Possibly unavoidably, we have always treated the world at least partially as realists in our everyday metaphysics: We deal with the objects surrounding us as real aids or obstacles that are independent of us and our perception of them. At the same time, we have adopted, over the last decades, a more reluctant and relativist stance when it comes to asserting the truth of beliefs we hold about this world and we do not demand that everyone else makes the same judgments as we do or that our judgments hold universally. From a philosophical perspective, a more sophisticated account can be given, and is given by Jure Simoniti and Gregor Kroupa in the introduction to their edited volume on idealism: In the history of idealism (or better: of the rise and fall of idealism), two different positions have resulted in our current dominant assumptions. Since Kant a certain anti–realism (we cannot know the world as it is in itself) has taken hold, accompanied later by an anti–idealism (we cannot grasp any absolute truth). When this development culminates in our time, a certain pushback has happened against the former, but not against the latter position: Realism, according to many contributors of this volume a now omnipresent position, aims to regain access to reality in order to be able to combat truth–relativism, without thereby committing itself to any kind of idealism. That two positions with a long history are juxtaposed in this way already shows that the realism and idealism at play here must be understood according to a minimal commitment that unites a wide variety of thinkers and positions. In the case of idealism, the editors make it explicit that such a position is characterized simply by a claim to some universal truth that transcends particular contexts (rather than any ontological commitment to a world consisting only of minds and their ideas) (ix), while neither the editors nor most of the contributors define what this realism that they oppose precisely consists in. Presumably it, too, is understood according to a minimal commitment, possibly just of ascribing to some everyday metaphysics as the one sketched above. The explicit aim of this volume is to push back against an overarching realist commitment and to provide impulses for a “new idealism [...] that will address and reconsider the possibility of positing truths that can only be formed around a core of irreducible ideality” (x), that is, an idealism free of the ontological baggage of its past but with a solution to the problem of truth for which realism claims to be the only viable option.

The stimuli for a new idealism are sought in two different domains into which the volume is accordingly divided: first, which aspects of historical
idealistic positions can be salvaged and, second, what the contemporary motivations are as to why we want to or have to reclaim any idealism at all. But if the reader expects to be presented with an account of historical idealist positions followed by contemporary metaphysical and epistemological considerations, she will be disappointed. It lies in the nature of an endeavour as large as the one of this volume to be able to cover only a fraction of what constitutes a history and theory of idealism. Furthermore, and naturally, also contemporary approaches are inspired by and take into account past positions and, in addition, some of the contributions exceed what might be considered more narrowly a ‘standard’ philosophical discourse and base their considerations to some extent on contemporary popular culture (Žižek, Krečič), literary works (Božovič) or the currently omnipresent virus (Dolar).

The opening contribution by James I. Porter takes us back to the beginnings of Western philosophy and the alleged emergence of the self. In difference to modern understandings of the ancient self, Porter argues that what we find in Heraclitus and other ancients is not so much a robust self, but rather one that is insignificant and in need to be overcome for a greater (moral, societal) purpose. Relating Heraclitus’ few fragments on the self to his greater metaphysical outlook reveals that psuchē is not a specifically human soul, but “a cosmic life–force or cosmic substance that reaches beyond individual human beings” (9). It does not represent a positive notion of life, but one of a life in constant peril in a world that is chaotic and ordered, alive and dying, at the same time. The individual self as part of this non–contradiction–flouting world must overcome its individuality and understand itself as enmeshed in a cosmos constituted by properties that are, from a different perspective, always also their opposites. In other words, the self is not found in itself, but as that which it is not, the “not–I” (16). A private and inward–looking (i.e. a ‘modern’) self is one that necessarily lacks insight into the universe, while a true self is one that looks outwards, but that thereby also gives up its individuality and humanity. When reality, and along with it also the self, is understood, the self acquires an “ecological character” (22) that pushes back against a world as created by individual selves and accepts its confluence with a cosmic whole.

