

How Intimate an “Intimate of Lessing” Truly Was Hegel?

Abstract. The stages on the conceptual road that Hegel travelled from the “Positivity of Christianity” essay of 1795/96, when he definitely was “an intimate of Lessing,” to the new Preface that he added to the essay in 1800, and then to the chapter on religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807, were also so many steps in Hegel’s distancing himself from the Enlightenment culture of *Populärphilosophie*. This paper details the nature of this culture. Hegel’s break from it required in effect the rejection of Spinoza’s metaphysics of substance that formed its intellectual foundation. By 1807, Lessing’s Nathan would not have appeared as wise to Hegel as he might have in 1795.

1. The issue of reconciliation

The episode is well known. In 1795, writing to Hegel from Tübingen, where he was still completing his studies, Schelling complained about the self-styled Kantian theologians who were systematically re-introducing all their pre-critical dogmas on the basis, however, of Kant’s newly founded moral theology. As Schelling wrote, “Before you can turn around the *deus ex machina* springs forth, the personal individual Being who sits in Heaven above!”¹ In his reply Hegel expressed no surprise that orthodoxy would surreptitiously try to reassert itself in the new intellectual milieu that Kant had brought about.² There were too many vested interests involved to expect that the theologians would simply abandon their old ways of thinking. This is a point that Hegel went on to develop at length later in the same year in an essay, never to be published, traditionally known as the “Positivity of Christianity.”³ There were also some muted reservations in his reply to Schelling. Hegel argued that Fichte himself had opened up the way to this manner of thinking with his *Critique of all Revelation* (*Briefe*, p. 17), and added that, if he just had the time, now that moral belief had been secured and the idea of God justified within an ethically based theology [*Ethiktheologie*], he would himself like

¹January 5, 1795. *Briefe*, p. 14.

²End of January 1795. *Briefe*, p.16.

³Nohl, p. 137. Knox, p. 67. Title in critical edition: “man mag die wiedersprechendeste Betrachtungen.” GW 1.281. According to the editors of the critical edition, the essay was substantially written by the end of November 1795. GW 1.496.

to explore how far it might be possible to work one's way back to an elucidation of "goal-directedness," that is to say, "back into physical theology" [*Physicotheologie*]. It would be a matter of applying to the issue of miracles and Providence the same procedure that Fichte had followed for elucidating the idea of revelation. Hegel concluded the letter, referring back to Schelling's complaint about the *Deus ex machina*, with the question, "Do you really believe that we fail to get so far?," i.e., as far as the "individual personal Being" that God is supposed to be.

The question apparently surprised Schelling. As he said in his reply, it was not one that he "would have expected from an intimate of Lessing."⁴ Echoing Lessing's retort to Jacobi in 1789, when the latter was trying to test Lessing's orthodoxy (Jacobi 1785, p. 12; 1994, p. 187), Schelling then added: "For us, [as for Lessing,] the orthodox concepts of God are no more. My reply is that we get even *further* than a personal Being. I have in the interim become a Spinozist!" that is, precisely what Jacobi had claimed that Lessing had become. Schelling went on to sketch for his friend Hegel, in a few strokes, the new form that his Spinozism had taken. Spinoza's absolute substance was replaced by an absolute subject which, however, would play the same role within the economy of the universe of being that Spinoza's substance had played. To quote:

The highest principle of all philosophy is for me the pure, Absolute Self; that is, the self insofar as it is merely a self, insofar as it is unconditioned in any way by objects but is rather posited by *freedom* [...] *God* is nothing but the Absolute Self, the self insofar as it has annihilated everything theoretical [i.e., the sphere of *determinate being* that arises within it by virtue of the *limitations* wrought on it by objectivity]. *God* in *theoretical* philosophy thus equals zero. Personality arises through the unity of consciousness. Yet consciousness is not possible without an object. But for God i.e., for the Absolute Self there is no object *whatsoever* [...] Consequently, there is no personal God. (*Briefe*, p. 22)

This was a clear statement of the philosophical programme that Schelling soon set out to realize. Whether his Spinozism would have made any sense to Lessing – or, even more importantly, whether it was proclaimed in the same spirit as Lessing had apparently

⁴February 4, 1795. *Briefe*, p. 21.

proclaimed his to Jacobi – this is, of course, another story. Lessing still belonged to the rationalistic world of the Enlightenment, and this was a world quite different from that of the early Romanticism for which Schelling, in defining his Spinozism, was also providing the speculative charter. But more to the point is what happened to Hegel in those same years. A change must have occurred in his intellectual perspectives that altogether altered his relation to Lessing. On the evidence of the 1795/96 essay on the positivity of Christianity, he was indeed an “intimate of Lessing,” as Schelling had described him – an “intimate,” moreover, in the strong sense of still belonging to Lessing’s cultural world. To be sure, at the time of his correspondence with Schelling, he was engaged in an intense study of both Kant and Fichte⁵ that bore fruits in the essay itself. The supremacy of the moral principle over any theoretical investigation is assumed throughout the essay (GW 1.282.9-11; Knox, p. 68). Nevertheless, as we shall see in a moment, the essay was still written as if on the leitmotif of Lessing’s *Nathan the Wise*. Hegel did not complete it at the time, but turned his attention to it again in 1800, when he began to revise it, to all appearances with the intention of eventually publishing it. However, as things turned out, in the new prefatory paragraphs that he then prepared for it he expounded a concept of positivity which was quite different from the one that he had apparently assumed in 1795⁶ – a concept, moreover, that totally undermined the supposed wisdom of Lessing’s Nathan. Whatever might have been Hegel previous intimacy with the famous author, it was no longer clear how it could possibly still hold. At any rate, there was no way that the rest of Hegel’s essay could be reconciled with this new concept of positivity. The essay was never completed, let alone published.

