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THE PERVERSION OF THE ABSOLUTE

Religion and Representation in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

A Dissertation

Presented in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

December 2017

BY

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1 Introduction

Hegel contra Theology

The aim of this study is to “recover a nonfoundational and radical Hegel,” to borrow critical theorist Gillian Rose’s description of her own work in *Hegel contra Sociology*.¹ In a similar spirit, my primary ambition is to challenge the dominant view that the core of his thinking amounts to a defense of the *status quo*, whether in its more conservative or liberal dimensions, while affirming the claim—often denied—that this core is political. My focus here is on the status of religion. I argue that attempts by sympathetic interpretations to remove, obscure, or otherwise revise the close connection between religion and philosophy in Hegel’s system in order to make it more accommodating to contemporary, critical attitudes toward metaphysics actually achieve the opposite by emphasizing what is in fact this system’s most conservative moment: the distinction between feeling (associated with religious cognition) and understanding (associated with logical cognition) as separate, inchoate “forms” of genuinely rational cognition—what Hegel calls “Absolute Knowing.” The latter, in which Hegel purports to comprehend the identity of the two forms, is viewed with near universal skepticism. In my view, this skepticism rests on a misguided tendency to substitute what is essentially a Kantian transcendental concept of identity, in which the unity of the two terms can only be *postulated* but never itself *comprehended*, for Hegel’s own “speculative” notion of identity. In short, my claim is that this substitution is an obscure form of question-begging,

1. I am deeply indebted here not only to the model Rose offers for a genuinely critical reading of Hegel, but also several of its specific insights, including the significance of speculative identity in relation to the question of law, and thus the fundamentally political nature of the most basic problems of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (1981).

in which the controversial status of Hegel's conclusion serves as the surreptitious justification for distorting or even rejecting his argument in favor of the position he explicitly criticizes, and further, rather than clarifying the relation of religion and philosophy in Hegel's system, these attempts effectively conflate the two with the result that the validity of reason is guaranteed only by reference to an external, postulated unity of being, and the legitimacy of faith always depends on the negative, abstract character of its values.² Against this tendency, my guiding thesis is that it is impossible to discern the vital, critical impetus of Hegel's system without fully appreciating the role of religion in it, as the level at which this *transcendental* identity is overcome.

The exposition of this thesis consists in two interconnected tasks. The historical object is to outline and trace the influence of a transcendental concept of identity in interpretations of religion in and—in the case of the Romantics—against Hegel's system, and develop an alternate concept explicitly and fully distinguished from Kant's. On this point it is committed to a somewhat opinionated interpretation of Kant's system. Namely, it locates a concept of identity at the transcendental hypothesis—that metaphysical truth neither has nor needs access to “real necessity”—in his account of the synthesis of representations (*Vorstellungen*³) in cognition. In sensation, or “outer sense,” the conjunction of two representations—the light of the sun and the warmth of a stone—is encountered as a fact, and this corresponds, in feeling, or “inner sense,” to the fact of a strong conviction of their necessary connection. But, as Hume had persuaded Kant, there is no relation between these facts itself perceptible by thought. To the extent we want to maintain the idea of some identity between them, it would have to be conceived as something transcendental—an ideally rather than really necessary connection. As a result, reason can only legitimately inquire about the subjective necessity of the feeling, leaving aside the question of what heretofore would have been called its “truth.” In other words, critique shifts attention to the formal *justification* of the

2. In other words, such interpretations save Hegel for modernity by making him conform to what Nietzsche identified as modernity's nihilistic core: the simultaneous knowledge of its own emptiness and fanatical defense of this emptiness as the highest “value”—not just the death of God but the elevation of death to something divine.

3. Kant also uses the term *Darstellung* in a related but arguably distinct fashion. Here, we will only be concerned with the more common, ordinary concept of *Vorstellung*, which translated the English word “idea” such as it is used in Locke and others.

claims of cognition (*quid iuris*), away from their *factual* basis (*quid facti*).⁴ As Rose observes, this idea forms the basis in the early twentieth-century pursuit of an empirico-scientific study of society, now entirely freed from any metaphysical necessity, which is replaced with “moral” or “social necessity.” In order to define this new concept of necessity, sociology reduces the relation between subjective data and objective data to just one of its terms, with the other relegated to the status of epiphenomena.⁵ Rose compellingly argues that the debate this fueled foundered in antinomical opposition according to a logic Kant himself identified, and the resulting methodological ambiguity has obscured the “philosophical foundations of Marxism” precisely insofar as it also “bars access to Hegel” (i.e., dialectical reason).⁶ This is also true, in Rose’s view, of Marx’s successors in Critical Theory, who continue to grapple with the relation between theory and practice. She demonstrates that efforts to overcome this problem have failed primarily because they remained within the horizon of a fundamental “neo-Kantian paradigm,” the problems of which are uniquely overcome by Hegel’s phenomenological method. The question I pursue here, building on Rose’s account, is both how and why post-Marxist philosophers miss this dimension of Hegel’s thinking. I trace this to a hegemonic consensus about his philosophical *theology*—namely, that a Kantian transcendental identity was required to make any sense of it.

I argue that, as a result, the same fundamental antinomy that has afflicted sociological accounts of reason have skewed interpretations of Hegel’s own work. We see this most clearly in Hegel’s phenomenology of religion in the penultimate chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This is where he develops his own account of representation, one that culminates his entire analysis of spirit, and therefore has crucial systematic implications. The function of this chapter, and religion in Hegel’s thought generally, has overwhelmingly been interpreted in light of the assumption that religion and philosophy are separate “forms” of thought, even if they nonetheless share the same content. According to this common view, Christian theology explicates the same “absolute”—viz.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), A84/B116. The idea of a “transcendental identity” is not one introduced by Kant, but I use it here anticipating the point at which something like it becomes unavoidable in his moral philosophy.

5. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 4–5.

6. *ibid.*, 2. Specifically, Rose analyzes how the work of Simmel ultimately sides with validity, whereas Lukács remains within the pole of values (despite his best efforts to overcome the antinomy).

divinity—in the religious “medium” of representation that philosophy explicates in the terms of an abstract logic. As in the case of neo-Kantian sociology, this has had the effect of splintering Hegel’s complete system into two supposedly mutual, but ultimately incompatible standpoints. These one-sided standpoints have gone on to inform the original schism between the Right and Young Hegelians and, I argue, resurface in the contemporary debate between traditional and “non-metaphysical” or “neo-Kantian” interpretations.⁷ Thus, though Rose may indeed be right that the interpretation of Marx has been hindered by a Kantian problem within sociological methodology that Hegel’s philosophy intends to address, Marx himself conjures this very problem in his effort to extract the foundations of historical materialism from Hegel’s own method. To do so, he implicitly draws on a Kantian model of identity to formulate his critique. For example, in a famous passage in the “Afterword” to *Capital*, he writes:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.⁸

For Marx, the defect of Hegel’s account of the dialectic stems from the separation of subject and object, and the reduction of the latter to the former. This means that his inversion of Hegelianism is in fact only the inversion of the *priority* of a transcendental identity of belief and thought that he attributes to Hegel, and it therefore axiomatically affirms this concept of identity as a matter of interpretation despite the significant elements of Marx’s own thought that resist it.⁹ After all, it should no more be true in a Marxian dialectic than it is in Hegel’s that the relation of subject and object is a “vulgar” reduction of one to the other, given the commitment of both to the idea that philosophy must become practical, that it must actualize freedom. To the extent that Marx

7. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 184.

8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (The Modern Library, 1936), 25.

9. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 215–6.

founds his method on this criticism of Hegel, any obscurity in it would be due at least in part to Marx's own acceptance of the predominant view of Hegel's concept of religion. Against this, the systematic formulation of my thesis is that "Absolute Knowing" has much more in common with the aims and methods of materialism than is generally appreciated, more in fact than it does with idealism, which is tied to a transcendental concept of identity that Hegel rejects.

