

[Findlay's Rational Mysticism: An Introduction. By Sanford L. Drob](#)

J.N. Findlay is primarily known for his groundbreaking work on Hegel (*Hegel: A Re-examination*, 1958), as the translator of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, for his essays on the puzzles engendered by time, and for his early efforts (later repudiated) to disprove the existence of God. He is also the author of a series of original works on major figures in the history of philosophy, including Meinong, Plato, Kant, and Wittgenstein. It is, however, Findlay's original philosophical writings that may well prove to be his greatest philosophical legacy. Findlay presented his modern version of Neoplatonism, his unique understanding of the objects of religious experience and the Absolute, his axiological ethics, and phenomenology of the "value firmament" in four works, all published between 1961 and 1970: *Values and Intentions* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961); *The Discipline of the Cave* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966); *The Transcendence of the Cave* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966); and *Ascent to the Absolute*. (London: George Allen & Unwin 1970). It is most unfortunate that each of these volumes are currently out of print. They are, apart from their philosophical value great poetic works that embody the striving of the human spirit towards, and even beyond, its highest possibilities and ideals.

In this brief, essay I can only touch upon a small segment of Findlay's thought, his philosophical theology, which reaches its zenith in *The Transcendence of the Cave*, and which can perhaps best be summarized with one of his own his terms, "rational mysticism". Findlay, whose Neoplatonism is clearly filtered through his reading of such later philosophers as Kant and Hegel, argued that a dialectical understanding of the philosophical antinomies of earthly life and experience can provide us with an *intellectual* intuition of "higher worlds" and an all encompassing "absolute" that is in many ways equivalent to the absolute intuited in mystical consciousness, both east and west.

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[The Absolute](#)

For Findlay, the Absolute embodies not only "the metaphysical values of simplicity, unity, self-existence and power" but also "the values...of justice, mercy, truth, beauty, etc." He holds that "God or the religious absolute cannot fail to will these values because, in a manner which defies ordinary grammar, he not only has them, but is them." (112). [All

page references in this essay, unless otherwise noted are to the *Transcendence of the Cave*.] Yet at the same time Findlay holds that the “will in the religious absolute can and must determine itself quite freely” (112).

On Findlay's view, the various values of mind, reason, intelligence and will, along with those of satisfaction, happiness, freedom, fairness, beauty, etc. “culminate in a single, unique intentional object to which devotion, worship, and unconditional self-dedication are the only appropriate attitude (98).”

To this point, Findlay is strictly Neoplatonic, and his views scarcely depart from those contained, for example, in Plotinus' *Enneads*. However, Findlay adapts this Neoplatonic view to a far more dynamic conception of the cosmos and God. He does this through a careful phenomenological description of the paradoxes, absurdities and antinomies that are endemic to earthly life, what he refers to, in accordance with the Platonic metaphor, as life within the “cave.”

Antinomies

According to Findlay, “antinomy...is an all-pervasive phenomenon in the experienced and interpreted world (2).” Findlay states that the fact that antinomies abound in human experience leads us to “find the world a queer place” and led Plato and others to describe it as a “cave” (21). He argues that “the pervasive antinomy of the world is far too serious and too deep to count as a mere formal contradiction” (21). He holds that while antinomies can be specified as formal contradictions, this provides us with no insight because such contradictions can be readily dissolved through a specification of the “senses” in which each pole of the contradiction is true and false. For Findlay, the antinomies of human experience are more akin to “discrepancies in a person's character,” and it does us no good to either define or argue them away as an merely “apparent” contradictions. Rather than adjust our concepts to accommodate antinimous experience, Findlay calls upon us to extend our experience to accommodate our antinimous concepts. Findlay seeks an accommodation that will “explain rather than explain away such antinomies.”

The Absurdities Are Many

The absurdities and antinomies of the world are many, and included amongst them are such classical philosophical and theological problems as the opposition between the dictates of morality and the rewards that are obviously bestowed upon the wicked; the opposition between our experience of ourselves as possessing free will, and the scientific assumptions of determinism; the puzzles engendered by the observation that all we can really know is the data of our own senses, and our certainty regarding the existence of an objective, external world; and the absurdities associated with the ideas that we only have direct awareness of our *own* minds, and our certainty of the existence of the minds and inner experiences of others.

Findlay focuses upon several antinomies connected with space and time; where, for example, on the one hand these great "media" of experience appear to be the "containers" within which all events occur, but on the other hand are themselves nothing except insofar as they are defined by the events that transpire within and thus constitute them. A second antinomy arises from our consideration of the temporal "now", the series of which seem to constitute the march of time, but none of which can be defined apart from reference to a past and a future. There are antinomies related to the opposition between efficient causality and teleology, and, according to Findlay, the consequent absurdities of bodies adjusting themselves to (future) happenings that never actually occur (27). There are antinomies that derive from a consideration of the fact that while we can appeal to the experience of others to prove something's existence or an event's occurrence, the very experience and testimony of the other is ultimately only apprehended through our own conscious awareness. Findlay also points to the paradoxical interdependence between the private and public criteria we utilize to comprehend our own and others' mental states. On the one hand we can only come to label and describe ours and others inner states through the publicly observable manifestations of them, e.g. through the *behavioral* expressions of anger, grief, thoughtfulness, etc. On the other hand, our understanding of such outward expressions is itself dependent upon private "inner" states, both the "inner" states that serve as fulfillment of, and thus give sense to, our public behavior, and the inner states through which we become aware of our own observations (*Discipline of the Cave*, p. 204).

