Evola, Magical Idealism, & Western Metaphysics, Part One

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Part 1 of 3

1. Introduction

Early in his career as a writer, Julius Evola published several philosophical works expounding a theory he called “magical idealism.” These include Saggi sull’idealismo magico (Essays on Magical Idealism, 1925), Teoria dell’individuo assoluto (Theory of the Absolute Individual, 1927), and Fenomenologia dell’individuo assoluto (Phenomenology of the Absolute Individual, 1930). Evola seems to use the terms “magical idealism” and “theory of the absolute individual” interchangeably.[1] He makes no secret of the fact that his ideas are a development of the tradition of German Idealism,[2] especially Fichte, and he acknowledges that the term “magical idealism” originates with Novalis. However, Evola forcefully critiques the idealists, and insists that his own position is a major step beyond them. In particular, he insists that his own magical idealism has little to do with that of Novalis.[3]

The purpose of this essay is to offer a summary and critique of magical idealism. Little has been written on this subject in English, and Evola’s philosophical works have so far not been translated. Because my Italian is not good enough to read these works with ease, I will be relying upon the English translation of Evola’s intellectual autobiography, The Path of Cinnabar. Chapter Four of that book is entitled “The Speculative Period of Magical Idealism and the Theory of the Absolute Individual,” and is almost 40 pages long. This gives us a lot to go on, but it must be acknowledged that a truly adequate treatment of magical idealism must await the translation of Evola’s philosophical works. As a result, my conclusions in this essay will merely be preliminary. My aim is to understand Evolian magical idealism within the context of German idealism, and to situate it within the larger context of Western metaphysics. Of necessity, the latter aim is critical, because my approach to Western metaphysics has been shaped by Martin Heidegger’s “destruction” of it.

This essay will defend three major critical claims:

Evola misunderstands certain features of German idealist thought, which has the consequence that Evolian magical idealism is actually much closer to the earlier idealists than Evola thinks that it is. This is especially true of Evola’s relationship to Fichte. Also, contrary to Evola’s own assertions, his ideas are quite close to Novalis’ version of magical idealism.

The epistemological arguments Evola presents in support of his idealism are untenable.

While Evola offers magical idealism as part of his “revolt against the modern world,” and as a philosophical expression of certain traditional teachings, his theory is, from start to finish, mired in philosophical assumptions that are unique to modernity, and to which the nihilism of the contemporary world can be directly traced.

The third critical point is obviously the most significant, since the first two are mainly of academic interest. The third criticism constitutes a major challenge to the idea, dear to many on the Right, that Evola’s philosophical theories offer us a path for the overcoming of modernity. Thus, the present essay should be seen as a continuation of the critique of Traditionalism I began in “Heidegger Against the Traditionalists.” In the next section, I will summarize the philosophical background necessary to understand Evola’s ideas. In succeeding sections, I will discuss Evola’s critique of the German idealists; summarize the basic elements of Evolian magical idealism; and offer concluding, critical reflections on Evola’s philosophy.

2. The Foundations of Magical Idealism in German Philosophy

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Evola explicitly characterizes his theories as a development of “transcendental idealism.”[4] This term originates with Kant, who used it to describe his own philosophy. (I have written five essays for Counter-Currents explaining Kant’s philosophy, as part of a larger project that involves a critique of modernity via an exploration of Western metaphysics; start here.) Transcendental idealism is something distinctively different from the subjective idealism (or “phenomenalism”) of Bishop Berkeley, who held that “ideas” — i.e., perceptions or impressions in our minds — are the only things that exist. Berkeley held that there is no world of objects existing independently of our ideas; mind-dependent ideas are the only objects.

In contrast to Berkeley, Kant held that there really is a world that exists independent of our impressions, but that we only know that world as it appears to us; we never know things as they are in themselves (i.e., things as they are independently of our experience of them). This is because our experience is partly the result of innate mental “rules” that “structure” the raw data provided by the senses. Although we can speak loosely and say that “I” structure that data or that “my mind” does so, in fact this structural activity is not performed by the conscious self, and happens, so to speak, “behind the curtain” (i.e., it is unconscious). Kant uses the term “transcendental” to refer to these mental structures, which are the conditions for any experience whatsoever. The tradition of transcendental philosophy that Kant inaugurated uses the term “transcendental subjectivity” to refer to that unconscious aspect of subjectivity which contains these epistemic rules and “applies” them.[5] Thus, transcendental idealism is the position that the objects of our experience are “transcendentally ideal”; i.e., those objects (as we experience them) are partly the product of the acts of transcendental subjectivity.

