idea, at least in any of its usual interpretations and as it is interpreted by Marx himself elsewhere.

It seems that, in Marx's account of Hegel, two distinct routes to acosmism, the denial of the world, may be discerned. The first goes by way of the assumption that the absolute subject has, so to speak, usurped all the available space, crowding out everything else. The problem is that, as Hegel says of Spinoza, 'there is too much God'. (59). By the second route the world turns out to be ontologically deficient just in virtue of being merely a projection of the consciousness of the individual self. Here we are in the domain of what, in the Marxist tradition, has standardly been termed 'subjective idealism', with Fichte as its stock exemplar and object lesson. It should be added that in a general way Marx is fully aware of the value of such a taxonomy of influences for understanding Hegel. Thus, in The Holy Family we are told that: 'In Hegel there are three elements, Spinozan substance, Fichtean self-consciousness and the Hegelian necessarily-contradictory unity of the two, the absolute spirit'. (60) The preceding discussion has tried to show that both the Spinozan and the Fichtean heritage may at any rate be traced in Marx’s acosmist version of Hegel's metaphysics. These elements may indeed be said to be necessarily contradictory in that context since they compete for the role of explaining why the world is a nullity, and both cannot be successful. There is, it should be noted, a further question as to the merits of Marx’s claim that the unity of Hegelian absolute spirit itself, that is, of the highest stage of the Idea, is necessarily contradictory on account of its dual heritage. This raises however, such large, substantive issues of Hegelian metaphysics that it must fall outside the limits of the present inquiry.

The inquiry has tried to show the diversity of Marx's readings of that metaphysics. It has naturally enough been necessary to draw on different elements of its chosen portion of text to confirm and illustrate this thesis. However, it is also natural to suspect that the various alternatives can scarcely be held so neatly apart in the text as such a procedure might suggest. The suspicion would be correct. The most striking instance of their simultaneous presence in one sentence arises in connection with 'circumstances, arbitrary will and choice of vocation'. Marx comments that these constitute an 'actual mediation', which is, however, in Hegel merely ‘the appearance of a mediation which the actual Idea undertakes with itself and which goes on behind the curtain (hinter der Gardine)’. (61) It is at first sight a puzzling comment. 'Behind the curtain' might be thought to suggest a transcendence which can after all be signalled by 'behind' as well as 'beyond'. Thus, what is in question, it might be supposed, is, to put it in religious terms, the hidden God of theism, working away behind the scenes to manipulate what takes place in front of them. This seems at variance, however, with the insistence that the operations in question are undertaken by the subject solely 'with itself', a difficulty surely so far as their wider efficacy is concerned. Such insistence might be taken rather as a way of characterising the monopolising pantheist subject. Now, however, the imagery of 'behind the curtain' begins to seem inappropriate. For in pantheism there is, so to speak, no dividing curtain, and hence no space behind it, or indeed in front: its unitary vision will not
allow such a duality of structure. Hence, if theism or pantheism were the only alternatives, it might have to be concluded that what we have here is a comprehensively mixed metaphor. It is necessary to ask whether the acosmist reading might be able to make better sense of it.