Although Marx (or Engels) never offers a systematic treatment of Hegel's philosophy, an *Anti-Hegel*, Marx's sporadic remarks take us *before* Hegel, temporally, to the Kantian problem of the relation between theory and practice in the context of an idea of the identity of faith and reason. This also puts us before *Hegel*, face to face with the basic problems Hegel himself confronts from his earliest writings leading to the conception of the *Phenomenology*. It reveals how the theological reading of Hegel, and the transcendental concept of identity it mobilizes, has proven to be the basic paradigm of Hegel interpretation in a way that makes critical appropriation of his philosophy uniquely impossible. I will thus briefly examine the fatal connection between theology and identity in Marx's critique of Hegel before giving an overview of how Hegel's view of religion might defy this critique.

Marx, Ante-Hegel

The prospects of a genuinely critical Hegelianism seem dim considering the extent to which it is precisely the dominance of identity for which Hegel's philosophy has become infamous, in its exclusion of all difference, its ability to imagine something else. Doesn't the other in the Hegelian dialectic always turn out to be a mirage in a desert of Sameness, a trick of the light of synthesis? *Das Wahre ist das Ganze* is the slogan of Hegel's system, and the whole must always be one, identical with itself *ex vi termini*. What do we really know about this pure identity? Only, it seems, that it is fundamentally negative. Thought determines, and determination is always limited by what it leaves indeterminate. Limited things cannot be the whole, they cannot be truly identical. Things negate the identical, and so they lack "truth." How can we doubt that anything apparently

positive in a Hegelian dialectic must therefore actually be the negative of a negative? The inevitable culmination of such a logic must come when thought finally negates even its own negations—and this result must itself also be negative, nothing but Hegel’s method that it has rediscovered as its own product, *causa sui*.

Of course, this sounds suspiciously more like mysticism than “Science”—not that there’s anything wrong with that. Mysticism, after all, has all sorts of uses, as long as it remains honest, as Nietzsche points out.¹⁰ But what is a mysticism of pure reason? Isn’t that really something worse: a mysticism masquerading as a science—a “cunning theology?”¹¹ Hegel, as a theologian of identity, would have to be the messiah who foretells his own coming. In this case, surely Kojève would have hit the nail on the head when he wrote that “Hegel becomes God by thinking or writing the Logik; or, if you like, it is by becoming God that he writes or thinks it.”¹² Too Christian for Christian humility, Hegel speaks of and for absolute necessity, never contingency. He proclaims the absolute reign of the present over past and future, what is over what may have been. *This is what always must have been*—Hegel preaches—*this is the end*.¹³

These seem to be the three primary symptoms of all Hegelianism, three things directly associated with what some have described as the fall of philosophy: absolute identity, absolute negativity, and absolute necessity. Together they comprise Gilles Deleuze’s uncharacteristically clinical diagnosis of Hegelian thought as the “extreme form” of its “long perversion.”¹⁴ They mark the most advanced stage of a kind of philosophical disease Kant was the first to name “ontotheology,” one that tries to “cognize existence,” the absolute, “through concepts.”¹⁵ Heidegger eventually identified this error as the true enemy of both philosophy and religion. In contemplating pure identity

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Vintage (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), ch. 2. See also Bataille on mysticism in Nietzsche’s work in George Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, Continuum Impacts Series (Continuum, 2004).

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin Books Limited, 2004), §10.

12. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James Nichols Jr. (1980), 120.

13. Catherine Malabou has responded to this idea extensively. See Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic* (Routledge, 2005), 3–4

14. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism (Columbia University Press, 1994), 164.

15. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A632/B660.

we forget what it means to be here (*Da-sein*), which means we cannot be open to a future, the *sine qua non* of any radical position. Before pure identity we “can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he dance before this God,” because we can expect nothing from it.¹⁶ In such a condition, satisfying the metaphysical impulse, the will to truth, inevitably requires a turn from the absolute beyond this world to the absolute within it: the state. To think ontotheologically means, practically speaking, to posit the identity of religion and the state. Hegel himself seems to leave no room for doubt in his lectures on the subject: “Universally speaking, religion and the foundation of the state are one and the same—they are explicitly and implicitly identical. . . The state is simply freedom in the world.”¹⁷ But again this returns us to the question, what is the nature of this identity?

It seems certain that what happened after Hegel has cured philosophy of its fixation on “Absolute Knowing,” to the point where the very phrase sounds silly when it is not simply menacing. If there is anything radical about such a concept, it would be the radicality of *evil* that manifests, as Hannah Arendt suggested, in the banality of nihilistic totalitarianism. And as Michel Foucault has painstakingly documented, the political rationality of our time has been structured by an increasingly radical “state-phobia” (although in fact it has not been able to give up the state—on the contrary, the power and reach of state institutions have only grown).¹⁸ When we return to Hegel’s system, there hardly seems to be anything left, anything still living, only empty concepts. How could this dialectic be anything but a lifeless abstraction? Already by Marx’s time, Hegel was treated as a “dead dog” for philosophical curators to exhibit in their museums. If “Absolute Knowing” culminates in an abstract, and thus outdated, theory of the state, what vital connection could Hegelianism have to the specific afflictions of the contemporary world, except insofar as the latter exhibits the same symptoms of excessive abstraction?¹⁹ What use could a system of absolute

16. Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *Identity and Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72.

17. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827* (2006), 339.

18. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, Michel Foucault, Lectures at the Collège de France (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 76–77.

19. This is precisely what Rose herself argues, although she reads it as Hegel’s intention to reduce bourgeois legalism to an absurd abstraction: “Hegel did not believe that freedom could be achieved in the pages of the Logic, nor did he have the ambition or vocation to impose it. He did not believe that there was any natural beginning or any Utopian end. He recognized the continuing domination of formal law and that his recognition was not enough to change it.

identity have, unless it could somehow serve as a source of inoculants against the infectious abstraction it carries? This would naturally require some surgery, and transfusion. It would require a restoration of philosophy before Hegel, to a concept of critique able to resist the feverish illusion stemming from reason's dialectic that Kant tried to quarantine. In its affliction of Hegel's mature system, abstraction would indeed be a pathology, but it also would be an object of a possible diagnosis and cure.

This was the idea Marx proposed as the first to see Hegel's mysticism of abstraction for what it really was—a theology of capital. In a fundamental way, Marx's remains the essential criticism of Hegel, and this dichotomy between critical respect and sympathetic rejection has governed the entire tradition of Hegel interpretation, extending through the contemporary debate between “traditional” and “non-metaphysical” readings. It has remained virtually undisputed that Hegel wanted to reconcile belief and understanding while keeping them separate. What philosophy knows for certain, religion believes, and the formal distinction between these two “shapes” of thought divides his system into two indifferent, but complementary, components of a “total” view of history. Practically speaking, Hegel's identity philosophy rests on the basis of a methodological thesis that reduces the latter to the former. Curiously, for Marx the value of this totalization was that no system needed to be mobilized against Hegel, because Hegel had done this work himself. He found it necessary to account for the real material existence of spirit if only in order to subsume it under an absolute abstraction. This is why Marx calls the *Phenomenology* the “true birthplace and secret of Hegel's philosophy.” It is where the genuine, positive object of thought is disguised as the spontaneous creation of an illusory, negative subject.²⁰

Although it is clear from his letters that Marx intended to write an explicit treatment of Hegel's philosophy, the difficulty and length of *Capital* preoccupied him until the end of his life. Instead, his “critique” of Hegel consists principally in various brief but famous remarks such as we find in the “Afterword,” that in Hegel the “dialectic is standing on its head” and that his “own dialectic

But in between the beginning and the end, the speculative exposition demonstrates the domination of abstraction and urges us to transform ethical life by re-cognizing the law of its determination.” Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 187. Although I agree in part, I think my rereading of religion will show that this abstraction is not entirely lifeless.

20. Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 107.

method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite.” Whereas Hegel’s dialectic “seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things,” he called his own “in its essence critical and revolutionary.” Hegel’s account of history is a “mystification,” but one which nevertheless possesses a “rational kernel.”²¹ The inversion of this account would thus be the preliminary definition of a materialist concept of history as opposed to an idealist one. In order to clarify his own method, Marx begins by clarifying the status of religion with respect to critique. This is never more true than when he contrasts himself with his Young Hegelian peers, because it precisely is what they had failed to accomplish by simply rejecting the religious aspect of Hegel’s thinking.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx accuses his contemporaries of being indebted to Hegelian mysticism “not only in their answers but in their very questions.”²² The scope of this condemnation included not only conservatives but also Marx’s fellow radicals, an opposition that hinged on the status of religion. But for Marx, this disagreement was purely superficial. He writes there that “The Young Hegelians are in agreement with the Old Hegelians in their belief in the rule of religion, of concepts, of a universal principle in the existing world. Only, the one party attacks this dominion as usurpation while the other extols it as legitimate.”²³ In order to overcome the abstraction of Hegel’s method, the entire procedure had to overturn this priority. Hegel’s dialectic in the *Phenomenology* proceeds from the real and concrete to the abstract. In contrast, Marx’s inverted dialectic is grounded in “real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.”²⁴ Marx focuses on the sphere of religion in Hegel because it is there, according to him, that Hegel fatally installs an abstraction to rule in place of reason. It is there, in the advent of “Absolute Knowing” that “After transcending religion. . . and recognizing it as a product of self-externalization, he yet finds confirmation of himself in religion as religion. Here is the root of Hegel’s false positivism.”²⁵

21. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 25.

22. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (International Publishers, 1972), 40.

23. *Ibid.*, 41.

24. *Ibid.*, 42.

25. Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 115.

The overriding significance of religion is fully confirmed by Marx's only sustained examination of Hegel's published writing in the fragmentary *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: a text that mainly does not concern history, but nevertheless introduces and summarizes Hegel's philosophy as the mystification of history. Marx claims that Hegel accomplishes this not by ignoring the real conditions of religion but by identifying them with reason. This is the meaning of Marx's famous proposition that the "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism" and this had been "essentially completed" by Hegel.²⁶ Marx's source here is, above all, Feuerbach, and especially his early sympathetic view of Hegel's dialectic as having "rationalized" religion. Genuine critique is the critique of reason itself, the determination of its real conditions. Although Hegel directs our attention to these conditions, he makes critique impossible when he subsumes them into illusory conditions of "Absolute Knowing" understood as merely subjective belief, a phantasm in place of objective freedom.

Thus, Marx's central motif in his critique of Hegel is of a pure "Idea" that accounts for all the genesis and structure of all aspects of civil society. Marx acknowledges that Hegel correctly identifies the concrete activity of individuals to comprise the content of civil society: "But in the state, which he demonstrates to be the self-conscious existence of the moral spirit, Hegel tacitly accepts this moral spirit's being the determining thing only implicitly, that is, in accordance with the universal Idea. He does not allow society to become the determining thing, because for that an actual subject is required, and he has only an abstract, imaginary subject."²⁷ Marx accuses Hegel of completely overlooking the real motor of history: he fails to see it even as he describes it. For Marx, what is essential about Hegelianism is the claim that only spirit has absolute necessity, and the objective world merely manifests that necessity. For the Old Hegelians, spirit is understood as a transcendent God; for the Young Hegelians, it is understood as the transcendental ideal. In either case, one must accept the thesis that these ideas determine the real structures of human society.

Conversely, genuine dialectical science in Marx's description is only possible when objective necessity can account for those structures, and only the material conditions of "sensuous life" have

26. Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 71.

27. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy Of Right* (1977), 122.

necessity, not concepts. The beliefs of individuals and the metaphysical systems they construct (religious concepts) as well as the laws and institutions they obey (political concepts) merely manifest those conditions. That is, they are representations with no critical function, because they merely reflect the conditions that give rise to them. At least, this is the case insofar as Marx presents his methodology in opposition to Hegel's, as a reversal of the identity he attributes to Hegel's dialectic. But clearly, this reversal rests on a Kantian distinction between representation and reason that, as Rose points out, creates problems in Marxist-sociological accounts of ideology.²⁸ It appeals to the same abstract identity it imputes to Hegel, only with the direction of the flow of necessity reversed—from objectivity (“material conditions,” the mode of production) to subjectivity (religion, but also metaphysics and law) instead of from subjectivity (religion, “absolute spirit”) to objectivity (ethical life, including economic relations). If Rose is right that Hegel's philosophy is capable of a critique of social conditions, then it is because Hegel's concept of identity confronts an abstraction deeper than either of its terms, the abstraction of a method that defines itself in absolute separation from its content. Marx is not able to overcome this abstraction precisely insofar as he remained wedded to the separation. The result is that the future of a radical theory of politics departs from a dialectical method entirely. The conclusion that Rose laments thus appears inevitable in view of Marx's own reading of Hegel as a theologian.

Hegel, post Hegel mortum

In terms of its historical legacy, the failure of Marx's rehabilitation of Hegel resulted in the cession of the field of dialectic by the Left Hegelians to the Right. However, this victory was short-lived as the advent of positivism and analytic philosophy was largely staged as a wholesale rejection of Hegel's system. In the words of Franz Rosenzweig, modern philosophy exists in a state *post Hegel mortum* in that it must accept Hegel's failure, along with its catastrophic consequences, to transcend the Kantian limitations of reason.²⁹ For historians of philosophy today, reading Hegel

28. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 217.

29. E. Rosenstock-Huussy et al., *Judaism Despite Christianity: The 1916 Wartime Correspondence Between Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy and Franz Rosenzweig* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 94.

is chiefly an exercise in hermeneutic precision. This means that there is little interest in whether Hegel solves the problems he sets out to solve. Indeed, it is nearly an axiom that the project of finding value in Hegel is so diametrically opposed to interest in what he actually intends to say that responsible scholars of Hegel have no choice but to choose between philosophical relevance and a historically accurate reconstruction.³⁰

The result is that the idea Hegel sets out to overcome, the formal opposition of thought and feeling, is precisely the model that is principally used to understand him, at least with regard to the systematic role of religion. In this, the contemporary, historical reading of Hegel does distinguish itself from the view of the Old Hegelians, who also sought a faithful reconstruction. Rather than reduce the objective meaning of history to the subjective expression of a necessary order, heralded by the Christian religion, the contemporary view allows religion and philosophy to remain separate in form, acknowledging Hegel's actual claim about their identity. However, this view is *de facto* a theological reading of Hegel insofar as the actual meaning of this identity remains something that "we cannot explain away" in secular terms, despite the fact that Hegel himself seems to quite clearly claim that it is precisely what he intends to uncover, even going so far as to make it the only possible object of genuine philosophy.³¹ In other words, contemporary readings of Hegel agree with Marx's diagnosis but reject his prognosis of recovery.

The ironic result of this attempt to be as faithful as possible to Hegel's system is the absolutization of the most Kantian element in it. From this perspective, the essence of religion and its indispensable value is its civic function. Jean Wahl³² and Jean Hyppolite³³ both evince a similar perspective in their readings of the *Phenomenology*, and later on H.S. Harris makes the point explicit when he argues that from his earliest thoughts on the topic, Hegel remains committed to the idea that religion as a "rational faith" was necessary for motivating the feeling of the absolute that rational knowledge could never produce on its own.³⁴ Hegel's approval and critique of Christianity,

30. Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (2002), 4–5.