Now, Evola’s magical idealism takes transcendental idealism as its starting point but aims to radicalize it. Evola believes that Kant’s own position is inconsistent and fundamentally timid. However, Evola was certainly not the first philosopher to think this, and to aspire to radicalize Kant. That distinction belongs to J. G. Fichte (1762-1814), and it is Fichte to whom Evola owes his greatest philosophical debts. (I have written five essays for Counter-Currents explaining Fichte’s ideas, as part of the same series on Western metaphysics; start here.)

Owing mainly to the great obscurity of his writing, Fichte’s major positions have frequently been misunderstood. He is most notorious for his desire to eliminate Kant’s “thing in itself” (a desire shared by Evola). This is the element in Kant’s philosophy that anchors it in realism and keeps subjective idealism at bay. As I said earlier, Kant held that we only know things as they appear to us, but we can never know things as they are in themselves. “Things as they are in themselves” is often abbreviated simply as “the thing-in-itself.” To Fichte, the thing-in-itself seemed like a completely empty and dispensable concept. If we cannot experience it, why accept that it exists? Fichte revered Kant, but he held that the great man’s acceptance of the thing-in-itself was a failure of will. Kant did not fully appreciate the truly radical nature of his own position and was still grasping onto a slim realist reed. Fichte therefore concluded that the thing-in-itself had to be eliminated.

But if we eliminate the thing-in-itself, then we can no longer maintain that objects as we experience them are only partly the result of the activity of transcendental subjectivity. In holding onto the thing-in-itself, Kant was indeed retaining the commonsense position that the table in front of me appears as it does partly due to the extra-mental characteristics of the table; i.e., the inherent characteristics of the table “out there in the world.” If we eliminate the thing-in-itself, then it looks like we are landed in subjective idealism (and possibly solipsism, the conviction that only I, myself exist). In fact, this is the position that is usually ascribed to Fichte. He is usually understood as having held that the world of experience is entirely the creation of the “Absolute Ego” (i.e., transcendental subjectivity).

However, as recent scholarship has demonstrated, this account of Fichte’s philosophy depends upon ignoring key passages in his writings and mis-reading others. Fichte’s actual position is not that the world is the creation of the Absolute Ego, but that it ought to be. In rejecting Kant’s thing-in-itself, Fichte does not, in fact, reject the idea that there is something that transcends consciousness. He rejects the thing-in-itself only insofar as he takes Kant to be referring to an absolutely unknowable object (which is arguably a misinterpretation of Kant). For Fichte, there is no such thing: There is only an ineradicable but shifting aspect of unknowability to all objects. In other words, no matter what object I am concerned with, there is always something about it that is unknown at any given time. For example, when I am looking at one side of the laptop, the other side is concealed from me. Or: I know certain things about laptops, whereas others are a mystery to me. Even if I learn more about them, much else will still remain unknown.

For Fichte, there is no such thing as an object that cannot be known at all, and knowledge is therefore in principle infinitely expandable. However, this must be understood as a “regulative ideal”: We strive to know, as if infinite or complete knowledge were possible. It is not ultimately possible because of the ineluctable element of an “unknown” in the experience of all objects. Despite this reasonable caveat, we have to say that Fichte exhibits a typical Enlightenment optimism about the expansion of knowledge. In fact, he takes that optimism in a revolutionary new direction.

In place of the Cartesian “contemplative” model of knowledge (in which the subject gazes upon an external world of objects), Fichte advances what can be called a “voluntarist” model. We believe in a world “out there,” he says, precisely because of its resistance to will: its resistance to my desire to fully know it and manipulate it. Indeed, the element of the “unknown” discussed above simply amounts to “that which resists my will.” Thus, as one commentator puts it, “for Fichte, the circumference of my world is equivalent to the limits of my will.”[6] Nevertheless, while the world will always, to one degree or another, resist our will, over the course of time we can get better and better at knowing and manipulating it.