There is an initial awkwardness arising from the fact that the key term Marx uses is 'appearance' where 'semblance' might be thought more appropriate to signal acosmism. This may simply have to be explained, however, in terms of the occasional indifference he shows to the nuances of Hegel's technical vocabulary, an indifference that has already been noted in this particular case and in the still more important one of 'actuality'. Moreover, the acosmist standpoint has no need of, and does not lend itself naturally to, the image of the curtain. Both in its Spinozan and its Fichtean versions it can be expounded satisfactorily without recourse to any such structural device which must rather figure for it as a complication and an encumbrance. (62) By contrast, the device seems to fit perfectly well into a theistic picture of the hidden God and the two realms of the divine and the human. Thus, it may have to be admitted that no reading is possible that will smoothly accommodate every detail of Marx's formulation. If difficulties of detail can be laid aside, however, it may well appear that the acosmist reading has a general advantage over its rivals. This is that it is perfectly adapted to capturing what may reasonably be regarded as the essence of what Marx wishes to convey, the sense that, for Hegel, the ordinary empirical world comprises only misleading outer shows to which reality does not pertain. What it does pertain to are the purely self-regarding operations of the Idea, operations that themselves seem well-suited to being explicated in terms of either Spinozan absolute or Fichtean ego. Thus, it appears that while each of the three ways of interpreting Hegel that have been described here can offer some purchase in this case, none is altogether satisfactory. This may itself, however, be taken as testifying to the weight of the diverse interpretative choices that were pressing on Marx. It is hardly surprising that they should on occasion come together to disharmonious and disconcerting effect at a single point in his work.

It should now be possible to turn fruitfully to the question signalled earlier of how a thinker of Marx's stature could harbour, apparently contentedly, such conflicting views. The question cannot be treated with anything like adequacy here, but something may be said at least to suggest where further inquiry might be rewarding. It should also serve to shed light from a fresh angle on the central theme of this inquiry, the hidden diversity of his dealings with Hegel. To start with, it may help to recall the commonplace that, in the most general terms, the pattern of those dealings is one of critical engagement followed by rejection. It is no doubt true that Hegelian residues remain throughout Marx's career, with some version of the dialectical method the most obvious candidate, and that throughout it also he was to display at different periods a varying sense of indebtedness and appreciation in regard to Hegel. Nevertheless, the overall pattern is clear. It is also clear that an essential dimension of Marx's attitude from the beginning is his awareness of the practical implications of Hegel's philosophy. Thus, it is significant that, even at his most Hegelian, his chief involvement with it takes the form of 'a critique of Hegel's doctrine of the state'. It should, of course, be remembered also that, as Marx was inclined to insist, the practical and theoretical are not to be held rigidly apart here. Thus, he rebukes Hegel's pupils who 'explain one or the other determination of his system by accommodation and the like'. What Marx wishes to stress instead is 'the possibility
that this apparent accommodation has its deepest roots in an inadequacy or inadequate formulation of his principle itself. (63). The present inquiry has sought to show that in truth he himself formulates Hegel’s 'principle' in a number of different ways. What they have in common, it should now be remarked, is that each may, in its own distinctive fashion, serve to root a verdict of accommodation. Hence, the possibility to be considered is that Marx’s practical repudiation of Hegel’s philosophy is over-determined to an extent he may have found sufficiently congenial and reassuring to obscure the need for more self-conscious reflection. This situation might at any rate have held for the relatively brief period in which the relationship with Hegel is of vital concern to him, before he turns all his attention to his true lifework beyond philosophy.

The case of pantheism, at least in its undynamic form, seems straightforward enough, and it is this form that is involved whenever Marx touches on the pantheist roots of Hegel's accommodation. If all things are incarnations of God, they are all to be accepted just in virtue of their character as divine. If whatever exists is rational, then whatever exists is to be accepted as having the authority of reason. In this form pantheism is a doctrine of universal accommodation.

Where the theistic reading is concerned it will simplify matters helpfully to focus on a central feature of the world to which Hegel stands accused of having accommodated himself. This is the institution of monarchy, with the Prussian monarchy as the chief case in point. In one aspect the process through which, according to Marx, the institution is legitimated in Hegel’s thought is entirely straightforward and, indeed, follows essentially the same lines as in the pantheist reading. 'Hegel is concerned', Marx asserts 'to present the monarch as the actual “God-man”, as the actual embodiment of the Idea' (64) To have such a status is clearly to be worthy of respect, indeed devotion. Hence, this approach serves to legitimate monarchy just by directly generating a positive evaluation of it. Another, more complex, line of thought may, however, be detected in Marx's account. Indeed, what has been said so far does not do justice to his sense of the metaphysical impulse that underpins Hegel's attitude to monarchy. The character of this impulse is suggested in the general claim, quoted by Marx, that 'subjectivity attains its truth only as a subject and personality only as a person'. (65) It is in keeping with this claim that the paragraph of the Philosophy of Right from which it comes should seek, as Marx puts it, 'to establish the Idea as “one individual”'. (66)