Paradoxes of Material Bodies

Findlay explores a number of paradoxes that relate to material bodies; for example, pointing out that while such bodies are thought to be completely independent of any mind cognizing them, they cannot even be conceived except in relation to a conscious perspective upon them (*Discipline of the Cave*, p. 261) or under the aegis of some ideational category. Findlay also holds that there is something highly paradoxical regarding our attitude towards *our own* bodies; on the one hand they seem essential to our mental and interpersonal life, while at the same time they seem to us to be alien to it (*Discipline of the Cave*, p. 206), so much so that theologians have long posited the mind or soul's independence from corporeal existence.

The Immanent Solution

Findlay proffers two broad metaphysical responses to the existence of the antinomies that are endemic to experience. The first, *immanent* response, is to hold with such philosophers as Fichte and Hegel that the difficulties and conundrums posed by our antinomous experiences and interpretations are goads towards the formation of common, aims, interests and meanings, and ultimately towards the forms of artistic, scientific and philosophical creativity that constitute historical, communal and cultural life (31, 100). On this view our varied ways of seeing and interpreting things do not ultimately reflect an underlying fixed nature, but rather permit and encourage the emergence of the inquiry, debate, cooperation, creativity and self-consciousness of the our rational, social selves. The problems of this world are neither open to simple solution nor are they hopelessly enigmatic. Though they may present themselves as conundrums for millennia, they are eventually accommodated by the human spirit, and remain enigmatic only and precisely to the degree as they force the fullest development of human values, imagination, science and philosophy (34). As Findlay puts it:

these oppositions and indifferences exist for the sake of the rational activities they render possible (101).

and

The untoward, the irrational, the merely personal, have the teleological role of providing the necessary incitement and raw material for the rational, common, self-conscious result, and so all phenomenal existence can be brought under

the sway of values, and something like the dominion of Good taught in the *Phaedo* proven true (76).

The Transcendent Solution

Findlay, however, proposes a second solution, a *transcendent* one, to the presence of antinomies, conflicts, absurdities and contradictions in this world. This second solution is necessitated because the first solution “remains a difficult unstable way of viewing things which like some strange effort at stereoscopy, is ready at any moment to switch back again to the deeply unsatisfying, but more stable ways of viewing things out of which it arose” (103). Part of our dissatisfaction with the immanent solution is that it places human life and endeavor at the center of the universe and relegates to insignificance much of the vast cosmos of stars and galaxies.

Findlay now suggests that behind the antinimous manifestations of our “cave” there is another world, or series of worlds, that both explain our current condition, and when properly understood, provide a metaphysical solution to our philosophical and moral dilemmas. He asks us to consider the possibility that “the solution of this world’s absurdities lies in another dimension and another life altogether” (105). This dimension or life is actually a “higher world”, or, better put, an upper half to our own world,” and the two halves only make fully rounded sense when seen in their mutual relevance and interconnection” (121). At another place Findlay hints at the possibility of a number of “higher worlds”:

Where scientific tensions only lead us to postulate new types of particles or modifications of fundamental scientific formulae, philosophical tensions lead us to complete our world with a whole new type or set of types of worlds (122).

"Otherworldly Geography"

Findlay's preferred model bases itself on an analogy with earthly geography, with our “world” occupying a region of maximum differentiation close to the “equator” and God or the “Absolute” occupying a region of maximal convergence at the poles. As we pass our equatorial zone and advance toward the “higher latitudes” there is a

steady vanishing of the harsh definiteness and distinctness of individuals, and a steady blurring or coming into coincidence of the divisions amongst kinds and categories, until in the end one approaches and perhaps at last reaches a paradoxical unitary point of convergence, where the objects of religion may be thought to have their habitat (123-4).

According to Findlay, the progress towards higher worlds or latitudes involves a steady diminution of individuality, corporeality and temporality, and he informs us that the objects in these worlds are governed by associations of meaning as opposed to causality (127). As we continue our ascent, individuality will begin to vanish, as things become more and more indistinguishable from their species and genera, resulting in a realm of values that exist generically apart from any instantiation (137). As individuality diminishes, the obstacles that it and materiality place between communicating minds will vanish as well, as will the communicative gulfs that exist between persons in our own realm (134-5). The attenuated matter of the upper realms, rather than being an obstacle to consciousness and reason, will simply serve as a context for communication and a vehicle for the expression of thought and will (128). Simple location will vanish, and all things will be "predominantly somewhere, but more distantly present everywhere else" (129). Temporality will be altered, and prophecy made possible, as alternative futures are displayed, teaching us what will almost certainly happen or will happen unless we take counter-measures, etc. (131). Finally,

At the mystical pole of our whole geography we may place an object of infinite and no longer puzzling perfection, which we need no longer conceive as a mere supreme instance of incompatible values, but as the living principle of all those values themselves (137).