31. Frederick Beiser, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (1993), 5.

32. Jean Wahl, *Le Malheur de la Conscience Dans la Philosophie de Hegel* (1929).

33. Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit"* (1979).

34. H. S. Harris, "Frankfurt 1797–1800: Phantasie und Herz," in *Hegel's Development*, v. 1 (Clarendon Press, 1972).

in this view, hinges on the extent to which it promotes the correct feeling—that is, one of “happy identity” rather than unhappy alienation. In all these views, the independence of both terms of the antinomy are maintained in their mutual separation. Spirit manifests the beliefs of religion. And the beliefs of religion are a reflection of spiritual development. So on the one hand, feeling produces concepts (via representations), but on the other hand, concepts determine interpretations of feeling, which virtually contain countless other interpretations. As such, both sides have absolute necessity, but we can only comprehend the objective, conceptual side. This makes the Hegelian circle into a vicious one, not because it contradicts itself but because it is closed. The conceptual content is grounded on a feeling which could in fact, by definition, ground other concepts that correspond to other beliefs—other possible interpretations. The mysticism of the absolute is affirmed in this incomprehensible necessity of a single one of its infinite possible manifestations.

According to Beiser, the other possible approach to Hegel is what he calls the “analytic” strategy. This means intentionally extracting what seems sensible or useful from Hegel’s system and using it to solve genuinely contemporary problems. In general this primarily means abandoning the metaphysical pretensions of his system, precisely on the grounds of their apparent mysticism. These readings are often called “non-traditional” or “revisionist” since they overturn a century of basic assumptions about Hegel’s project, but it is best known by the name given by one of its earliest proponents, Klaus Hartmann. He called his interpretation of Hegel’s system “non-metaphysical” because it doesn’t set out to determine the true nature of what exists, only the categorical relations that govern rational thought. What is at stake is not some apodictic certitude about what is, but rather simply the unpacking of the implications of socio-cultural norms, specifically the expectation that any discursive claim take the form of a logical syllogism.

The non-metaphysical approach tries to avoid the circularity of Marxist and contemporary Hegelian interpretations by refusing all necessity in either direction. It assumes that subjective feelings can correspond to any and all beliefs, but also that these are irrelevant to their objective social context. The reason *why* people believe as they do is held to be an incomprehensible mystery. That is, this interpretation transposes Hegel into precisely the neo-Kantian sociological framework

that Rose critiques. It examines how certain values determine the social structures we live in. These values can either be external to consciousness, as in the case of Weberian sociology, or internal to consciousness in the case of Durkheim. Either way, it duplicates the Kantian antinomy of morality within the sphere of objectivity, while neglecting subjectivity entirely and therefore guaranteeing the impossibility of any reconciliation. For of course the question of whether one can adjudicate between social values depends entirely on whether one can have necessary and not merely contingent experience of them—that is, it depends on an objective account of subjective experience.

Robert Pippin’s central text on the *Phenomenology*, *The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, explicitly excludes the “Religion” chapter from consideration. He rejects the idea that the beliefs Hegel examines there could have any bearing on the logical structure of “Spirit.”³⁵ His work can therefore be considered as an application of the Durkheimian model of sociology to the interpretation of Hegel’s work. Accordingly, only the norms governing society have any necessity—beliefs the society has about its own fundamental aims and purposes only reflect these norms. In the case of “modernity” the relevant norm is the advancement of knowledge, (i.e., Enlightenment). As Kant argued, these pursuits entail the value placed on “ideals” such as peace, freedom, and equality. But, according to Pippin, the origin of these norms is beyond the domain of rational investigation itself. They are the result of a contingent history.

Inversely, Terry Pinkard’s close attention to Hegel’s concept of religion reflects a Weberian understanding of the role of belief vis. reason. The core of his argument is that the shape of consciousness wholly depends on what it identifies as “sacred.”³⁶ The role of philosophy is to understand the structures of human reason in their distinct forms, but these forms take their necessity from the teleological values articulated in religion. Certainly, Christianity assumes a certain precedence in this account as the only religion in which the value that is singled out as sacred is humanity as such, as the source of sanctity itself. However, Pinkard denies that there is anything “metaphysical” in the function of religion. He therefore explicitly denies any necessity to the form

35. Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (1989).

36. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (1996), 220.

of representation.³⁷ Or rather, he grants that there is, retrospectively, a kind of conceptual necessity in the structures of “modern life,” but they remain only one possibility in a “larger field of possibilities.”³⁸ In other words, there is nothing essential to *human* life in *modern* life. It simply reflects the way of organizing society when Christian values are respected. As in the case of Pippin, there is no final justification of the particular values we happen to have inherited. Belief, too, is a contingent fact.

The neo-Kantian basis of both approaches requires that they trace the grounds of thought (now understood as an objective institution rather than a subjective capacity) to something that exceeds reason—history—without thereby either justifying continued faith in its value or rejecting its validity. The neo-Kantian interpretation of Hegel must both deny the necessity of thought—insofar as it postulates an inaccessible beyond—and affirm it—insofar as it refuses to comprehend this beyond.³⁹ The same antinomy repeats itself throughout the history of Hegel scholarship, even in those interpretations that try to eschew religion in their analyses. The domain of subjective beliefs points to objective laws, but these in turn imply beliefs. Their transcendental identity means that both domains are respected in their mutual, complimentary exclusion. Each are potential standpoints to take on the relation between subject and world, and the coherence of both demands that they remain mutually incomplete. As Kant explicitly argued, if reason attempts to reconcile belief’s skepticism about the authority of law, or the understanding’s skepticism about the reality of freedom, then it falls into the errors of ontotheology—errors which, in the realm of social relations, are “injustices.” But of course, from the point of view of law, the claims of science may well seem intrinsically evil, and from the point of view of science, law a bare exercise of power. For Kant, the role of reason is not to reconcile the two views, but to prevent either from dominating. But in every individual circumstance, one side can and must prevail. The best that reason can do is prevent this fact being taken for justice. But neither is it ultimately able to condemn such domination as *injustice*, because the latter is not a matter of facts at all but a use of reason, the *perversion* of reason. If

37. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, 253.

38. *Ibid.*, 268.

39. Marx’s inversion of this same formulation creates the opposite epistemological problem in his work. He postulates ethical values that transcend objective history without attempting to comprehend them.

the history of Hegel scholarship has misconstrued Hegel's philosophy of religion in order to avoid this perversion, then correcting it will require confronting, and as I will argue, even embracing it.

Speculation and perversion

The idea of ontotheology is closely linked to suspicion toward perversion. It is not a criticism of theology, but a theological criticism. The accusation that Hegel's philosophy is fundamentally ontotheological does not rest on the idea that it posits an identity of faith and reason, but that this identity becomes the object of philosophy itself. In Kant's definition, this means Hegel violates the inherent boundaries of reason by declaring that this identity, which should be only postulated, is something real. That is, apparently in the tradition of rationalist epistemology, Hegel claims to comprehend an identity that Kant, in his analysis of the antinomies of reason, places beyond all comprehension. Reason certainly cannot dispense with the assumption of this identity without lapsing into absolute skepticism—it must accept it as something only subjectively necessary. Critique in the Kantian sense means to deny skepticism without giving in to the temptation to overcome it through reason alone. The attempt to mobilize reason in defiance of the limits observed by it, Kant calls the “perverted reason” that defines speculative theology as opposed to the transcendental theology he proposes:

The idea of systematic unity should only serve as a regulative principle for seeking this unity in the combination of things in accordance with universal laws of nature, and to the extent that something of the sort is encountered in an empirical way, one should believe oneself to have approximated to completeness in its use, though one obviously will never reach it. Instead of this, one reverses the matter and begins by grounding things hypostatically on the actuality of a principle of purposive unity; because it is entirely inscrutable, the concept of such a highest intelligence is determined anthropomorphically, and then one imposes ends on nature forcibly and dictatorially, instead of seeking for them reasonably on the path of physical investigation, so that

teleology, which ought to serve only to supplement the unity of nature in accordance with universal laws, not only works to do away with it, but even deprives reason of its end, namely proving the existence of such an intelligent supreme cause from nature according to this end.⁴⁰