The scene is now set for a kind of structural parallelism of the divine and human realms. It is a conception entirely familiar to Marx since it figured explicitly and prominently in intellectual debates in Germany in his formative decade of the 1830s. (67) Thus, corresponding to the personal subject of the universe in general, the God of theism, there is the personal subject in the human realm, as exemplified above all by the King of Prussia. Here one has to deal not with an incarnation of the divine, but rather with an analogue or mirror-image of it. The conception is of a form of homology in which the institutions of the human world are normatively underwritten by being, so to speak, projected on to a cosmic screen. Hence, the legitimacy that pertains to them is that of whatever is in harmony with, indeed re-enacts, the basic character of the universe. The model of structural parallelism is deeply congenial to Marx and he continues to make use of it in his later work. In Capital, for example, he traces an 'analogy' between the religious world and the world of commodities.
Christianity in particular, with its cult of the abstract man, is said to be the form of religion that 'corresponds best (ist die entsprechenste)' to a society based on commodity production in which all private labours are brought into relation as homogeneous human labour. (68) It is not at all surprising that the model should play a part in his thinking about the way Hegel’s accommodation is rooted in the principle of theism.

The practical significance of acosmism has to be approached somewhat differently since it is scarcely possible in this case to speak in any straightforward way of legitimating existing institutions. These must suffer, along with all the other elements of nature and society, under the blight of being unreal. Attention should turn rather to the legitimation, or more strictly the de-legitimation, of practices. When this shift is made it becomes possible to see, with Marx, that acosmist philosophy is, so to speak, objectively conservative. In general terms it seems reasonable to suppose that a belief in the nullity of the world must tend to dry up the springs of action. At the very least it must devitalise and subvert any project of theoretically grounding a programme for radical, not to speak of revolutionary, change. Thus, the existential implications of Spinozan acosmism would seem to lie not in any form of practice but rather in contemplation of the sole, all-encompassing reality and a principled indifference towards the specific character of its semblances. It may be more fruitful at present, however, to pursue the matter in relation to the Fichtean version.

According to that version, nature, as was noted earlier, lay concealed within, and was brought forth by, the thinker as a 'thing of thought'. This view of the ontological status of nature is also applied in Manuscripts to the components of the human social world. Thus, for instance, 'wealth and state power' are said to be understood by Hegel as 'thought-essences' (Gedankenwesen) (69). It follows that the entire process of generation of the natural and social worlds, a process of ‘alienation’ in Marx’s terms, takes place entirely within consciousness, and that an alteration of consciousness is all that is required to overcome such alienation. Hence it is that what Hegel offers is a ‘sublating (Aufheben) in thought which leaves its object in existence in the actual world’ while believing that ‘it has actually overcome it’. (70) It is in this sense that one may speak of his Fichtean acosmism as objectively conservative. It sheds some further light to note how the topic is pursued by Marx in relation to Hegel’s followers, the Young Hegelians. It is pursued the more vigorously as their pretensions to be revolutionary thinkers need, in Marx’s view, to be exposed. Since theirs is, however, at best merely a revolution of consciousness they are, 'in spite of their allegedly “world shattering” statements' in truth 'the staunchest conservatives'. (71) It is true that a more substantial form of change seems called for by the most genuinely Fichtean of these thinkers, Max Stirner, but it amounts at best to a call for self-change: 'I, the actual man, do not have to change actuality, which I can only change together with others, but have to change myself in myself'. (72) Hence it is that that the rebellion proclaimed by Stirner means in the end 'anything you like, except action' (73). What is primarily excluded from its meaning, in Marx’s view, is collective action for social and political change, action to transform the existing structure of wealth and state power. In treating this structure as merely a projection of individual consciousness, Fichtean acosmism serves to represent any such programme of action as misconceived, beside the point and, thereby, as lacking legitimacy.
A variety of grounds is, it appears, adduced in Marx's writings for holding that accommodation is rooted in a principle of Hegel's philosophy, that this philosophy embodies, so to speak, a logic, or logics, of accommodation. That variety in turn reflects the more fundamental variety of Marx’s interpretations of the principle in question. The matter cannot be left, however, without observing that Marx also recognises in Hegel a logic of non-accommodation, a logic to which he is himself unfaithful. Indeed, this recognition belongs at a deeper level of insight, a level at which Marx’s true achievement as a critic of Hegel comes into view. The discussion has so far has focused on his dealings with 'Hegelian philosophy in general', in effect with the metaphysics, What has emerged may be said to have itself something of the character of a mystery story with its tantalising fragments, shifting perspectives and hidden, unresolved tensions. The story would be incomplete, however, if it did not take account of Marx’s success in getting to the heart of the 'mystery' of the Philosophy of Right. Not to do so would, moreover, be to fail to make full use of the portion of text which has been our chief resource. For that offers clear guidance as to where one should turn.