So far so good, but what does this have to do with the idea that the world “ought to be” the creation of the Absolute Ego? How is Fichte’s philosophy an idealism at all? The answer has to do with how he conceptualizes the act of knowing or manipulating objects according to the will. The object presents itself as an other. But when I know it or transform it according to my designs, I am overcoming the otherness of the other. And we can also say that we are overcoming the subject-object distinction. Why? Because when I confront the transformed object I am, in effect, confronting myself; the subject is confronting itself as object (the subject becomes object / the object becomes the subject).

To see why, let’s consider a simple example. Suppose I take up a block of wood. This is undeniably an other; an object which I, as a subject, confront in its otherness: I did not create it, and much about it is unknown to me. But suppose I whittle it into a doorstop or into a comb. In confronting this newly created object I am now confronting myself, because in it my own subjectivity (my plans, designs, imagination, etc.) has become objectified. For Fichte, it is the human vocation to transform the entire world in this fashion — to, in effect “make the whole realm of nature disappear.”[7] Thus, our end is to be confronted only with ourselves; to make subjectivity absolute — meaning, to make subjectivity the only thing that exists. Our end is to become the conscious creators of existence; in effect, to become God. It is worth repeating, however, that Fichte holds this to be a regulative ideal: We can work towards this goal, and we will make progress, but it will never be fully and finally achieved.

Lastly, it is necessary to mention that, for Fichte, the human project of transforming nature has an inescapably moral significance. It might have seemed from the foregoing that we are putting our own personal, idiosyncratic stamp upon nature. But Fichte rejects this. He enjoins us to transform the world according to ideals that have a moral significance. What is may not be made over into just any old thing I want; it is to be made over into what ought to be. Further, like Kant, Fichte holds that moral principles (genuine moral principles, at least) are not arbitrary or personal inventions, but are derived from the nature of subjectivity itself.

To fully explain this point would take us too far afield, but we can give a very brief indication of what Fichte means. He characterizes the will as exhibiting a tendency toward “absolute indeterminacy through anything outside itself,” or the tendency “to determine itself absolutely, without any external impetus.”[8] In short, the ultimate goal of the will is absolute freedom; the state of being wholly self-determined; not being determined by anything outside oneself. This is simply Kant’s conception of the autonomy of the moral will taken to a new extreme. And Fichte argues that the will’s absolute freedom, independence, and autonomy (which amount to the same thing) is the supreme principle of morality.

You can buy James J. O’Meara’s Mysticism After Modernism here.

An action is moral, ultimately, if it “lies in a series [of actions] through the continuation of which the I would have to become independent.”[9] In other words, an action is moral if it is compatible with, or promotes, the subject’s freedom. But the entire modern project of the mastery and control of nature promotes the subject’s freedom — by canceling the otherness of nature, rendering the subject, in principle, absolutely free and unopposed. Thus, for Fichte, the mastery and control of nature is a moral project. And it bears repeating that this moral ideal is not a personal creation, but (so Fichte believed) derived from the very nature of subjectivity.

Let us note one final thing concerning the moral dimension of Fichte’s idealism, for later on it will allow us to highlight one way in which Evola’s idealism is significantly different. I said above that, for Fichte, there is a moral imperative to master nature by canceling its “otherness.” What we immediately think of is the nature “out there in the world.” He does mean this — but he also means the nature in us. Everything in me that is irrational and unchosen — my emotions, predilections, drives, preferences, and instincts — must be mastered as well: Mastered according to reason, and according to morality. In other words, everything about me that is “natural” must be brought under the dominion of reason. All that is contrary to the absolute freedom and independence of a rational being must be eradicated. (Though, once again, Fichte regards this as an infinite task.)