This was the conceptual quandary in which Hegel found himself in 1800. Religion was for him, as it had been from the beginning and would be to the end of his life, his main concern, and religion meant the reconciliation of God and man, of the infinite and the finite.

⁵On this point, see the second paragraph of Hegel’s letter to Schelling of late January,

1795 (*Briefe*, p. 16), and also his letter to Schelling of April 16, 1795 (*Briefe*, pp. 23-24).

⁶Nohl had already recognizes this much. Nohl, p. 139, Note 1.

Existentially, at the level of immediate experience, such a reconciliation might be felt to be consummated in the medium of cultic practices – for the Christians, for instance, in the celebration of the Eucharist. Speculatively, however, what stood in the way of conceptually comprehending this reconciliation was “the ugly, broad ditch” which, as Lessing had said and Hegel knew, lay between the positivity of historical events and the eternal truths of reason.⁷ The question was how God, who is eternal and therefore transcends time, could possibly be present *in history*, where alone the human individual would be in the position of coming in contact with him. This was a metaphysical issue, and, as of 1800, Hegel had rightly come to the conclusion that an examination of the religious trope of reconciliation could not “be thoughtfully and thoroughly pursued,” as he wrote in the new prefatory paragraphs for his earlier uncompleted essay, “without becoming in the end a metaphysical treatment of the relation between the finite and the infinite” (Nohl, p. 146; Knox, p. 176). Also in 1800, Hegel was apparently satisfied that the Spinozism of Schelling would provide the required basis for such a metaphysical treatment. The mediation of God and man which the Christians believed to have been realized in the single figure of Christ had rather to be viewed, in Spinozistic manner, as a cosmic state of affairs. As he wrote: “Everything high, noble, and good in man is divine [...] But this view becomes glaringly positive if human nature is absolutely severed from the divine, if no mediation between the two is conceded except in one single individual.”⁸ The mediation would have to be not just a matter of divine historical interventions, but of unity of natures. This is the solution that Schelling’s new pantheism offered. Hegel, however, must not have been as comfortable as Schelling apparently was in

⁷“Das, das ist der garstige breit Graben, über den ich nicht kommen kann.” Lessing, p. 13.

⁸“[...] alles Höhere, alles Edle und Gute des Menschen etwas Göttliches ist [...] Aber dann wird diese Ansicht zum grellen Positiven, wenn die menschliche Natur absolut geschieden wird von dem Göttlichen, wenn keine Vermittlung derselben – ausser nur in Einem Individuum – zugelassen [...] wird.” Nohl, 146, Knox, 176. The Spinozistic overtones of this passage are not obvious, but they are there. See on this point Jaeschke (1990), p. 121.

discounting the image of a personal God. Indeed, so far as the issue of reconciliation which was uppermost in Hegel's mind was concerned, Schelling's position presented some *prima facie* formidable conceptual problems. There was, in the first place, the problem of translating "Absolute Substance" into "Absolute Self," and, secondly, the problem of understanding how the nihilation of "everything theoretical," that is to say, the nihilation of the whole "sphere of *determinate being*" that the translation apparently required according to Schelling's own testimony would have left any room open for the concept itself of "reconciliation." What would the latter possibly mean if one of the terms to be mediated, namely the finite determinate being which, according to Schelling, arose within the Absolute Self by virtue of objectification, was nihilated in the process? This was Hegel quandary.

Later, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel defined religion as "the speech of the community regarding its spirit."⁹ The resolution to his quandary was to replace Schelling's "Absolute Self" with "Spirit." In doing so, Hegel was drawing on the fund of his Christian heritage, in which "Spirit" is God's foremost name. Whether the name, in the new context within which he employed it, could still be asserted, without equivocation or prevarication, of the God of traditional religious belief, is itself an interesting question. Nevertheless, the new conceptual position that Hegel had to attain before he could see himself in the clear on the issue of reconciliation had to cover precisely the distance between God as "Absolute Self" and God as "the spirit of the community," and in order to accomplish this it was necessary for him to distance himself from Schelling. In 1800, Hegel had already said that the issue of the reconciliation of the Human and the Divine required metaphysical treatment.¹⁰ What he could not have appreciated at the time was that this treatment would ultimately require a radical change in metaphysics, and that such a change would forever put an end to the Lessing's heritage of Enlightenment metaphysics. The problem with Schelling's

⁹"[. . .] religion which, as intuited or existing knowledge, is the speech of the community regarding its spirit." "[. . .] die Religion, die als angeschautes oder dasayendes Wissen das Sprechen der Gemeinde über ihren Geist ist." GW 9.353.34-35.

¹⁰See Note 7 above.

Spinozism is that it remained hostage to that tradition.

It is this change that we want to examine. In the development of Hegel's thought, it received full conceptual expression only in the transition from the second to the third book of the Greater Logic (1813), and final confirmation in a few subtle modifications to the earlier text that Hegel introduced in the revised part of the 1832 edition.¹¹ In this paper, however, we are concerned only with how it was already present in the *Phenomenology* of 1807. But first, we must consider the just mentioned Lessing heritage.

2. Lessing's heritage of Enlightenment metaphysics

Just how the traditional metaphysical doctrine of God, based as it was on the proofs of his existence, gradually gave way to a “philosophy of religion” is an issue all by itself.¹² The final impetus to this shift away from natural theology was of course given by the recognition that the conceptual basis of the latter was flawed – that neither the existence nor the nature of God could be conceptually demonstrated. In this respect, Kant's critique played a decisive influence – even though Kant himself used the expression “philosophy of religion” only late and sparingly. It was only to be expected that, as the subject matter itself of natural theology came into doubt, attention would shift to the question of why the beliefs in God and his attributes that had made that theology possible should have arisen in the first place – of the reason, in other words, behind the historical phenomenon of religion.¹⁹ Kant himself, and

¹¹These changes have to do with Hegel's rejection of both Spinoza's and Kant's claim that the modal categories have only subjective value. Cf. GW 21.323-326.