Kant relies on what he has taken Hume to have definitely shown: the identity between the feeling of necessity uniting two representations and the necessity imposed on them by the categories of the understanding is inscrutable. It is true that we cannot help but invoke the ultimate unity of experience according to rational concepts in order to avoid skepticism about even our most rudimentary forms of knowledge. But insofar as reason takes this necessity to be real, the expression of an *ens realissimum*, it is not simply in error, as Hume might have said. Rather, it is fundamentally perverted, because it deploys teleology for an illicit purpose. Teleology, Kant asserts, is intended to uphold the universality of law (i.e., the laws of the understanding, which make the investigation, and knowledge of the world possible. In other words, Kant proposes that purposiveness (teleology) itself has a purpose: the maintenance of an order of knowledge. But this is not the same as a *body* of knowledge. In order for the latter to increase, the autonomy of the former must be respected. It is in this sense that Nietzsche attributes a will to knowledge to philosophers that imposes and not merely discovers an order in the world. And it is this will that Hegel defies if he collapses the distinction between the order, or form of knowledge, and its content.

Kant introduces the concept of perversion in order to distinguish this threat to critique from the much better known problem of dogmatism. Perversion for Kant is something worse than dogmatism because it cannot be overcome. Reason is only “lazy” when, taking whatever particular experience it has as complete, it fails to pursue its proper end of universality. Kant says that this applies to “any principle that makes one regard his investigation into nature, whatever it may be, as complete.”⁴¹ The common saying that “there is a reason for everything” is paradigmatic of the way this kind of error gives up on the search for real causes in favor of bare assertion. In this sense, the purposiveness of reason fails to accomplish its purpose, but only in a negative way. Reason

40. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A692/B720–A693/B721.

41. *Ibid.*, A690/B718.

allows faith to take over for it, instead of support it. But if the boundary between faith and reason is erased altogether, then this is something more severe: reason becomes perverted. It makes the pursuit of knowledge impossible by substituting the necessity of a few particular representations for absolute necessity. In the first case, reason can correct its own deficiency by comparing the limitation of the particular knowledge we have to the universality of genuinely universal ends. But in the second case, because particular ends have been substituted for genuine knowledge, having falsely determined it in a positive way, reason deprives itself of this means of correction. And this occurs in all previous theology: representations of a particular religious formation are made to serve as the ground of all existence, and not merely the objects of intense feeling, as in ordinary religion. Reason goes so far as to impose a particular will on nature that is foreign to it. Even in the theoretical context Kant already evokes the moral dimension of perversion by associating it with tyranny. The will to truth can be opposed to a will to domination only insofar as it maintains the separation between faith and reason while at the same time affirming their identity. This is precisely what Kant conceives as the task of critique.

However, this definition foreshadows a second perversion that threatens the critical project, this time in its practical sphere. On the level of pure (theoretical) reason, the danger of perversion was foreseeable and preventable by a concept of reason itself: the transcendental distinction between the regulative and the constitutive use of a concept. But on the level of action, the separation is not so easily maintained, and the threat of perversion reappears even within the boundary of critical reason. This is because Kant's concept of the good will demands a real and not merely ideal unity of feeling and reason. The laws of the understanding and the law of reason converge in the feeling of respect for the moral law that provides the psychological motivation and justification for the moral act. In the *Groundwork*, and to an even greater extent the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant emphasizes the negative side of this identity.⁴² The morality of an action, strictly speaking, has nothing to do with the desire to do good from "love" or "benevolence," but only the rational knowledge of what is good. From this point of view, practical reason is defined according to

42. Kant does mention a "positive" conception of reason in the *Groundwork* but drops it.

its separation from all “alien causes”—namely, feeling. However, human beings are not purely rational. All of their actions, moral or immoral, are subject to determination by some sort of incentive. In line with the structure of the argument of the first critique, Kant insists that morality does not require any actual knowledge of how an act might be subject both to a chain of causes and the spontaneously effect of reason itself, only that this is possible.

However, in the case of practical reason, the subjective necessity that we think of ourselves as free when we act morally does not suffice to guarantee the healthy operation of practical reason. Unlike the case of theoretical reason, it cannot help but represent particular ends as universal, because that is precisely when it thinks of itself as acting morally. This act of representation, and the ensuing feeling of pleasure that psychologically determines the act, is necessary for a moral act to be possible. Although it does not make the action moral, it accompanies every moral action. Kant calls this “enthusiasm” (*Enthusiasmus*). But enthusiasm is easily confused with another feeling that is not only itself immoral, but also the root of *all* evil: fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*). Kant defines fanaticism as the feeling associated with the thought of something supersensible (viz., freedom). This feeling would imply a denial of the transcendental ideality that prevents illusion, and thus undermine critique itself. In the case of moral action, it is therefore necessary that agent feel that they have acted morally, but imperative that they not feel *sure* they have. The latter would require rational knowledge of the ground of the act, a perversion of practical reason. Although all moral people must feel they have done the right thing, only fanatics are certain about this.

Due to the nature of action, the perversion of fanaticism is not avoidable through the sheer idea of the transcendental hypothesis. It is a natural disposition of human beings. As such, Kant calls it inextirpable. Furthermore, since the dominance of reason by a feeling is the very opposite of the constitution of a good will, Kant calls it a “radical evil.” Although he is fairly consistent throughout his moral writings that religion is not only superfluous for morality, but actively harmful to it, he reverses this position in his late work *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*. There he argues precisely that a kind of religion is necessary in order to cultivate the peculiar attitude of enthusiasm, while also preventing fanaticism.

It is widely agreed that Hegel's criticism of Kant centers on the idea of morality. It is most dramatically staged in the final section of "Spirit" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the opposition between two apparently opposite figures that in fact represent the single dilemma that Hegel attributes to the Kantian moral agent. The reconciliation of this opposition occurs in some of the most controversial passages of the text and introduces "Religion" as the next step in the development of consciousness. In this sense, Hegel follows Kant's own progression. However, the content of the chapter reveals a very different function of religious representation. Rather than restraining representation as a threat to the formal order of practical reason, Hegel *affirms* its perverse character, which he takes to be the essence of religion as representation. This is the evil specific to Hegel's ontotheology, from the point of view of interpretations that assume a Kantian idea of identity in their analysis of the systematic role of religion, which is to say, nearly all interpretations of Hegel. He seems to extend the merely conceptual necessity of Kant's account of morality, which is wholly negative, to the realm of positive knowledge, making a fanatical belief in the righteousness of currently existing institutions and norms the basis for his philosophy. However, as I will argue, Hegel's account of religion is not intended either to reject Kant's concept of morality, or to complete it. Rather, Hegel intends to overcome it and free its critical potential from a lingering commitment to an alienated, and thus unfree, concept of the absolute necessity.

In order to see more clearly how Hegel's analysis of religion addresses itself to the problem of identity as a sublation of the "Moral World View," I begin in Chapter 1 with a brief overview of milestones in Christian moral philosophy in which the problem of identity bears directly on the question of good and evil, in a way that yields a specific concept of perversion. I will focus in particular on the way in which Kant's philosophy is continuous with this tradition, rather than a break with it as is commonly supposed. This will then bring Hegel's own identity philosophy in the context of early German Romanticism into better focus. In Chapter 2 I show that far from defending rational theology against the radical potential of the imagination, his criticism of Schleiermacher's valuation of "heresy" takes aim at what he sees as an illegitimate *negative* theology. In Chapter 3, I will then attempt to uncover an account of identity that does justice to Hegel's critique of morality

in both its Kantian and Romantic guises. Finally, Chapter 4 tests this account's ability to make sense of Hegel's obscure concept of "Absolute Knowing" as "comprehended history." If my argument is successful, I will be able to conclude that the majority of Hegel's readers have suppressed the systematic importance of Hegel's philosophy of religion by putting a Kantian framework in its place, and consequently they have turned Hegel on his head not because Hegel's philosophy of religion mystifies history, but because Hegel's philosophy of religion has been mystified.