The path of the self in the history of philosophy—or the misunderstanding of this self by later interpreters—is pursued further by Jure Simoniti’s analysis of the Augustinian self. This analysis is embedded in the assumption that idealisms emerge when reality comes to a point at which it resists the symbols we ascribe to it, that is, at which a concept is no longer applicable to the world, but instead of disappearing finds a place in the subject. The case study provided for this claim is the appearance of the Augustinian private self as a locus for sin and evil that has lost its place in a world that, qua creation, is exclusively
good. Such a world, so Simoniti, requires an idealist redefinition of evil. The *Confessions* are thus read as a recount of the moment in which evil moves a particular life, namely that of Augustine himself, and puts him in opposition to God. But internalizing this evil as an idea of sin, the sinner remains a part of the good creation. What was, before Christianity, a cosmic force in the world and ascribed to the world, is now being internalized and idealized. In what is explicitly considered a speculative interpretation, Simoniti ascribes three levels of sin to Augustine: on an ontological level, sin is nothing but privation, on a semantical level ‘evil’ needs to persist for ‘good’ to have any meaning, and on an existential level, evil is incorporated by the subject. This ‘new’ evil is thus no longer real or in the world, but ideal and relocated as sin. Reclaimed in this way, sin or evil provides the core for the private self. A similar account is provided in some detail also for Descartes, whose *res cogitans* or subject is regarded as the new home for binary concepts made homeless by mechanical accounts of the physical world, such as doubt and certainty or mortality and immortality. The final historical considerations of this mechanism of idealizing are hints to Kant’s, Nietzsche’s, Heidegger’s and Lacan’s thoughts. The idealism that emerges here is not one of us projecting our own categories onto the world, but one that saves certain concepts from a world indifferent to us.

Following these considerations about the idealizing self, the next two texts seem satisfied with settling for a weaker form of idealism, one that merely requires the presence of some idealizing. Gregor Kroupa argues that genetic reconstructions as idealized models are not only a better path to truth than empirical accounts, but also that the origin of such accounts can be found already in Descartes (and thus prior to the genetic geometrical definitions with whose popularization Hobbes is usually credited). Among the many changes the 17th century underwent, an important one is the move from the Aristotelian view that knowledge of the causes of a thing does not add anything to our knowledge of its essence to the claim that a real definition shows how something can be produced. The most prominent and widespread case of such definitions are found in geometry, but since the objects of geometry are ideal, the causal processes we give for their constructions need not match the processes by which these figures come about in the world. The ideal genesis described in such definitions is more reliable, simpler, more general and more intelligible than a description of the empirical genesis could ever be. But, so Kroupa, what we find even earlier than Hobbesian genetic definition is a kind of ‘genetic epistemology’ in Descartes. His account of creation as an idealized account of how God could have created the world makes him an early proponent of the very assumption that also grounds the idealizing of causal explanations: that “truth is found in idealizations rather than in facts” (83).
Only because these explanations are idealized do they reveal the intelligible structure of their objects. The thought of idealism as idealizing thought is pushed even further by Miran Božovič's contribution, which considers such idealist elements always to be present in realist systems (and vice versa). The example he chooses to illustrate this point is the whale ship Pequod (from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*), which Božovič regards as a closed utilitarian microcosmos, because every part of that ship as well as every part of a caught whale on that ship is of use: The whale is eaten by the light supplied by its own oil, which in turn is extracted by simmering over a flame that is kept ablaze by remnants of the oil's extraction process. After having made the most of the whale, its few remains that still blemish the ship are cleared away with the ash from its own burning. This application of things to themselves in order to maximize their use is, so Božovič, analogous to Bentham's continued existence as an embalmed body and for the reasons outlined his *Auto–Icon*, where he enumerates the economical, genealogical, theatrical, phrenological and other possible uses of an individual's body after death. The lesson from this analysis: Even utilitarianism in its most realist, materialist form overvalues utility and turns it into an ideal.