¹²A methodical and exhaustive treatment of the subject can be found in Feiereis (1965).

Walter Jaeschke rightly observes, however, that the Feiereis's term *Umprägung* (“transformation”) is not an apt one, for the shift from natural theology to philosophy of religion meant a rejection and replacement of the former – not just a simple transformation, as if a substantial core of it were still retained. (1990), pp. 4-5.

¹⁹The term, “philosophy of religion,” was first coined in 1772 by Sigismund v.

Storchenau; it was then adopted by Karl Leonhard Reinhold but given definite meaning only in

Fichte after him, found justification for such beliefs on ethical grounds. This was a strategy that, at first at least, appealed to many – witness the theologians at the Tübingen Stift to whom Schelling referred in his letter to Hegel, or, for that matter, to Hegel himself in his 1795/96 essay. As Hegel had said at the time, “the essence of any true religion, the Christian religion included,” is that it has “as its purpose the establishment of human duties and their underlying motives in their purity and the use of the idea of God to show the possibility of the *summum bonum*” (GW 1.297.24-31; Knox, p. 86). This was a claim worthy indeed of Kant. But the fact is that both the shift of interest from natural theology to philosophy of religion, and Kant’s ethical justification for the subject matter of the latter after his destructive critique of the former, fell within a tradition of late Enlightenment thought that well antedated Kant’s critique of reason.

It is instructive in this matter to consider Johann Joachim Spalding,²⁰ the first in a long line of rationalist theologians that included J. F. Jerusalem, J. S. Semler and A. G. Baumgarten. According to the school of thought that they represented, the essence of Christianity was exhaustively defined by a number of simple truths (belief in God and in an afterlife foremost among them) which pure reason, unfettered by prejudice or other historical accidental encumbrances, could establish on its own. The tendency was to identify religious practice with the practice of a morally virtuous life. This was a programme for rationalizing Christianity which, in the Germany of the second half of the eighteenth century, attracted just as many proponents as it provoked detractors.²¹ But it is not the programme itself which is of interest here. More to the point is the general mental attitude with which it was undertaken. It is in this respect that Spalding is especially illuminating.

In 1748 Spalding authored a treatise with the title *The Vocation of Humankind*,²²

Kant’s late essays on religion. For an extensive treatment of the topic, see Jaeschke (2004), pp.1-19.

²⁰Di Giovanni (2005), especially Chapter 1.

²¹This is the school of theology that normally goes under the name of ‘Neology.’ For a clear statement of its tenets, see Feiereis, p. 40.

²²I am citing from the later edition of 1774.

which he then reissued in modified forms for the rest of the century. Here is how the fictional protagonist of the piece, who obviously speaks for Spalding, begins:

Having suffered long enough the plague of an unstable mind, one troubled by opposing impressions, he [i.e., the writer] had resolved in earnest and with equanimity to examine what he should be, starting from the beginning. He had resolved not to accept anything as true, or reject anything as prejudice, which would not appear as such by this rigid new test; to collect and join together all that he found in this way undeniable, and to draw from it the necessary consequences [. . .]; thus to establish for himself a secure system of life by which he could abide for all times.
... (p. 3)

And, after some meandering, he reaches the conclusion:

Everything in nature persuades me that righteousness and happiness belong together, and that they also always come together if external circumstances do not disrupt this otherwise so essential a bond. Such a pervasive tendency for order must, however, be fulfilled; and only its realization would remove the confusion and contradiction that would otherwise obtain. If I were to consider this life as the final human state, I would not be able to make my thinking on the matter fall in one piece. The moment I however expand my vision [. . .], everything falls conceptually into place [. . .]. The moment I am assured that the great originator of all things – the one who at all times acts according to the strictest of rules and the noblest intentions – cannot possibly be willing to annihilate me, I need not, so I believe, fear any other destruction. (pp. 54-56, *passim*)

Here is Spalding, still unaffected by Kantian Critique, raising what were in effect Kant's own critical questions, "What can I know?" "How must I act?" "What can I hope for?" and answering them in the same vein. To be sure, Spalding, just as Jerusalem and his other fellow theologians, did not mean by "moral virtue" the same as Kant was to mean. Nor did "system" in Spalding's "system of life" carry the same critical implications as Kant's attempts at an architectonic of reason. Nevertheless, the programme in both instances was

motivated by the same very practical desire of establishing, over otherwise scattered experiences, an edifice of meaning within the compass of which one could then lead a well ordered life and, consequently, also hope to satisfy the even more fundamental natural desire of attaining happiness. Kant himself was later to admit that this desire for happiness was indefeasible. Moreover, however different in foundation and structure, the edifice of the theologians and that of the critical Kant both relied on religion for their coping stone. They both turned to religion for the belief in a God, the creator of nature, that would justify the hope for the desired happiness. One can understand, therefore, why Hegel, in his Jena essay *Faith and Knowledge*, would level against Kant the otherwise surprising accusation of eudemonism (Hegel, 1977, p. 66; GW 4.324.31-33). God, and all that accompanied the belief in his existence, had a place in the system of experience only because his governance was required for the sake of ensuring the possibility of happiness. Jerusalem's claim, that "the whole nature of religion [consists] in the instruction for the most complete contentedness,"²³ was an expression of Enlightenment belief. It fitted just as well in Kant's critical system.