Thus, at the apex of all the worlds, Findlay places what Plotinus described as "The Good", what the Indian philosophers referred to as *Brahman-Atman*, and what the Kabbalists spoke of as the Infinite, *Ein-sof*.

Rational Mysticism

One might think that Findlay would follow Plotinus in an appeal to a supra-rational mystical vision to justify his assertions regarding the upper worlds. However, he holds

his philosophy to be rationally derived, as following *logically* from the antinomies and conundrums of our earthly existence. He writes:

What I have tried to work out could have been documented and confirmed by an immense amount of mystical and religious literature and experience, but I have not appealed to such support. While I do not accept any form of the widely-held dichotomy between logical and empirical truth, I do not wish, as a philosopher, to contribute to the merely empirical treatment of anything. If there is not an element of necessity, of genuine logical structure, in the construction of higher spheres of experience and their objects, they are for me without interest or importance (preface).

The world as we experience it is broken, disjoint, absurd and incomprehensible, and only begins to make sense when we posit a higher realm as its complement and completion. The various puzzles and antinomies of our world find a solution and vanish in the higher realms. According to Findlay, the philosophical and spiritual conundrums of our own world, including but not limited to antinomies with respect to space and time, freedom and necessity, randomness and teleology, inner experience and the external world, "other minds", and the problem of evil, are insuperable when considered in the context of the world of ordinary life and experience, and are only resolved when we consider the possibility of a spiritual and "unified" world existing as a complement to our own.

[The Problem of Other Minds](#)

Here I will provide a single but, I believe, telling example of Findlay's reasoning. Philosophers have long been troubled by the question of how it is that we know that individuals other than ourselves possess minds. It is argued that while we *know* our own minds directly through introspection, we can only *infer* the existence of others' minds on the basis of their physical behavior. It is readily apparent that this entire problem would not arise in a world in which all consciousness was effectively one, or, less dramatically, in a (slightly lower) world in which there was direct communication between separate minds, unmediated by behavior or other material events. Indeed, we might posit the existence of a higher, unitary, world in order to solve the problem of minds other than our own. We might also recognize that such a world, in which experience is organized quite differently than in our own, is more or less continually accessible to some individuals in

our own world, and, to all of us, at least on occasion. In those experiences in which the mystic, for example, recognizes the unity of all souls, or in those interpersonal encounters in which one immediately understands another's thoughts and feelings, and experiences them as if they were one's own, we are, as it were, transported to a "higher reality". When we conceptualize higher worlds simply as (radically) different ways of organizing experience, the great mystery about higher worlds and their penetration into our own disappears, and what at first appears as a distant, alien concept becomes familiar and relevant to daily life.

Concluding Reflections

Findlay is not alone in positing the existence of an underlying reality, or "world" in which the antinomies and philosophical conundrums of our own world are presumably resolved (Plato's ideal forms, Kant's "noumenal" reality, Hegel's "absolute spirit", the linguistic philosopher's "ideal language" are each examples that come readily to mind). Just as one might posit the existence of an "afterlife" to explain the moral antinomy manifest in the "suffering of the righteous," one might also posit the existence of a "higher" reality in order to solve other enigmatic and disturbing philosophical problems.

Indeed, when we reflect upon the kind of world which would resolve *our* philosophical dilemmas, we begin to recognize it as very much akin to the world which certain mystical traditions posit as existing in a metaphysical region between our world and the Absolute, and which Findlay tells us serves as the compliment or completion of our own world. This is because such a higher world is a *unified*, purely spiritual and conceptual world that exists outside the vexing realm of space and time. It is a world which follows a purely *rational* order in which there is no place for randomly caused events. It is a world in which "acts of will" need not proceed through the medium of matter and hence involve themselves in the problems of material necessity. It is a world in which we are in direct communion with both the (purely ideational or spiritual) objects of experience and the thoughts of other minds, and hence a world within which the philosophical problems of "knowledge and its objects" and the "existence of other minds" cannot conceivably arise. It is a world devoid of serial time and hence a world in which the puzzles of temporality cannot arise. It is a world without gross matter, and hence a world in which the distinction between a concept and its instance cannot be maintained, and thus where to know an instance is *ipso facto* to know its universal and vice versa. Finally, it is a

world in which there is neither material harm nor gain and, hence, where virtue and righteousness exist as their own and only reward.

[This article is a modified version of essays that appear in S Drob, *Kabbalistic Metaphors: Jewish Mystical Themes in Ancient and Modern Thought* (Jason Aronson, 2000) and on the New Kabbalah Website (www.newkabbalah.com), where the author argues that Findlay's philosophy is particularly helpful in understanding the Jewish Mystical tradition.]