The final part of the historical section covers in greater detail the thinker many of the contributors to this volume consider ultimately the best impulse giver for a new idealism: Hegel. One of the problems Hegel's system poses is that absolute idealism seems to subordinate the world of objects to a pure thought that thinks itself, produces all its determinations and thus has no externality. At the same time, there is a nature that is supposed to be the self–externalized negative of the Idea. Bojana Jovičević tackles this tension between Idea and nature as both dependent and independent of each other by introducing Hegel's concept of ‘free release’ into the equation. Tracing this concept back to Jacobi, for whom comprehension of an object requires that we make it subjective and our own creation, the threat of nihilism looms: If we need to negate existence in order to gain knowledge, thought will ultimately negate its own existence. This is only avoidable if thought is limited by something prior and external to and other than knowledge. For Hegel, on the contrary, thought integrates what is alien to it and by recognizing an irreducible otherness of what is external determines itself. In this way, thought always also refers to nature. ‘Free release’ is thought's mechanism to check the veracity of its truth by withdrawing from nature and seeing how or if it produces in itself “the regime of subjectivity of the idea” (123). Even Hegel's idealism, supplying a backward motion to Božovič's claim of realism's idealism, requires a nature external to thought. Robert B. Pippin then supplies some further depth to the general metaphysical considerations of Hegelian idealism with a critique by
Heidegger: That Hegel considers reason to be able to determine all there is is not compatible with the finitude of human reason. This is not just to say that Hegel’s assumption is overly optimistic, but also, on a more fundamental level, that the focus on the intelligibility of beings leaves out the meaning of being itself. The problem Heidegger diagnoses is therefore not that Hegel neglected the individual thinker, since his concern is a different one, namely “thought’s determination of what thought must be [...] in order to be a possible truth bearer” (135). Heidegger understands, so Pippin, that Hegel is after being which grounds itself and all beings, but objects that this leads to ‘what it is to be’ and ‘to be this or that’ to be one and the same thing. What Heidegger demands is what Hegel excluded from the realm of the achievable: a positive characterization of thought as such, independent of its manifestation. Pippin concludes with some thoughts on how Hegel and Heidegger could be united on this issue—a way that would have probably dissatisfied both. The historical part of this volume is rounded off by opposing Brandom’s realist Hegel with Rorty’s antirealist one in order to show that Hegel’s position in fact falls between the two into something that is akin to contemporary actualism as proposed by Arthur Prior or Robert Stalnaker. Paul Redding takes as the starting point for his considerations these two radically opposed readings of Hegel, both of which originate from Wilfrid Sellars, and settles on the debate about truth and judgment in order to adjudicate between these different readings. Reconstructing the opposition between Rorty and Brandom as one that importantly includes the question of modalities or no modalities in Hegel, he concludes that the two types of judgment we find The Science of Logic, qualitative judgment (judgment of inherence) and quantitative judgment (judgment of subsumption), point us beyond this opposition: A qualitative judgment about a singular thing and its properties is distinct from a particular thing being subsumed under a predicate. This opens the interpretative space to accommodate an actualist understanding of Hegel, according to which possibility is constructed via accessibility from this world: We can move from a singular thing in this world to possible things of this kind and can ascribe to Hegel, therefore, neither a radical realism nor an equally radical antirealism, but “a more modest realism that grounds modal concepts in cognition of the actual world.” (167)

The opening of the part on ‘contemporary impulses’ takes us immediately back to the question of the subject, albeit in an unexpected manner. Slavoj Žižek invokes the Buddhist self and the movie Joker in order to unearth a subject that is not only ineradicable but also threatened by a certain nihilism and to advocate for a rehabilitation of some idealism. Drawing on various considerations of a ‘subjective destitution’ in which the subject is reduced to some void—a view possibly best known in form of the Buddhist nirvana (but, so
Žižek, also found in mystical experience, self–destitution for the sake of radical revolutionary agency, Lacan’s subjective destitution, social nihilism)—a subject is uncovered that is never absolute void, but an always disturbed or disbalanced void or in a constant struggle with its material and cultural conditions. The character Joker from the eponymous movie serves as an example of such a subject reduced to its absolute minimum: a character who simply acts out powerless his own drives. But watching him, we can and must pass through this state (in thought, not in deed!) and recognize the Joker’s absolutely self–destructive and other–destructive stance as a genuine possibility in order “to get rid of the illusions that pertain to the existing order” (183). Only this allows us to conceive genuinely new and revolutionary (but, in contrast to the Joker, also non–violent) political action.