Of course, this means, in effect, that we must work for the abolition of our own individuality — since it is precisely my own peculiar, unchosen combination of emotions, predilections, drives, preferences, and instincts that makes me unique. Fichte not only recognizes this implication, he positively affirms it: He proclaims the “unconditional rejection of all individuality” and states that we must work toward the eradication of “the personal, sensuous existence of the individual.”[10] The rational life, says Fichte, “consists in a person forgetting himself in the species, placing his life in the service of the life of the whole, and sacrificing it for its sake.”[11]

3. Evola’s Critique of the Idealists

The foregoing is an extremely compressed summary of the philosophical background necessary to understand magical idealism (we will consider the influence of Novalis in the concluding section). So how does Evola’s position differ from Fichte’s? The answer is that magical idealism is, in fact, quite close to Fichte’s version of transcendental idealism. However, it differs from his in one crucial respect. Fichte had argued, in essence, for a “pragmatic” position: Even though the world will never be, fully and finally, the creation of Absolute Ego, we must nevertheless act as if this is possible, and work tirelessly for its realization. To put the matter as succinctly as possible, Evola replaces the Absolute Ego with the personal ego; he argues that we must come to see the world as the creation of the being that says “I.”

Needless to say, this point will require a good deal of elaboration. We must begin by explaining precisely what the difference is between the “Absolute Ego” and the “personal ego,” for the difference may not be immediately obvious to all readers. I noted in the last section that “Absolute Ego” is Fichte’s term for transcendental subjectivity, which is the “unconscious” aspect of subjectivity; that which acts behind the scenes to shape the raw data of the senses according to a priori categories and rules. To see what the difference is between the Absolute Ego and the personal ego, let us just begin by noting that there is absolutely nothing personal or individual about transcendental subjectivity. It was the position of Kant and Fichte, in fact, that transcendental subjectivity is universal: “My” Absolute Ego structures experience exactly like “yours” does. This is why we both have the experience of living in the same world, and why we are able to communicate with each other. Though we may speak loosely of “my” transcendental subjectivity, it contains nothing that is unique to me: none of my memories, quirks, or personal proclivities.

What Evola offers is an idealism that is “pragmatic” in the same sense as Fichte’s. However, it enjoins us to come to see the world not as the creation of some kind of universal, Absolute Ego, but instead as the creation of the finite, personal ego. This will involve, in part, the personal ego coming to assume all the a priori functions that Kant and Fichte had attributed to transcendental subjectivity. In other words, Evola enjoins us to experience the world as if it is the creation of the personal “I” — as if it is my creation. I must come to see that my experience is the result of my own, personal choice. The extent to which my experience seems to be the product of unconscious factors beyond my control, is the extent to which I am guilty of a failure of will and a failure of imagination. In maintaining this, Evola believes he is being truer to the principle of radical freedom and autonomy than Fichte himself was. And there is some reason to follow him in thinking this.

Recall that Fichte maintained that true freedom means being absolutely undetermined by anything “outside” oneself. But there are two major reasons why the Absolute Ego, or transcendental subjectivity, could indeed be said to be “outside myself.” First, I noted a moment ago that while we can speak loosely of “my” transcendental subjectivity or of “yours,” there is absolutely nothing personal about it. Second, transcendental subjectivity, Kant argued, does not appear in space and time. Rather, objects appear for us in space and time precisely as a result of the acts of transcendental subjectivity. This means that transcendental subjectivity is not an object that we could point to, occupying a certain position in space and a certain moment in time.

Given both these points, there is no logical basis for believing that there is more than one transcendental subjectivity. For what indeed would differentiate multiple transcendental subjectivities if they are completely universal and impersonal (and thus indistinguishable), as well as impossible to locate in space and time? Thus, not only is there nothing personal about transcendental subjectivity, there is no reason to think that it is “mine” or that “I have it.” It seems, in fact, to be something quite alien and mysterious.

But there is an even deeper problem for Fichte. Given that there is nothing subjective, personal, or ego-like about the Absolute Ego, in virtue of what is it called “ego” at all? This was precisely the question Schelling and Hegel would ask of Fichte, which led them to drop the language of an “Absolute Ego” entirely and to speak instead of an “Absolute” which transcends the subject-object division. In sum, the Absolute Ego (and, we might add, the Absolute) emerges as something that is decidedly not “me” or “mine.” In fact, it is something “outside” me; it is an “other” to me.