What makes Lessing interesting is that, even though he held, apparently to the end, a view of religion that did not substantially differ from that of the rationalist theologians (Feiereis, p. 105), nevertheless, in the course of his dispute with the defenders of strict orthodoxy, he raised the question of truth in a form that worked the same effect in the field of theological debate as Kant's critique of reason was to have for the broader theory of experience. The question was epitomized in the already mentioned well known trope of the broad ditch separating supposed facts of history and eternal truths of reason. A religious belief such as that of Christ's divinity could not be founded on anything that Jesus allegedly said about himself or anything that he did. For even if we had historically reliable evidence of what he actually said or did, that his words are credible testimony to his eternal nature and his deeds true miracles depends on whether we have already accepted his divinity. This was one critical edge of Lessing's position. Divinity is not something that can be exhibited historically, however historically reliable the events on the basis of which one would want

²³"... in der Anweisung zur vollkommenen Zufriedenheit." Jerusalem, p. 401.

to justify its presence in history might be. This claim is equivalent to Kant's critical argument that the necessity of experience can never be empirically derived, however empirically reliable the facts on the basis of which the derivation is attempted. This was Lessing's deflating strategy as directed at orthodox theology. But there was another critical edge to his position as well, and this time it was directed at the rationalist theologians whom Lessing, incidentally, did not hold in any greater esteem than he did the orthodox (Feiereis, p. 104). The gap that separates the historical from the rational also undermined the possibility that reason might save on rational grounds alone all the content of Christian belief. After all that reason might say or do to appropriate this content in the medium of universal intentions, that which makes it typically *historical*, i.e., highly particularized, remains untouched. This is precisely the element that constitutes the positivity of Christianity and the object of its faith. The claim of the rationalist theologians that their reconstruction of Christianity, on a few allegedly natural truths of reason, exhaustively defined its essence was, therefore, a hollow one – unless, of course, the positive residue of their rationalization process is interpreted as mere superstition or the stuff of malevolent popery. The rationalist theologians did not hesitate to make this reductive move. Lessing, however, was not open to it. On the contrary, his intention was to save, in some way or other, the value of precisely the positivity of religious belief.

But how could this be done? In *Nathan der Weise* (1779) and in *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780), Lessing's solution apparently consisted in considering history as a crucible, as it were, in which the truths of reason are purified – a sort of protracted process of learning for which, however, there is no single prescribed course. A variety of courses, as represented by the various historical forms of religion, were equally possible. But the problem with this solution was twofold. On the one hand, it was not clear exactly *what* was being learned in this learning process. Abstracted from the historically conditioned context that gave to the ethical verities of the rationalist theologians at least the appearance of a modicum of concrete meaning, such verities remained empty abstractions. On the other hand, assuming that the learning had occurred, what meaning was then left for the many

vicissitudes of history that actually impart to the latter the existential edge that it has over the reflection of reason but, precisely for this reason, resist reduction to any learned message? Lessing had run up against the same problem to which Kant's theory of experience eventually succumbed. The same ambiguity applied to history as interpreted by Lessing as it did to immediate experience as interpreted by Kant. Namely, on the one hand immediate experience was existentially all-important, because when abstracted from it, the *a priori* claims of reason remained mere abstractions. On the other hand, when measured against these claims, the latter, at least ideally, retained ontological priority. Taken on its own, the immediate content of experience was reduced to just a series of transient phenomena void of substance. Their truth lay outside them, just as the truth of Lessing's history lay outside it.

As I mentioned earlier, Hegel's 1795/96 essay reads as if *Nathan the Wise* were its leitmotif. Hegel cites Sittah, a character in the play, as saying with reference to the Christians: "The faith their founder seasoned with humanity they live, not because it is humane, but because Christ taught it, because Christ practiced it."²⁴ This is a statement of the corrupt state of Christianity for which the essay sought an explanation. How could the original Christian message, which was a statement of universal humanism, have become entangled in practices that were dictated by accidental historical circumstances, which detracted from, and even corrupted, its universal appeal, but which, because of the private interests motivating them, nonetheless increased its authority? This was the question that governed Hegel's essay. In Lessing's play, the Lay Brother and Nathan are the characters who succeed in recovering the spirit of precisely that universal human vocation. Hegel duly cites their exchange: "Lay Brother: Thou art a Christian by God, thou art a Christian. A better Christian never was. Nathan: 'Tis well for us! For what makes me a Christian, makes thee for me a Jew" (GW 1.303.1-6; Knox, p. 92). Lessing's remedy for the current sad state of all religions was to see through the dross of positivity that affected them all and hid the

²⁴GW 1.285.29-32; Knox, p. 72. This quote is repeated in the new 1800 Preface, but in a new context. Nohl, p. 145; Knox, p. 175.

universal message that lay behind them. Hegel's programme in his essay was to explain the origin of the dross that affected Christian religion in particular.

The programme, however, as planned in the new Preface of 1800, could not take the same shape as it had in the earlier text. "The conception of the 'positivity' of a religion," Hegel opens the new paragraphs, "has originated and become important only in recent times" (Nohl, p. 139; Knox, p. 167). In fact, it had been brought to universal attention by Lessing over twenty years earlier. But Hegel was now bringing to it, not indeed a change to the general estimate that "positivity" was not a good thing, but a new refinement in the judgement of what counted as "positivity." His argument was that "positivity" cannot be simply identified with "accidentality," for what counts as "accidental" is such only as measured against some concept or other of "human nature," with respect to which it fails the test of necessity and universality. But any such concept of human nature is in fact only a product of abstraction. So must also be, therefore, any concept of "natural religion," since its alleged universality and necessity depends precisely on this abstractive product. This is not to say that we do not have, or indeed even need, the concept of a human nature in general. But the fact is that, as Hegel goes on to say, "the living nature of man is always other than the concept of it" (Nohl, p. 141; Knox, p. 169). Existence, in other words, always escapes any abstract definition of it. Accordingly, so far as religion is concerned, factors that from an external and abstractive standpoint would appear as mere accidents (and these would include such things as feelings and emotions), as experienced internally might well be instead the very conditions which, in a given historical age, make possible the realization of the true spirit of religion. They should not be considered, therefore, as "positive" in the derogatory meaning that attaches to the term. The same factors become "positive" in this derogatory sense only to the extent that, at some point or other, they begin to stand in the way of the free and unsullied expression of that spirit. In order to become hindrances of this kind, and especially in order to be experienced as having so become, a new awareness of what it is to be a human being is required – that is to say, a new definition of human nature must have arisen and, consequently, also a new awareness of the nature of religion. What counts as