The guidance comes in a sentence near the beginning of the commentary on paragraph 262: 'Family and civil society appear as the dark ground of nature from which the light of the state emerges'. (74) The principle of the line of criticism that is thereby introduced is that Hegel’s doctrine of the state is dominated throughout, to its structural detriment, by this dark ground. The key pressure points are identified by Marx as the hereditary monarchy, the hereditary legislators and the institution of primogeniture, particularly as it concerns landed property. At all of these points a purely natural determinant, that of birth, is allowed to trump the claims of reason, spirit and society. This situation is the subject of incisive criticism by Marx, as exemplified in the following passage:

'Hegel everywhere sinks from his political spiritualism (Spiritualismus) down into the crassest materialism. At the summit of the political state it is always birth that makes determinant individuals into embodiments of the highest political tasks. The highest activities of the state coincide with individuals through their birth, just as the situation of an animal, its character, mode of life etc. are directly born with it. The state in its highest functions acquires an animal actuality'. (75)

The force of this criticism lies precisely in its immanent character. For Hegel's preference for spirit (Geist) over nature is, as Marx is well aware, built in to the very fabric of his thinking. Thus, spirit is a higher stage, embodying a fuller, more concrete, definition, of the Hegelian Idea. Moreover, the success of spirit in emancipating itself from nature is for Hegel the ultimate determinant of progress in history. (76) It is calamitous for his project in political philosophy that he should accept that, as Marx puts it, what rules the state, itself supposedly the ‘highest existence (Dasein) of freedom’, the ‘existence of self-conscious reason’, and the ‘realisation of the free spirit’, is 'blind natural necessity' (77) Hegel is failing here to follow his own best insights, the non-accommodationist logic that should have led him to reject institutions whose ‘secret’ is ‘zoology’ (78) In drawing attention to this triumph of nature over spirit Marx is striking at the very foundations of the institutional structure depicted in the Philosophy of Right. It is in this sense that he may be said to have revealed the ‘mystery’ of that work in the form of its fundamental disharmony and lack of organic connection with Hegel’s system.
A more deadly strain of criticism could hardly be conceived. It cannot, however, be
said to have received its due in the mainstream of Hegel scholarship, a region where
Marx’s importance as a critic has gone largely unacknowledged. This failure has, no
doubt, many causes but it must in some degree reflect a more general failure, on the
part of both admirers and opponents, to pay close attention to the specificity of his
account of Hegel, a failure that makes it difficult to bring any particular aspect of it
into sharp focus. The present inquiry has attempted to illustrate on a small scale the
value of paying such attention. Concentrating on the question of the nature of the
Idea and of its relationship to the empirical world, as depicted by Marx, and, using a
brief portion of text as springboard, it has distinguished three positions. They may be
summed up in the propositions that this world is partly constitutive of the Idea, that it
is a creation of the Idea and that, by comparison with the Idea, it lacks genuine reality.
These positions were labelled pantheism, theism and acosmism respectively.
Pantheism, it was shown, is present in Marx’s account in two versions, historical and
unhistorical, and two distinct streams of thought feed into acosmism, one of Spinozan
and the other of Fichtean provenance. These diverse formulations of Hegel's
‘principle' yield diverse theoretical grounds for his ‘accommodation’ and hence,
indirectly, for Marx’s rejection of the practical dimension of his thought.