The idea that this other structures my experience thus has to emerge, by the terms of Fichte’s own position, as an intolerable affront to human freedom. This claim is perhaps the most interesting aspect of Evola’s critique of Fichte. To be clear, he argues that if true freedom means being wholly undetermined by anything outside ourselves, then given that transcendental subjectivity is neither “myself” nor under my conscious control, we must, on principle, reject the idea of transcendental subjectivity. Let’s consider some of Evola’s own statements about these ideas.

In The Path of Cinnabar, Evola makes clear his contempt for the academic philosophers who put forward idealist theories: “[What] I found disgusting in all this was the coexistence of the petit-bourgeois, paid, married and conformist university professor alongside the theory of an absolute, free ‘I’ which is the creator of both the world and of history.”[12] Evola thus sees a disconnect between the grand theories of the professors and their own personal lives (a disconnect between what Gurdjieff would call their “knowledge” and their own level of “being”). However, Evola’s criticism goes much deeper than this. He also sees the theories of the same professors (not just their lives) as infected with a basic timidity.

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Evola argues that transcendental idealism makes the “I” (the personal ego) fundamentally passive: “Ultimately, this approach implies a basic passivity on the part of the true ‘I,’ which is told what he is ‘freely’ to desire in things, history, contingencies, etc.”[13] Indeed, as we have already seen, transcendental idealism insists that the activity of creating our experience of a world “out there” is performed unconsciously by “another part” of subjectivity different from the conscious, personal “I.” As Evola puts the matter, “[An] individual can only claim to possess ‘transcendental thought’ . . . in such a way as to consider the world as something ‘posited’ there by himself, if he conceptualizes such a possession as an unconscious act on his part.”[14]

However, as we have already seen, this “unconscious” part of subjectivity, once it is fully understood, is so impersonal and alien that there is every reason to conceptualize it as an other, and not a part of subjectivity at all. Evola expresses precisely this criticism, and argues that ultimately it completely vitiates the transcendental idealist position. The following difficult passage from The Path of Cinnabar is key, and I shall quote it at length:

My ultimate philosophical conclusions, then, were as follows: the idealist reduction of nature, and most of the world of real experience, to a mere posit of the “I” is accomplished “through the reduction of the ‘I’ to nature, for nothing is known — or rather, nothing is assumed to be known — of that very ‘I’ which is freedom; and further, through an identification of the notion of the ‘I,’ by the use of an evident paralogism, with that of the principle of spontaneity, which is ultimately the principle of nature.” Given that the cosmogonic, transcendental activity of the “I” when compared to that of the concrete “I,” must either be defined as an unconscious act, or be seen to possess the qualities of a passive, unintentional, unpredictable, aimless, and merely “spontaneous” activity, it is clear that, were idealists seriously (and not merely imaginatively) to follow the principle of the concrete person’s conformity to the transcendental “I” (known as the “pure act,” or by whatever name idealists chose to describe their new god), they would have utterly regressed to a sub-personal level; even more so than the various philosophers who sung of “Life” and irrationality, and who were haughtily shunned by Idealists.[15]

What is crucial here is the following: “the Idealist reduction of nature . . . to a mere posit of the ‘I’ is accomplished through the reduction of the ‘I’ to nature.” As I will discuss in more detail later, Fichte had argued that fundamentally only two philosophies are possible: “dogmatism” (i.e., determinism), which explains experience as caused by an external world “out there” (i.e., “nature”) acting upon the subject; and “idealism,” which explains the external world as having been created by subjectivity. Fichte rejects dogmatism and embraces idealism precisely because he rejects the idea (as we have already discussed) of anything “outside” subjectivity determining it; he upholds, in principle, the absolute freedom of the subject. We have seen, however, that on analysis the Absolute Ego or transcendental subjectivity emerges precisely as something “other” that acts upon the conscious “I.”

Thus, in a grand philosophical irony, Fichte’s idealism turns out to be another form of dogmatism! The idealists intend to “reduce nature” to a posit of the “I” but wind up reducing the “I” to a posit of nature (where “nature” is just understood to be anything external to the conscious “I,” including “unconscious” transcendental subjectivity). Further, in the quotation above, Evola claims that the “idealist reduction of nature . . . to a mere posit of the ‘I’” is also accomplished “through an identification of the notion of the ‘I’ . . . with that of the principle of spontaneity, which is ultimately the principle of nature.” Here Evola is framing a related objection, also to the effect that the idealists inadvertently wind up reducing the “I” to nature.