significant accidentality in one historical age can count as *superfluous* accidentality – as positive dross, in other words – in another age. The issue of positivity thus turns out to be one of discovering a rule by which this distinction between significant and superfluous accidentality can be maintained without having to fall back on a univocal definition of either. The aim of Hegel’s essay, as defined in 1800, is to discover how and why religion, granted that it requires in general the commitment to something transcendent, in any of its given historical forms nonetheless counts certain of its expressions, which by its own internal standards are “accidents,” as sacrosanct to it. As Hegel says, “We are not concerned in this essay with accidentals which are first made such by abstract reflection, but only with those which, as the content of religion, are supposed by religion itself to subsist as accidental, to have high significance despite their transience, to be sacrosanct and worthy of veneration despite their restricted and finite character.”²⁵

Hegel is concerned, not with the content as such of religion which, as measured against the element of transcendence to which every religion is committed, necessarily always turns out to be accidental, but with the form that makes it the content of religion in the first place. This is an important formulation. It immediately connects with another equally important passage in the same 1800 Preface. For a modern reader of *Nathan the Wise*, it also calls attention to a passage in the play which, despite Hegel’s repeated quotations, is conspicuous for having been passed over in silence in the 1795/96 text. In the 1800 Preface, Hegel says: “An ideal of human nature is quite different from general concepts of man’s vocation or of man’s relation to God. The ideal does permit of particularization in detail, and therefore it demands appropriate religious actions, feelings, usages.”²⁶ The mention of “man’s vocation” in this passage is normally taken to be a reference to Fichte’s

²⁵Nohl, p. 147; Knox, p. 177. But see also Nohl, p. 141; Knox, pp. 169-170.

²⁶Nohl, p. 142; Knox, p. 170. This is an early instance of Hegel’s characteristic claim that a true universal should contain the principle of differentiation and particularization within it. It is not a principle of external aggregation of singulars, but a rule rather for developing an ideal totality internally.

1800 essay, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. And so it certainly was. But the title of Fichte's essay harkened back to Spalding's essay of 1748, as well as to the discussion on the same theme to which everyone of any importance, including Lessing, had contributed over the past fifty years. In hinting that a new kind of conceptualization was needed – one that would not reduce immediate reality to mere accidentality but would rather make it significant precisely in its accidentality – Hegel was closing the books, so to speak, on that tradition. He was distancing himself from Lessing and, as the reference to Fichte already indicated, from the ethical subjectivity of Kant. The implication was that in order for the theme of the reconciliation of the divine and the human to be explored anew, the metaphysical treatment of the relation of infinite and finite that the exploration required was to be based on a new type of conceptualization. In 1800, Hegel already knew this much. What he yet had to learn was that Spinoza himself, who was after all the one behind the whole tradition that Lessing represented, had also to be overcome.

This brings us to the passage in Lessing's play conspicuous for having been passed over in silence. There is an episode in the play in which Nathan refers to the atrocities inflicted on his family by the Christians.²⁷ For the modern reader, the equanimity, even the charity, with which Nathan responded to such atrocities, strikes a false psychological note. The response makes him a shadowy figure, more of an ideal – and a dubious one at that – than a real person. But it was the only rational response possible on the metaphysical assumptions of the rationalist theologians. Such assumptions rendered evil – as measured against the overall perfection of the cosmos – as the most accidental of accidents, the most transient of transient phenomena, and therefore nothing *per se* significant. Jacobi admired Spinoza because, as he pointed out to Lessing when confronting him with his own Spinozism, of all the metaphysicians he was the only one with the courage to acknowledge, without prevarication, that evil is nothing ultimately real.²⁸ The test, therefore, of whether

²⁷Act IV, Scene 7, lines 659ff.

²⁸This is the implication in Jacobi (1785) pp. 18-22. See also pp. 27-29, for the esteem in which Jacobi held Spinoza. Jacobi (1994) pp. 189-190, 193.

Hegel's newly envisaged metaphysics would succeed, as it shaped itself in 1800, was this: whether, on the new assumptions, evil could be conceived as the point at which human existence attains its utmost individuality, hence also its extreme accidentality, but also its highest significance, for it is in that state that the reconciliation of God and man is first made possible.

3. Reconciliation in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

By the end of the Jena period – i.e., in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – Hegel had yet to construct the formal architectonic of his later philosophy of religion. He was already in possession, however, of its general principle. Religion was for Hegel “the shape [*Gestalt*] of the absolute Spirit that knows itself as absolute Spirit, yet still in the form of representation [*Vorstellung*].”²⁹ This is a fair statement of the concept that governs Hegel’s treatment of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology*. But it remains an empty formulation unless one first connects it with the function that this Chapter plays within the whole economy of the *Phenomenology*,³⁰ and, even more importantly, how it connects with the already cited definition of religion, as the “speech of the community about its spirit,” which appears in the preceding Chapter and actually paves the way for the treatment of Chapter VII.