The claim of a minimal irreducible subject is followed by Sebastian Rödl’s sweeping claim that philosophy is best understood as metaphysics and as nothing but its own history. Combining the views of Aristotle and Plato, Rödl argues that the object of the Aristotelian science of being qua being, namely being, is apprehended by judging and that whatever we apprehend, we apprehend as something that has being. Such a concept, which is unconditionally universal, cannot be apprehended by some ‘organ’ (since any organ has only a limited domain over which it ranges), it is infinite and it is apodictic knowledge whose ground is unconditionally necessary (since there is no other that could serve as its ground). In Hegelian fashion, this judgment is infinite because the soul apprehends through itself and determines its own object, it is self–determination. Metaphysics is, therefore, nothing but the self–explication of reason, i.e. judgment. This, Rödl concedes, is prima facie at odds with metaphysics having a history. But if we consider philosophical history as a sequence of thoughts we understand, each position that is understood turns out to be nothing but an instance of us making the same judgment. We understand whenever we see why a judgment is made for internal reasons (rather than, for example, because of circumstantial, historical or societal reasons), whenever we have a judgment that explains itself and requires no further reasons. Consequently, there is no progress or debate in philosophy: Philosophical knowledge can not be opposed or measured against competing hypotheses; it is, rather, what is agreed upon by all and not open for debate—its only explanation is its truth. Furthermore, a philosophical thought is not the thought of this or that philosopher, but it is the thought of everyone who knows its truth—it is timeless: “Since metaphysical knowledge has no outer, time does not affect it as a form of externality.” (205) This idealist attempt to reconcile metaphysics with its history is followed by Isabelle Thomas–Fogiel’s case for idealism as a third and hitherto unappreciated option in the debate between
realism and relativism. Juxtaposing Meillassoux’s realism and Bitbol’s correlationism, she ascribes the following ‘dilemma’ (which might more aptly be called a false dichotomy than a dilemma) to the contemporary metaphysical picture: Either reality is, ontologically, independent of our cognition or it is not, and we can either know, epistemologically, what is independent of us or we confine ourselves to what things are for us. The options we therefore have are either truth as subordinated to reality, but thus also robust, or truth as some kind of plausibility to be evaluated according to other considerations such as usefulness or coherence. The choice, it seems, is realism or relativism. But, so Thomas–Fogiel, also idealism, broadly understood as assuming some ideal order that is valid regardless of considering material things, can provide genuine truth and thus is a serious alternative. Knowledge of such an ideal order would be true and universal because it could be gained by a subject independently of its circumstances, i.e. it is an “omnisubjectivity” (218), and it is repeatable at all times without taking recourse to something real and independent. Such an idealism can remain neutral with regards to the question of the ontological status of this ideality: Whether it has independent existence or is dependent on us is irrelevant for its truth. Such an approach is confronted with an obvious objection: How can we determine which concepts are truly universal and applicable at all times and in all places? Rather than giving instances of such concepts, Thomas–Fogiel considers universality as measurable by degree, namely by its capability to accommodate points of view: the more perspectives a theory can accommodate, the ‘truer’ it is. This idealism operates with a notion of knowledge that is not about grasping some infinite and absolute entity, but that is a process of constantly widening the range of perspectives and moving the limits so as to reduce the ‘other’ that is not captured by it.

Having covered so far many different reasons and aspects of possible idealisms, the entry by Paul Guyer finally (and surprisingly late in the volume) provides a much-needed classification of idealisms, which is also of great help to the reader in ordering and characterizing the previous and following entries. The basis for the distinction between the different kinds of idealism he identifies are the kinds of arguments put forward in favour of them. They fall, broadly, into two categories, epistemological and metaphysical reasons, and lead their proponents to two possible kinds of idealist ontologies, monistic and dualistic. This yields a fourfold table: On the one hand, there are monistic idealisms (those that claim only minds and their ideas exist), arrived at predominantly on epistemic grounds (Berkeley) or metaphysical grounds (Leibniz, McTaggart). On the other hand, there are dualistic idealisms (that accept the existence of matter but consider the ideal more valuable or real), based either on primarily metaphysical (Plato) or epistemological grounds (Hegel). Guyer rightly points
out that this is a useful classification that is readily understood, but that it is also overly schematic. Most of the thinkers analysed provide epistemological as well as metaphysical reasons, but they usually give greater weight or a more fundamental status to either of the two. Unsurprisingly, Guyer’s favourite position is none of four idealisms offered so far. Without going into the reasons as to why he considers all of them insufficient, he introduces Kant’s idealism “on practical grounds” as the only one “worth defending” (233). According to his understanding, Kant walks the line between accepting the unknowability of things as they are in themselves without turning them into mental entities, but nonetheless holding that rational beings are more valuable insofar as they set their ends freely. Rather than relying on theoretical arguments, Guyer concludingly suggests, the best case for idealism might be found in practical considerations, in particular for idealism as “as a moral doctrine, or as a colorful expression of a moral doctrine of the incomparable value of human beings, and other rational beings should there be any.” (249)