When he writes of the “principle of spontaneity,” he is referencing one of the major claims made by Kant and Fichte about transcendental subjectivity. In the technical vocabulary of idealism, saying that transcendental subjectivity exhibits “spontaneity” means that no external cause acts upon it in order to compel it to apply concepts to the matter of sensibility. Transcendental subjectivity is therefore fundamentally free. But this means that if we were to ask where subjectivity’s concepts come from, by the logic of their own position Kant and Fichte cannot appeal to any source, let alone “cause” of the concepts aside from subjectivity itself. Their position therefore seems to require that in some sense or other, transcendental subjectivity freely “specifies itself” into the concepts of the understanding, and the other a priori rules that structure experience. Kant in his Opus Postumum and Fichte in his various versions of the Wissenschaftslehre had tried to detail the nature of this self-specification.

For Evola, however, the problem with this position is that it attributes to transcendental subjectivity the very characteristic that dogmatism/determinism attributes to nature. According to that position, nature is an “other” to subjectivity that appears to us as it does because nature is itself free and spontaneous: through its own activities, it gives rise to various phenomena that present themselves to consciousness. I have no choice but to experience the world the way that I do because the world is inherently that way and didn’t get to be that way as a result of anything I have done.

The trouble with idealism, however, is that it transfers to transcendental subjectivity the freedom and spontaneity that dogmatism attributes to nature. And it thereby declares subjectivity “free” because it is not determined by an “other.” But, as we have seen, on closer examination transcendental subjectivity emerges as so “other” to our conscious selves that there is scarcely any reason to call it “subjectivity” at all. Thus, the idealists make transcendental subjectivity into a second nature: It is free and spontaneous, but it is still not me; it is yet another “other.” Once again, the idealists wind up introducing a new dogmatism, in which “I” am understood to be determined by something external to my conscious self. It is just that this external thing is now named “transcendental subjectivity” rather than “nature.”

At the end of the quotation above, Evola states that “were idealists seriously . . . to follow the principle of the concrete person’s conformity to the transcendental ‘I’ (known as the ‘pure act,’ or by whatever name idealists chose to describe their new god), they would have utterly regressed to a sub-personal level.” What he means by this is that while the idealists think they are affirming the absolute freedom of subjectivity, in fact to accept their philosophy would really mean to passively accept the determination of the conscious “I” by an alien other. It would really mean to embrace a subhuman (and thus “sub-personal”) state. Note also that Evola refers to the “new god” of the idealists. This is certainly a valid claim, given that all of the idealists (save Kant) flirted with the idea of identifying transcendental subjectivity or the Absolute Ego with God (and Hegel is very clear in identifying his Absolute with God). Needless to say, God is yet another “other” external to the self that is supposed to determine it. Evola writes further in The Path of Cinnabar that

[t]he idealist philosopher, like an Atlas shrugging the cosmic weight off his back, had gotten rid of the true “I,” and had embraced a “transcendental “I” or “Absolute Spirit” (also known as Logos, Idea, or Pure Act) which he bestowed with a cosmogonic function. The Idealist philosopher declared that, in comparison to such a transcendental “I,” the concrete personality of an individual is merely illusion or fiction — [Giovanni] Gentile even used the expression “a puppet of the imagination.” According to this idealist view, one partakes of truth, certainty, reality, ethics, spirituality, and history only insofar as one identifies oneself with such a transcendental entity.[16]

By “the true ‘I’” Evola means precisely “the concrete personality of an individual”; i.e., the personal ego. Evola later refers to idealism as exhibiting “a progressive flight away from the genuine “I” in which the individual “does not endure: it gives way; it does not rule things, but melts within them. This is the path of decadence.”[17] In fact, Evola believes that the problems endemic to transcendental idealism must lead to its self-overcoming in magical idealism. He thus asserts a dialectical progression of idealist philosophies, culminating in his own ideas.[18]