Regarding the first point, two texts are significant for the present purpose. The first is where Hegel reviews the various shapes in which Spirit is manifested in the course of the experiences which the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* undergoes historically, and which “we,” namely the philosophers who are the authors of the *Phenomenology*, are reflecting

²⁹According Jaeschke (1983), pp. 59-60. The formula is derived from the opening paragraphs of Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

³⁰Jaeschke (1990, Chapter 3) gives an interesting account of the difficulties interpreters have had in locating Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* within the development of the whole work.

on.³¹ That protagonist is of course Everyman. At one point in the review, Hegel says that the shapes in question, namely “consciousness,” “self-consciousness,” and “reason,” are “in actual Spirit the attributes of its substance; in religion, however, they are rather predicates of the subject,” even though, as he proceeds to add, all the shapes are “in general in Spirit” (*überhaupt im Geiste*).³² Spirit is the power that the world holds over Everyman inasmuch the latter has in fact created it with his language, basically his language about nature. Language is the existence of Spirit,³³ Hegel says. But the fact that such is the case – that his world is a product of language – is a truth which, historically speaking, Everyman constantly forgets and must learn to remember precisely in the course of the experiences recorded in the *Phenomenology*. In this state of forgetfulness, Everyman finds himself confronted with objects which he presumes to exist independently of him and which consequently assume aspects that are alien to him and even threatening. It is in the midst of these objects, however, that he must nonetheless establish his home, and, it must be added, since they are in fact his products, he at least unknowingly *feels* that they are indeed where his home lies. Hegel’s way of summarizing this situation is to say that, in this state of self-forgetfulness, Spirit exists for the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* “as substance” – that is to say, Everyman experiences and treats his world, and himself as part of it, as “substance.” This is the world which was the object of traditional metaphysics. It is rational in the way in which Spalding, and Lessing as well, took their world to be rational, namely as a structurally well orchestrated cosmos in which every part ultimately works for the perfection of the whole. In this world, reason is – as Hegel says in his text – an attribute of substance, just as “thought” and “extension,” on Spinoza’s version of traditional metaphysics, were the two attributes of the one substance which for him was God. Happiness, in this world, consists in harmonizing one’s existence

³¹The review is at the very beginning of Chapter VII. The “*wir*” is introduced in the *Einleitung* and does its job of observer and critic throughout the rest of the work. Cf. GW 9.60.23 and 61.5.

³²GW 9.367.17-26. But this whole first part of Chapter VII is important.

³³“Wir sehen hiemit die *Sprache* als das Daseyn des Geistes.” GW 9.351.11.

with its overall order.

Everyman's forgetfulness regarding the linguistic production of his world is no simple error, not even a flaw. On the contrary, it is an essential dimension of experience – one which can be reflectively recognized and understood but never done away with, and which is denied only at one's risk. This is so because, as a matter of fact, the language in the medium of which the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* creates his world, and thereby falls under the sway of Spirit,³⁴ is one which he has not himself created. It is the language of a community into which he was born – a community, moreover, that had a natural origin, for it came to be in the process of absolving needs that were in the first instance purely biological. To be sure, once language came into the picture, such needs ceased to be purely biological: eating or dying became a matter of *right* eating or *right* dying, and this involved what was in fact a creative judgement. But the point is that, whatever the consequent spiritualization of nature, whatever the new power that the latter might have acquired precisely by becoming a world full of gods, it is its just '*being there*' that gives to the judgements raising it to a spiritual state their existential edge, their seriousness. One cannot choose to make the possession of nature, which thereby becomes a commodity, a matter of prestige without engaging in power struggles and, concurrently, also risking death (Cf. GW 9.111.25-27). But as natural existence passes away, so does the spiritual. Nor can one pass judgement regarding one's identity in opposition to the judgement of one's community and create, in effect, a language strictly of one's own, without thereby running the risk of being excommunicated by the community and, as a result, finding one's language turned into hollow sound. The natural naive realism of Everyman's consciousness is simply a recognition of this fact. To forget that one may well be free to choose how one interprets nature, but that one is not free to choose the natural consequences that follow from that choice, is just as serious a case of forgetfulness as it is to forget that nature acquires meaning

³⁴For examples of how new social arrangements are established by the creation of new types of language (for instance, the language of counsel, and the language of flattery), see Section B of Chapter VI, "Der sich entfremdete Geist: Die Bildung."

– is spiritualized – only in the medium of language. It is the exact counterpart of the other forgetfulness. But it is one that becomes possible only when Everyman has come out of the other forgetfulness: when for him, therefore, Spirit is Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, and what for him previously were “attributes” of Spirit as “substance” now become – to return to the cited text – the “predicates” of Spirit, a function of what “is said.” The temptation then arises to turn the whole of reality into a play of words, as the *philosophes* of the late Enlightenment did in France (GW 9.283-284), thereby subverting all values and in fact inflicting on society a violence that came to visit them all too physically during the Terror. And, on the German side, there was the phenomenon of the Romantic “beautiful soul,” for whom the only criterion of truth was his inner voice – an empty sound, because purely private, and, therefore, the source of spiritual consumption.

We shall return to this “beautiful soul.” As for the second text, which will take us directly back to the conclusion of the previous chapter, it is part of the same review at the beginning of Chapter VII. “Religion,” Hegel says, “ist die Vollendung des Geistes” (GW 9.366.9). “Religion is the completion of Spirit.” It is in the context of religious practices that language, in the medium of which the protagonist of the *Phenomenology* expresses the truth of his experiences, ceases to be just the determination of a presupposed cosmos or, as in the case of the decadent language of the late French Enlightenment, simply a language about itself. It becomes a biography of God, so to speak – a God, however, who no longer is just a cosmic principle, but is one who speaks, and who knows that his language is creative. God is now Spirit, absolute Spirit that knows itself to be absolute Spirit. Of course, this biography is just a story, and in religion it must remain a story. But the important point is that the human individual does not appear in it, as he did in Spalding’s or Lessing’s cosmos, as just one more component in a universal order of things. He is engaged in it at a personal level, exactly as Jacobi insisted that he should be. But one cannot be effectively so engaged except at a point of extreme singularity, where one’s identity stands opposed to that of any other. This is a point that depends for its determination on the *when* and *where* of one’s natural existence. The religious man might not know it reflectively, though he at least *feels* it, and

he might still express it in cosmic imagery, but what is truly at issue in his cultic practices and in the language associated with them is precisely *who* he is. His problem is that his identity is bound to nature, but that he cannot depend on this nature for the determination of his identity because, to the extent that he does so, he has already made it re-exist in the medium of language: he has already invested it with a meaning that it does not have on its own.³⁵ The resolution of the issue requires, therefore, a judgement which is creative – creative first of all with respect to the value of nature. This is how Lessing's problem of the “ugly broad ditch” is reinterpreted by Hegel – not as an issue of bridging disparate strata of being on a cosmic scale, but as a problem inherent in the structure of human existence itself.