This philosophical classification can be considered to be the conclusion of the more straightforwardly philosophical considerations of idealism, as it is followed by two texts that draw their inspiration from rather different sources in order to elucidate the importance of some idealism. Jela Krečič starts her deliberations on idealism from the development Hollywood movies and television series had undergone: For a long time, productions aimed for idealization or idealized depiction of individuals and society, but by now they are almost exclusively attempts to depict some alleged real, marred and authentic. She regards this development as a consequence of a simplified thinking in dichotomies: the real is opposed to the imaginary, the real to the ideal, the true to the false. Instead of idealizing and providing a means to escape, life is to be reproduced in all its unideal and uninspiring aspects. The rise of reality television and ‘quality shows’ (among her examples are The Sopranos, The Wire, and Mad Men)—despite their being opposed insofar as the former is pretending to deliver uncensored reality in a cheap manner while the latter strives for artistic value, expensive production and carefully crafted scripts—is due to this turn to realism: Instead of exemplary individuals, we are confronted with flawed and/or ordinary characters. The means chosen to achieve ‘authenticity’ is the depiction of genuine injustices, individual psychological or other issues, violence, profanity, etc., but instead of leading to a push against these omnipresent problems in the audience, the genre itself simply became a standard and turned out to be neither radical nor disruptive. In order to gain genuine insight and be a transformative force, Krečič argues, movies and television shows need to reintroduce a self–reflective idealizing frame or metalevel. Fiction can effect truth, but it cannot do so directly, because—as we have already encountered
in various entries in this volume—there is neither a reality nor an absolute truth available to us: “The best one can hope for in this world is setting up those frames of indirect contact between the two where truth and reality will, to an extent, “magically” coincide and perhaps reveal themselves fully.” (263) When fiction returns to its former ways of idealizing (and rejects the currently overvalued realism in its depictions), it will be able to be politically efficacious.

Not only the history of cinema and television provides us with an illustration of the role of a certain idealism, but, according to Mladen Dolar, so does the history of virology. While claiming no direct connection between the two, Dolar presents the history of the term ‘virus’ in the sense of an agent causing a (in the first instance venereal) disease and the first documented use of ‘materialism’ as occurring simultaneously in the 18th century, followed by the coincidental co–appearance of the first use of ‘virus’ as understood today and the publication of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*—a “viral book for the century” (270)—in the late 1890s. Dolar contrasts the nature of a virus as something that is not really life (since it lacks the ability to self–replicate), as something not–life, almost nothing, threatening to life, with a historical stance on materialist philosophy as being infectious as well a danger to spirit, morality and life. The example that is used to illustrate this stance is Plato’s rejection of certain dramas as a dangerous influence on actor as well as audience insofar as the enacted might be imitated. By mimicking with one’s own body some vicious or flawed person, by imitating words and behaviour, the spirit, so Plato, might be negatively affected. Equally, the imitation of virtuous behaviour might lead to moral improvement of the spirit. The underlying worry, so Dolar, is the power of matter to affect the spirit. But, historically, there is also an ascription of a viral nature to spirit. Especially during the Enlightenment, and reiterated by Hegel, the notion that reason or ideas can combat prejudice and superstition, that is, that in its progress, reason infects the body, was widespread. Taking the viral character of matter and mind into account, Dolar argues for a “viral ontology” (280): virus not only as something alien and outside, but as something that has a metaphorical counterpart in matter, which itself is always also infected by the spirit. According to such an ontology, matter is always more than mere matter and humanity might depend, phrased in a rather timely fashion, “on this viral knot of spirit and body, on the virus as its intimate alien kernel” (281).

We have seen that the texts collected in this volume provide a wide range of perspectives on and arguments for idealism. The rather weak criterion for any idealism that the editors provided, namely a universality of truth transcending particular contexts, made room for all those perspectives. But, of course, such a weak criterion might very well be merely necessary for idealism, but
not sufficient. And a more demanding or stronger idealism, as several entries in this volume prove, can take various forms. But all the contributions viewed together also give rise to a related and fundamental question the aspiring idealist needs to ask herself: What do I want my idealism to achieve? Am I satisfied with an idealist claim weak enough to make it readily acceptable to everybody who merely considers that ideals or idealizations are relevant to human thought or do I want an idealism that is robust and demanding enough either to carve out and justify its own epistemological or metaphysical space or to be a driving force for improvement of either a subject or a society? The contributions collected in this volume give different answers to this question. It thereby shows that there is not one case for a new idealism, but many different cases for very different idealisms, Hegelian and Kantian ones, subject–dissolving and subject–promoting ones, epistemologically, practically, culturally grounded ones, weaker ones requiring mere idealization of concepts or stronger ones requiring absolute, infinite, necessary ideas. These views present, accordingly, not a united idealist front, but constitute a wide arrangement of very different and sometimes opposing views of the role and structure of a possible or new idealism. They also vary in the presuppositions they make not only regarding metaphysical or epistemological assumptions, but also regarding the reader’s knowledge of the subject matter they treat and familiarity with a particular philosophical jargon. That makes it sometimes difficult for the reader to follow precisely the line of reasoning, but this fact might itself add to what this volume is supposed to do and what is made explicit in the title of the editors’ introduction: it provides “Impulses for a New Idealism”, even if it does not provide a new idealism.

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