A complex picture has now emerged, a complexity which, as was hinted earlier, has
not been adequately reflected in the literature on the relationship between Hegel and
Marx, as anyone acquainted with that literature could surely testify. It has been
possible here to outline it only in the most schematic terms and much remains to be
done by way of exploring in detail the elements of the picture and the connections
between them. It is, one might suggest in conclusion, vitally important that
commentators sympathetic to Marx and his legacy should participate in such projects.
They owe him the respect that consists in submitting his work to the most rigorous
critical analysis they can manage. To do so is, moreover, it is the only way to exhibit
decisively the abundance and fertility of his ideas and thereby confirm him in his
rightful place as a major, indispensible figure in Western philosophy. There is no
cause to fear the outcome of such analysis, whatever its degree of rigour. Marx has
no need of being patronised by our excessive tenderness, a tenderness that is
particularly misguided where his dealings with Hegel are concerned. It is time to
dispense with the disabling irony of treating as a source of clear, univocal, instantly
authoritative truths what is in reality one of the richest imbroglios in the history of
thought.

Notes
1. Marx 1962, pp.264-5; Marx 1975, pp.63-4. All translations from Marx are by
the present writer. A standard English translation is also cited in every case.
7. Marx and Engels 1977, p. 608; Marx and Engels 1975a, p.577
16. For this, and other, reasons some commentators have preferred to call Hegel a ‘panentheist’ rather than ‘pantheist’. Provided that the sense in which ‘pantheism’ is being ascribed to him is sufficiently clear, however, this is a question of terminology which need not be pursued here. See Robert C. Whittemore, ‘Hegel as Panentheist’, Tulane Studies in Philosophy, volume 9, 1960, pp.134-64.
23. Marx 1962, p. 733; Marx and Engels 1975b, 70. It is clear from the context that here, as often with Marx, ‘speculative’ and ‘Hegelian’ are interchangeable terms.
27. Marx 1962, p. 272; Marx 1975, p. 70.
33. Marx 1962, p. 272; Marx 1975, p. 70.
36. See, e.g., Marx 1975, pp. 67, 73-4, 93, 98, 128.
38. Marx 1962, p.262; Marx 1975, p. 61.
42. Marx 1962, p. 262; Marx 1975, p.62.
43. Marx 1962, p. 272; Marx 1975, p.70.
44. Marx and Engels 1977, p. 577; Marx 1975, 389.
52. Marx 1962, p.264; Marx 1975, p. 63.

62. It is tempting to speculate that Marx, steeped as he was in ancient philosophy, is influenced at some level here by the classic acosmist parable of Plato’s Cave with its use of similar theatrical imagery.
63. Marx and Engels 1977, p. 326; Marx and Engels 1975b, p. 84.
64. Marx 1962, p. 285; Marx 1975, p. 81.
66. Marx 1962, p. 287; Marx 1975, p. 82.
67. For an illuminating discussion see Warren Breckman, Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

70. Marx and Engels 1977, pp. 582-3; Marx 1975a, p. 394.
76. See, e.g., Hegel 1975, pp. 152-96.
78. Marx 1962, p. 397; Marx 1975, p. 175.

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