2 The perversion of identity

The evil of ontotheology

Hegel's philosophy has earned infamy for the prominent role it affords apparently theological or quasi-theological figures such as "Spirit," faith, and of course the "Absolute." Notoriously opaque, his published works are often understood through the lens of his much more straightforward lectures on the philosophy of religion, where among other controversial ideas, one can read that philosophy and religion share the same object—that is, they stand in a relation of identity. This idea seems to confirm the worst connotations of any talk of "Absolute Knowing." "Spirit" has been correspondingly understood as a reference to Christian eschatology—divine providence guiding history to a pre-determined, necessary conclusion, and legitimating anything that advances that history, regardless of how apparently brutal or inhumane. Above all, this is true of the "State," the "actuality of the ethical idea."¹ Thus, critics of Hegel have worried that everything that escapes or worse resists this advance is by opposition rendered unnecessary, dispensable.

Taken alone such a view might not be enough to single Hegel out in the history of Western Philosophy. In fact, knowledge of the absolute is one of its major themes, especially in the context of Christian theology. But in the hindsight of Kant's "Copernican Revolution" in epistemology, Hegel seems to be on the wrong side of this history, resurrecting blind dogmatics in the age of Enlightenment. According to Kant's definition of "ontotheology," a philosophy becomes mired in illusions when it attempts to apply the categories of the finite understanding to what truly is,

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1991), ¶257.

positing a likeness between human consciousness and things in themselves, an identity between thought and being. The identity of religion and philosophy is the highest expression of what has been called “identity philosophy.” Kant’s transcendental deduction is ostensibly a *reductio ad absurdum* of identity philosophy, demonstrating the futility and superfluity of the aims of traditional metaphysics after centuries of failure to advance: a failure that might appear “ridiculous” if it were not so fateful.² In its place he substitutes a “critical metaphysics” and complementary ethics that makes the perversion of ontotheology the most radical evil. This is the reason that Hegel’s philosophy is condemned in advance as something essentially *perverse*. Whereas the traditional operation of ontotheology was to produce a concept of evil, and thereby account for it, the evil of Hegel’s identity philosophy is its ontotheology. The question has largely been, therefore, whether there is anything in it that can be redeemed, and how to accomplish that.³

Other than Marx’s parenthetical polemics, this criticism finds its earliest and perhaps most forcible expression in Schelling. Schelling and Hegel’s early friendship and common philosophical interests in reuniting faith and reason is well-known. Very early on Schelling adopted the label of “identity philosophy” for his own explicitly theodical system. But he revised his views in the years after he published *Presentation of My System* in 1801, and eventually he would criticize Hegel’s “absolute idealism” in those aspects that were the most reminiscent of his former position. Specifically, he denied that Hegel was ever able to demonstrate the identity of thought and being “within thought,” which he took to be the aim of the phenomenological method insofar as it attempts to recuperate the destruction of every finite historical shape of consciousness through reflection. Instead, he favored the more epistemologically modest position that this identity ultimately escapes any rational cognition or guarantee, and every attempt to secure such a guarantee can only be the narcissistic projection of its author’s own subjectivity. Ultimately he feared Hegel’s thought took philosophy beyond its proper function or natural limits, that it perverted reason.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

3. A question one might of course justly answer with another question: “Why bother?”

This indicates that the criticism of Hegel's philosophy of identity is at its core a moral criticism. More than an example of an *errant* logic, Hegel's philosophy of identity soon came to be regarded as, in the stark phrase of one commentator, "the highest expression of evil."⁴ At issue above all is the degradation that allegedly awaits human freedom if it proclaims its own mastery of God and world in the face of all experiential evidence to the contrary, essentially proving itself to have "gone mad."⁵ It is this kind of self-imposed slavery that is closely linked to evil in Schelling's philosophical theology and has functioned almost as an axiom among critics of Hegel. This concept of evil has a long tradition in Christian moral philosophy up to and including Kant. According to it, any attempt to make the good identical with reason is perverse in the etymologically strict sense of a turning away of reason from its proper end, which in the case of reason is to serve what is good and not dictate to it. Of course, this is only possible insofar as some limited form of identity between reason and goodness is posited. On the one hand, evil can result when this identity is forsaken by reason. But when reason goes further and mistakes itself for the good then no check on evil is possible at all. The depth of the depravity of Hegelian absolute identity is that it not only serves as the basis for all other evils, but it also represents the most extreme form of evil achieved in the modern age—totalitarianism. It is the only philosophical reference Hannah Arendt directly associates with the power of what she famously called the "banality" of this form of evil.⁶ It is something incapable of grasping its own evil nature, as she observes with regard to Eichmann's asinine invocation of the categorical imperative to defend his "work." This kind of evil is always just doing what it is told. Perversion is thus identified as a mindless evil, even as it takes the most rational form.

If Hegel is accused of ontotheology, this is therefore not simply a matter of importing an obsolete and discredited framework into modern philosophy. On the contrary, his perversion of identity strikes at the core of a tradition in which an essentially Christian concept of morality has de-

4. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (State University of New York Press, 2010), xxvii.

5. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

6. She also explicitly interprets it as a "perversion" of Kantian ethics, through this association of it with Eichmann's own claims.

terminated the function and scope of reason in its vocation to comprehend the world, even as the religion has declined. According to this tradition, reason fulfills an essentially subservient role as the mediator between faith and understanding. Truth, which is accessible to the soul directly and purely in the light of faith, must be transported to the understanding, which otherwise remains fragmented by a lack of coherent purpose or end. The two must be *made* identical, and this is the vocation of philosophical reason. This identifying activity of reason is vital to the essential Christian mission of the salvation of humankind. However, it is possible for reason to go astray in this task if it assumes too much responsibility, with the result that the understanding fixates on unpredictable and divergent ends. It is the lack of order or unified purpose that has always defined evil. The specificity of the various concepts of evil is found not in the results but in the cause of this disorder, understood as a specific type of perversion.

In what follows I will outline some crucial milestones in this tradition with regard to the structure of perversion. In each, one finds an attempt to account for evil by means of reason, in which reason comes up against a seemingly intractable limit that gives rise to a division between what is good and what is evil. Augustine states that desire, fixating on particular ends, overtakes and perverts reason. Hobbes, despite his reputation for being a critic of faith, actually discovers a new object of faith in the sovereign—the “mortal God” whose will guarantees the social cohesion sought by speech, which otherwise is perverted by contradiction and inconstancy. Finally, Kant marks the all important moment reason itself is identified as essentially perverse, insofar as it must always express itself as a particular will. This compels him to admit a role for faith, though a negative one. This brief history of perversion not only illustrates the link between the question of religion, perversion and identity, but it also outlines the essential problem to which Hegel’s philosophy of religion, and his peculiar concept of identity, will form a response: the antinomy of the moral world view.