It is understandable, therefore, why in the *Phenomenology* Hegel would begin the chapter on religion with a review of the whole course of the experience that its protagonist has traversed up to that point. That protagonist would not be true to character in his role in the work unless he were presumed from the start to be a real historical individual. From the start, therefore, the interest motivating his experience has to be the determination (*Bestimmung*) of his identity precisely as historical individual – his “vocation” (*Bestimmung*) in nature, in other words. In fact, all the shapes of experience examined, up to religion (the manifestations of Spirit as consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason), are abstract aspects of this one original attempt at a language of self-identity. The problem with each of these aspects was precisely that they were abstract: the language in the medium of which they were acted out failed to comprehend the individual acting them out.³⁶ Religion, therefore, is not just one more of these aspects, only differing from them by a relative degree of complexity. It is rather the matrix that contains them all and made them possible in the first place, even though it is only at this stage in the *Phenomenology* that the adequate language

³⁵I have also treated this theme elsewhere, but in a completely different context. Cf. Di Giovanni (2009.2).

³⁶Accordingly, Hegel says that moral consciousness is “dumb” (“*stumm*”). GW 9.351.24. Since the identity of the moral “I” is ambiguous (not natural, but in need of nature), it cannot speak in first person.

has been made available for making the point manifest – available, that is, at least for “us” the philosophers. Not that religion, or religious language, was not present in all the shapes of experience examined so far. But, as Hegel puts it, it was present in these experiences simply as one factor among many, and itself in a shape consistent with the abstract level of self-awareness characteristic of the experience in question. (GW 9.365.25-366.8). There was no adequate language of individuality, and therefore also no language that would do justice to the primacy of religious experience.

The issues with which Hegel had been grappling in the 1800 new Preface to the “Positivity of Christianity” thus come to a head in the *Phenomenology* in Chapter VII. Now we know why accidentality necessarily affects the content of religion; why it would be recognized as accidentality from the internal standpoint of religion itself and yet, in the experience of religious man, be something sacrosanct. We also have a test of what counts as significant accidentality as contrasted with mere positive dross. There will necessarily be accidentality in religion because, as we have just said, at issue in religion is the determination of individual self-identity. This determination is bound to the *here and now* of nature (the *hic et nunc* of the mediaeval scholastics) – a *here and now* which is therefore existentially necessary. Yet the determination is not simply *given* by nature, because, in order for the latter to enter significantly into this process of self-identification, a reflective judgement is required that transcends it in its entirety and, consequently, also in any of its singular moments. This judgement is the work of Spirit. Hence the natural *here and now* that significantly singles out the human individual, though existentially necessary, remains accidental in form: it is, as it were, a gift of the Spirit and, as such, is experienced – to use Hegel’s word – as “sacrosanct.” But the judgement that makes it sacrosanct can change, as the criteria of self-identity typical of a culture and a given historical age gains in reflective awareness. The points of transition from one level of such self-awareness to another – new manifestations of Spirit – are where what was sacrosanct at a previous level becomes positive dross in the subsequent. But whether sacrosanct or positive dross, the ‘here’ and ‘now’ that makes for the singularity of identity still remains a matter of accidentality, and, as Hegel said in 1800, is also experienced

in religion as being such.

It is natural to ask what would count as sacrosanct in a philosophical culture such as Hegel thought was already at hand in 1807. But how, or even whether, Hegel answers the question in the *Phenomenology* cannot concern us here. More to the point is the conceptual distance that he traversed since 1800, when he called for an “ideal of human nature” which, unlike any abstract concept of the human vocation, permitted “of particularization in detail.” The ideal, which in 1800 was only a desideratum, has now been realized in the idea of a special form of life – one that consists in a process by which an originally merely organic individual becomes conceptually aware of his place in nature, thereby transcends the latter by investing it with meaning as precisely *his* nature, and, as he becomes ever more reflectively aware of this process itself, generates ever more sophisticated universes of meaning accordingly, each governed by the particular judgement that the individual has at the moment more or less explicitly made about his nature, and each typified by the way in which the individual’s transcendence *vis-à-vis* nature is objectified and is given a name – whether as “the infinite,” “reason,” or “Spirit.” This is not a univocal, abstract but still material, definition. Rather, it is a formula for a repeated conceptual determination of a living human nature – the same which, according to Hegel’s statement of 1800, “is always other than the concept of it,” but which nevertheless, as the formula allows us to recognize, in its many historical shapes remains a variation on the theme of “the manifestation of Spirit.” Spinoza’s metaphysics of substance had been left behind. The reconciliation of the infinite and the finite is no longer a matter of subsuming under a universal concept a particularized material which, as such, necessarily remains unconceptualized. Nor, accordingly, is the vocation of humankind a matter of fitting human existence within the perfection of a pre-ordered totality. It is instead a matter of recognizing the presence of Spirit in experience. And, in the context of religious life, this recognition assumes for Hegel the objective form of a biography of God. What remains to be explained is why the reconciliation must be a “reconciliation” – implying as this term does a prior disruption and the consequent need for

mending the damage incurred.³⁷ But Hegel has already done this at the end of Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*, leading up to the theme of religion in Chapter VII.

