Andrew Bowie writes about German idealism and its concept of the Absolute,

The Absolute need not be thought of as some strange mystical entity: it is initially just the necessary correlate of the relative status of anything that can be explained causally.\(^1\)

We normally think of the world as a collection of individual things in a causal (or other) configuration, but this conception becomes problematic when we try to think the world or the universe as a whole, as all there is. The causal configuration is not capable of explaining its own existence since this would lead to an infinite regress of causes. Everything that belongs to this configuration is relative. Hence, it takes an Absolute as correlate. Thinking an Absolute, the Unconditioned [\textit{das Unbedingte}], is the “natural” result of trying to understand the totality of the world or universe, including ourselves as knowing subjects. For Bowie the Absolute appears to be no more than a logical counterpart of our natural ontology, a thought construction without reality or content.

\textit{Selbstbewusstsein und spekulatives Denken [Self-Consciousness and Speculative Thinking]}, one of Henrich’s metaphysical texts, ends with the sentence:

In a time that either expects theoretical redemption from progressive science and increasingly subtle conceptual analysis, or seeks final satisfaction and appeasement in abstinence from theory, the Kantian imperative ‘\textit{sapere aude!’} must include emphatically the imperative ‘\textit{speculari aude!’} – Have the courage to think beyond your world in order to understand it and also yourself in it!\(^2\)

This appeal to “think beyond your world” expresses an existential need to understand one’s own obscure existence in a world that is not self-

\(^1\) Bowie 1994, 4.
\(^2\) Henrich 1982a, 181. For the English translation, see Henrich 1997a.
explanatory. This “beyond” seems more than the mere logical correlate to the relativity of this world that Bowie refers to as Absolute. In addition, Henrich rejects the divide between contemporary alternatives: scientific and theoretical thinking versus an attitude that finds its peace in irrationality, a life without theory, blind faith. Then again, Henrich observes that it could be the case that philosophy is unable to give the answers itself so that its task would be no more than to untangle the thoughts, to test the possible grounds in order to understand the situation of people who are faced with such questions in greater depth, but not to decide about them. Metaphysics has become a taboo in contemporary philosophy.

As a term first applied to the works of Aristotle about a prima philosophia, it is an old philosophical discipline. However, the Kantian insight that it is unable to provide reliable knowledge concerning God has had a huge impact on modern philosophy. Initially, a new generation of philosophers refuses to give in. This gives rise to the type of speculative thinking that links (self-)consciousness with an absolute, transcendent ground in German idealism. Exactly this combination of subjectivity and metaphysics is rejected several decades later. Self-consciousness as a philosophical principle is viewed as a foundationalist project that is no longer considered viable. Ludwig Heyde writes,

From the second half of the nineteenth century onward philosophy teems with ‘farewell speeches.’ The most spectacular must be Nietzsche’s message of the death of God... There is Marx’ announcement of the end of speculative thinking... With much pathos the members of the Wiener Kreis stand up for a radical positivism with their manifest Wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung... The fake questions of metaphysics and theology should be exposed once and for all.4

Philosophy and theology are pulled apart. Philosophy is the domain of reason and theology is concerned with the realm of faith. Metaphysics as the discipline where the two overlap seems to have lost its right to exist. In the second half of the 20th century, idealistic metaphysics is not only disqualified as unscientific and irrelevant but unmasked as an expression of power-hunger that has turned out to be disastrous in history as well.

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3 See Henrich 1999, 75.
4 Heyde 2000, 11f.