4. How wise was “Nathan the Wise”?

What separates Hegel’s wisdom from that of the Enlightenment is the recognition that violence, and therefore in principle evil as well, is endemic to human existence. It is the necessary consequence of the human task of transforming nature by making it re-exist in the medium of language, hence of injecting it into a system of ends which are typically human and, as such, therefore transcendent with respect to it. In effect, this means that nature becomes for the human individual necessarily problematic, because, on the one hand, his singular identity depends on it, but on the other hand, since this identity is no longer just natural but the product of a judgement deciding *who* the individual is, its singularity, precisely as natural, must nonetheless be invested with infinite value. But to claim infinite value for what is essentially finite, especially in the face of other individuals claiming the same for their singularity (as one must indeed do if the claim is to have existential grip) – to do *that* is self-conceit. It is pride, in other words, and pride is evil – *irreducible evil* because, unlike the sufferings that are part and parcel of being flesh and bone, it is personal and demonic, the result of a decision.

In the *Phenomenology* this is a consequence that was already made manifest at the origin of self-consciousness, when otherwise purely organic individuals choose to make nature the ground for a battle of prestige, thereby risking their very existence. Of course, there is nothing necessarily demonic about this self-conceit of prestige. But there certainly is in the language of the Christian preacher (or any like-minded prophet) who claims for his necessarily history-bound voice the value of God’s word. This is the significance of the appearance of the Romantic “beautiful soul” at the end of Chapter VI, and of the new language of “confession,” “forgiveness,” and “reconciliation” that ensues and brings to

³⁷I have treated this theme elsewhere, but in a completely different context. Cf. di Giovanni (2009.2).

conclusion the experience begun with the battle of prestige.³⁸ The “beautiful soul” is the individual who takes the particular voice of his conscience as the norm of universal truth and, consequently, necessarily runs into conflict with other like-minded individuals. The ensuing context is not now between infinite desires for nature as in the battle of prestige, but between competing witnesses as to what counts as nature’s true meaning. In a way, the conflict is still one between claims to nature as “mine” and not “thine” (Cf. GW 9.344.21ff). But the “mine” and “thine” have now assumed the shapes of moral visions, and the threat that nature (now the battleground of these visions) holds for each contestant is that, as he or she invests natural particularities with universal significance, he or she is sinning against the universal – in effect, cutting himself or herself off from the community of humankind. The significance of this experience is that it brings to recognition – at least for “us,” the philosophers – that to generate conflict, and therefore to have already injured the other even before one can begin to realize it, is part and parcel of spiritual life. But with this recognition the possibility historically also arises of redefining the vocation of humankind as one of creating a society based, not on any utopian ideal of perfect harmony, but on the reconciliation which comes from confession and forgiveness. The issue is not to do away with evil, but to contain it and, therefore, hopefully also to redeem it.

In Hegel’s fictional account, the conflict of “beautiful souls” is portrayed as one between two individuals, one passionately dedicated to immediate action and the other just as passionately dedicated to reflective judgement. In the economy of the *Phenomenology*, theirs is the final confrontation of the speculative and practical standpoint, of theory and praxis. What makes for the “hardness of heart” of the two characters, that is, the conceit of their particularity, is not just that each is *de facto* bound to a naturally limited situation, yet the one will take his deeds to have absolute value and the other will pass his judgements with categorical universality. That’s all part of being rational. The “hardness” lies rather in the fact that the man of action will not acknowledge the truth of the theoretical judgement exposing

³⁸Section C.c of Chapter VI, “Das Gewissen, Sie Schöne Seele, Das Böse und seine Verzeyhung.”

the *de facto* particularity of his deeds, and the man of judgement will not recognize that it is indeed impossible to act morally without presuming that one's actions set up a universal norm of conduct. The beginning of reconciliation, the “melting of the hard heart,” only occurs when the one recognizes the truth of the theoretical judgement and, while continuing to act, asks forgiveness for the violence which inevitably attaches to his deeds; and the other recognizes the constraints of actions and, without abdicating the privilege of theoretical judgement, reserves any moral indictment to the judgement of history. When I say “history” here, I do not mean any grand theory – “History” capitalized, so to speak. I mean “history,” rather, in the sense of the *Phenomenology* – as a new reflective awareness that the consequences of any particular choice eventually brings in train. It is this new awareness, by virtue of the new spiritual profundity that it creates, that makes manifest the particularity of both the choice and the consequences: makes them manifest by precisely transforming them into positive dross, according to Hegel’s 1800 formula.

I said earlier that in naming God as Spirit Hegel was drawing on his Christian heritage. It is doubtful, however, whether, by identifying Spirit with the spirit of the human community of which “religion is the speech,” he would win the support of orthodoxy. Yet in two respects at least, his language was truer to that heritage than anything that the rationalist theologians of the Enlightenment had to offer. For one thing, the “speech” in question had to be, on Hegel’s account of human existence, one of reconciliation – in the strongest meaning of that word, because, on that account of Hegel, the human individual is spiritually born already in the self-conceit of pride and, therefore, necessarily set against nature; his first need is to mend precisely this state of disruption. This is the first aspect. The other is that this process, because of the identity of the individual which at issue in it, will be carried out in the medium of feelings, emotions, and beliefs – Hegel’s *Vorstellung*, in other words, in the medium of which, in religion, Spirit knows itself as such – all these, factors which are historically accidental but, precisely for that reason, give to the process its existential traction. They are sacrosanct. Philosophical reflection might well recognize them for what they are, and hopefully also save them from their possible irrationality if need be,

but it cannot ever reduce them to the merely conceptual – let alone to the rational vision of the Enlightenment's rational theologians.

Nathan's wisdom was the best of Enlightenment wisdom, but that is all that it was. It was based on the belief that there is a spark of Divinity in every religion which was simply obscured by positive dross. What was lost on this understanding of human existence was the scandal of the particular, the evil that religions necessarily bring on other religions because of their necessary particularity. On Hegel's premises, the exchange between Sittah and Nathan would have to be, instead of a profession of hidden identity as it is in Lessing's play, the extension of forgiveness by each to the other for being what the other is, but at the same time also the tendering of forgiveness from each to the other for what each is. This is not something that Nathan would have been able to understand. He was not, after all, all that wise.

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