The perversion of desire: Augustine

The peculiar evil of perversion is initially defined in classical Christian philosophy as a disorder of the will, where bodily desires dominate reason. In Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* one finds a particularly clear analysis of the essential threat of perversion. He recounts his love of reading "obscene text[s]" as a boy in school and considering his mother's desire that he "should not fall into fornication... womanish advice."⁷ In other words, he reveled in precisely the disorder of his soul's desires that Plato argued made people unjust, and therefore bad. The idea of disordered desire is therefore already present in pre-Christian worldview. But the true sense of perversion is not fully captured by Augustine's various accounts of sexual liberality. Rather, it is illustrated in one the most famous sections in this text that concerns the delight he took in theft. He describes himself as a young man:

Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong. There was a pear tree near our vineyard laden with fruit, though attractive in neither colour nor taste. To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night after (in our usual pestilential way) we had continued our game in the streets. We carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless *our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed.*⁸

Augustine compares himself here unfavorably, and seemingly hyperbolically, to Catiline, an infamous Roman senator accused of, in addition to conspiracy and murder, violating one of the vestal virgins. Augustine is quite earnest in this comparison—Catiline's acts at least had some motive, however base, while his own crimes, though minor, had no other motive beyond the sheer plea-

7. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (OUP, 2008), I, xvi, 26; II, iii, 7.

8. *Ibid.*, 2, iv, 9, emphasis added.

sure of the wicked act itself. Augustine quips that “If any of those pears entered my mouth, my criminality was the piquant sauce.”⁹ This is what is definitive of perversion as the form of *evil*: one strays, not out of weakness, but out of the pure denial of what reason knows about the good. Rather than a simple excess of pleasure, it is a special kind of pleasure that defines evil.

It is possible that these early experiences are what initially drew Augustine to the Manichean sect, which insisted that the moral distinction between good and evil could only be explained by an ontological correlate. Everything he says about his actions implies an idea of evil as an autonomous force with its own logic, directly resistant to and not simply lacking in goodness. Writing several years later as a convert, he confirms that it was precisely the intuitive appeal of this doctrine that had captivated him. In comparison, he considered the Christian idea of an omnipotent and perfect God presiding over a corrupt creation—strangely permissive and yet wrathful—irrational. Augustine admits that he simply could not conceive of “the existence of another [spiritual] reality” beyond the conflict and struggle of the physical world that nonetheless determined it completely.¹⁰ In an important sense, then, it was the peculiar concept of identity implied by Christian theology—of reason with precisely what seemed to oppose it—that Augustine initially rejected. In fact, there may have been no particular cause for Augustine to question the Manichean “mythology” for a long time because it accorded very well with his experience of evil as its own reward, intrinsically opposed to goodness, rendering the latter in constant need of protection and defense.

A major turning point in Augustine’s life occurs, however, when a friend he had known from childhood, and had spent much time with in conversation and study, a time which he described as “sweet. . . beyond all sweetnesses of life,” died of a sudden, inexplicable sickness. After this, all the pleasures of contemplation, virtuous pleasures, “transformed into a cruel torment” for him.¹¹ From this point on Augustine’s autobiography becomes one of conversion, and it is marked largely by a significant shift in his thinking about evil. How could it be that, precisely at a time when he was least disordered in his pursuits, he should suffer the most horrible punishment? The only apparent

9. Augustine, *The Confessions*, II, vi, 12.

10. *Ibid.*, III, vii, 12.

11. *Ibid.*, IV, iv, 7.

answer to this paradox both radicalizes Christian morality and renders it coherent: evil exists in the will of human beings themselves, insofar as they presume to determine what is good, not in any other spiritual “force.” Goodness and evil refer less to the particular details of the action, but more to the desire of the actor—not what one does, but who one is.¹²

The significance of this shift is evident in the double meaning that evil takes on by the time Augustine writes *On the Free Choice of the Will*: “We use the word ‘evil’ in two senses: first, when we say that someone has done evil; and second, when we say that someone has suffered evil.”¹³ While Manichaeism provided the most direct and substantial account of the first sense, it could not account for the second. What preference could one have for goodness if evil was equal to it in power, such that being good was no protection against evil? What could distinguish it from evil *qua* moral force? Although a pure will to do evil might lay at the base of evil acts, they also obviously have significantly more apparent charms. The Christian notion of evil is defined by the fallibility of will, rather than its power. This fallibility originates in will itself, and not a temptation to which the will succumbs. This raises the “true” problem of evil as perversion. Why would human beings choose evil, if it also means choosing suffering? As Augustine puts it, in what sense is it possible, contrary to Platonism, to *choose* unhappiness, and not simply succumb to it?

The only possible explanation is that rational knowledge of the good is not simply difficult, but impossible. Far from being a virtuous pursuit, this knowledge represents the ultimate sin, as depicted in Genesis. This is why faith must be essential to virtue. The attraction of evil is not so much the promise of (bodily) pleasure but of a forbidden knowledge. Thus, in defining exactly what makes a deed evil or not, Augustine must appeal not to any specific quality, anything belonging to what he names the “external visible act,” but rather to the internal motivation for the action. The source of evil in the will itself is what Augustine calls *cupiditas*, desire. This can be translated as “lust” or “greed” to indicate that the danger is a kind of disordered pleasure, but Augustine makes it quite clear that it is not simply an excess of desire but its perversion that is the

12. According to Nietzsche’s view, this is the decisive shift that defines the transition from “pre-moral” history of (Western) civilization to the early form of “noble” Christian morality. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Part V.

13. Augustine, *The Confessions*, 1.1/32.

source of the evil. He writes that “all wicked people, just like good people, desire to live without fear [*cupere namque sine metu vivere*]. The difference is that the good, in desiring this, turn their love away from things that cannot be possessed without the fear of losing them. The wicked try to get rid of anything that prevents them from enjoying such things securely.”¹⁴ All human will is guided by the same desire, but this desire can become perverted: it turns away from its proper object. This is *genuine* evil: “perversion of the will, turned aside from... God”¹⁵ to lesser things. Augustine realizes that his suffering at the loss of his friend is the doing of neither God nor some other powerful force, but his own desire to love things that can be lost, which is to say everything that we can have *knowledge* of. Since everything finite passes away, to make a particular thing (or person) the object of one’s desire is to doom oneself to suffer *and* sin. Only the infinite can be loved without evil, and only faith, not reason, produces and guides this love.

Although Augustine emphasizes the importance of the individual, free choice of the will, he does so because reason is not sufficient to guide this choice—it can only direct us to the need for faith. Faith is precisely not something individual, private, or a matter of choice. It is the identity of all (human) consciousness with the divine will, the unity of thought and being, which is proven through obedience to the “eternal law,” and forsaken when reason seeks to make its own laws. The coherence of the distinction between good and evil depends on the existence of a single unified Church that articulates and interprets the “word” of God. By refuting this necessity and challenging the authority of Catholicism, unified faith, the Reformation destroyed this distinction without destroying either the Church or Christianity. A new concept of identity was required in order to account for the reality of evil. This is the basic aim of Hobbes’s philosophy when it proposes *human* speech as the site of perversion.

14. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. T. Williams, Hackett Classics Series (Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 1.4/42.

15. Augustine, *The Confessions*, VII, iii 5.

The perversion of speech: Hobbes

In Hobbes the theological problem of evil is conceived as the *natural* condition of social warfare. According to his fundamental materialism, the will has no object other than the particular impressions of sense—it cannot be perverted. Nonetheless a concept of evil in precisely the sense that preoccupied Augustine is at the heart of his conception of philosophy. The importance of this concept, he says:

is to be judged, not so much by the advantages we enjoy by knowing it, as by the disasters we suffer by being ignorant of it. All the disasters which can be avoided by deliberate human action are the result of war, and especially of civil war, since it is the source of massacres, destitution, and deprivation of everything. These things do not happen because people want them to happen, since one can only want what is good, or at least what appears to be good. *Nor is it that they do not know these things are evil*, for who is there who does not feel that death and poverty are evil and harmful to themselves? Therefore the cause is civil war, because they do not know the causes of war and peace; and there are very few people who have learned what their duties are in order to consolidate and preserve peace—that is, the genuine rule of living.¹⁶

Thus, Hobbes begins with the same problem as Augustine: suffering. And apparently also like Augustine, Hobbes directs us to desire—the “passions”—in order to find its cause. His famous instruction, found in the introduction to *Leviathan*, provides a curious translation of the ancient dictum *nosce te ipsum*—“Read Thyself.” He explains that by reading the law exhibited by our own passions, we can come to know the law that governs us regardless or in spite of what faith instructs about divine law.¹⁷

Since Hobbes argues the passions are most clearly exhibited in pride, rapaciousness, and violence, and the general “state of war” that characterizes what he calls our “natural state,” he has

16. Thomas Hobbes, “De Corpore,” 1.7, accessed September 30, 2012, <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/hmp/texts/modern/hobbes/decorpore/decorpindex.html>.

17. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1996), 10.

typically been interpreted according to another dictum he sometimes invokes, *homo homini lupus*. Against this, Rousseau, for instance, objects that we lack any basis from which to extrapolate universal qualities of human nature from our own, historically situated, already corrupted constitution. But fear and concomitant aggression are by no means given any methodological priority in Hobbes's treatment of the passions.¹⁸ Rather, he asserts that "[evil] things do not happen because people want them to happen." It is therefore misguided to attribute any priority of evil to nature or human beings. On the contrary, they are naturally inclined to peace. It is true that war is to be found in humankind's natural condition, and the causes of war, in human nature. But he directly denies that war comes about from an inherent desire to choose evil. What then explains the peculiar problem that war poses for human beings—a problem that is more radical than the conflict of the natural animal world in that it indicates not so much a predominance of actual conflict but the "known disposition thereto"?¹⁹

The reason Hobbes's materialism requires above all the rejection of the "free will" is because it cannot account for this situation, the evil of warfare. In the beginning of the *Leviathan* he argues that *all* human thought, conceived as either "reason" or "faith" originates in sense. What Hobbes calls the passions are the conventional names for specific types of bodily motion. He writes that the "Thoughts of man," every "Representation or Appearance" in the mind, are all to be traced back to sense—namely, a certain "pressure" that "causeth there a resistance, or counter-pressure, or endeavor of the heart, to deliver itself."²⁰ These "small beginnings of Motion" are called "Appetite," or "Desire," when we move in toward its object, and "Aversion" when we are repulsed. But they are called "Love" and "Hate" to the extent we form a conviction about how we ought to act with regard to these objects (what Hobbes calls our "manners"). Reason, therefore, is also a passion. Hobbes writes that "the thoughts, are to the Desires, as Scouts, and Spies, to range abroad, and find the way to the things Desired."²¹ The will, lacking any hypothesis of a faculty

18. Hobbes himself says that he does not intend his slogan, "... as it is now used, to countenance, either the barbarous state of men in power, towards their inferiors; or to encourage men of low degree, to a sawcie behavior towards their betters." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 10.

19. *Ibid.*, 88.

20. *Ibid.*, 13.

21. *Ibid.*, 53.

independent of sense, can only designate the “last Appetite, or Aversion, immediately adhering to the action,” only one small motion in a series, the one that happens to precede the “act”—the external motion caused by the smaller internal motion.²² However, this does not mean that reason is simply subordinate to passions. While reason cannot be taken as a distinct, spontaneous faculty that “roams free” beyond every material constraint, it is a particular passion, distinct from the rest. Like any passion it can be distinguished only by its particular effects. Thus, Hobbes specifically rejects the definition of the “Schooles,” which splits the notion of will into two—one which is an accident of a body (i.e., a motion), and one which is rational (a non-moving origin of motion). The problem with such a supposition is that it renders incoherent the entire account of the passions, because there would be no way to give an account for a conflict in passions—they would always be subject to reason and there would be no evil. As Hobbes states, it would be impossible to conceive of a “Voluntary Act against Reason.”²³

Now, all the passions are eventually grouped by Hobbes according to whether they “incline men to peace” or against it.²⁴ But reason is excluded from this categorization, even though Hobbes clearly associates reason with peace more than any other passion. Modesty, for example, naturally disinclines individuals to pursue violent means to any end. But their ability to do so is always relative to their individual constitution and their circumstances. There is no guarantee that in any given milieu there will be a high enough percentage of modest enough individuals to successfully form a covenant. Indeed, Hobbes argues that “vain-glory” predominates because in the condition of nature modesty is simply weakness. Thus, until the passion of reason prevails, even the most diffident must choose war or die. One seeks glory because glory both signifies and produces security, which is to say, peace. This explains the strange duality of the first law of nature, in which Hobbes seems to claim that human beings are both inclined to peace and coerced into war by reason:

22. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 44.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 90.

And consequently it is a precept, or generall rule of Reason, That every man, ought to endeavor Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of Warre. The first branch of which Rule, containineth the first, and Fundamentall Law of Nature; which is, to seek peace and follow it. The second, the summe of the Right of Nature; which is, By all means we can, to defend ourselves.

This duality is reflected in reason's two jurisdictions: it can operate "in foro interno" and "in foro externo." Living in a world controlled by glory, individuals, whose passionate modesty would lead them to live in peace, are constrained by circumstance to adapt, and become fierce.²⁵ So, there are at least two kinds of motion that Hobbes's refers to as "reason," a peaceful reason that seeks the only universal passion, and an evil reason that carries out war. Reason, the passion for peace, leads to war when it is externalized.

The explanation for this perversion of reason is not desire, but speech. First of all, speech, not reason, is what sets humans apart from animals, because it makes their condition of war more necessary and more brutal. The great use of speech is that, through the use of settled definitions of words (which are only particular motions), it communicates goals, and reason in common. This can of course be used as a means of war, but more fundamentally, Hobbes discovers in speech the *origin* of war. This is because speech can also be *abused*, as when the same words are used to refer to different objects, in other words to lie, even in definitions themselves that are therefore contradictory and lack any possible object.²⁶ This allows the other passions to incite acts against reason. There are two cases when speech, otherwise the greatest and defining asset of human beings, becomes destructive to our reason. The first is what Hobbes calls "insignificant" or "senseless" speech. He gives several examples of this, but as we saw the idea of a "free will" is particularly singled out by him as an absurdity. The special danger of this abuse of speech for Hobbes is its effect on civil law. While its use can and often does serve instrumental reason (although it can also

25. "For he that should be modest, and tractable, and perform all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man els should do so, should but make himselfe a prey to others, and procure his own certain ruine, contrary to the ground of the Laws of Nature, which tend to Natures preservation." Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 110.

26. *Ibid.*

result from simple faulty memory), it can never serve peace, which is the object of reflexive reason and the fundamental law of nature. As we saw in Augustine, a peculiar implication of the doctrine of the free will was to render all temporal, or civil, law evil, and thus in Hobbes' view it is "no wonder if it produce sedition and change of government" because it allows them to "mistake that for their private inheritance, and birth-right which is the right of the public only."²⁷ The case of insignificant speech underlies the possibility of a second abuse, "inconstant" speech: speech that mistakes a private end for a universal one. Inconstant speech primarily indicates any discourse that depends on an idea of good and evil. When any particular law is described as intrinsically good (usually in opposition to the prevailing, evil law), this surreptitiously presents the particular desire of the promoter as the desire of all. But Hobbes himself, of course, precisely describes peace as the desire of all. Hobbes's account of reason is by his own definition an abuse of speech.

In order to account for this, Hobbes claims that his argument can only be taken as "counsel," not "command." Hobbes defines counsel as something said to someone for the good of that person, not for the good of the counselor, whereas the speaker that *commands* refers to things that are good for them.²⁸ But on what basis can this counsel be distinguished from that of the classical schools? As speech, reason necessarily takes the form of something inconstant. This is why even good counsel can't establish the laws of peace *in foro externo*, because a temporary alliance of ends can never be maintained without the backing of force.²⁹ This is possibly the most fundamental ground for Hobbes's argument for absolute sovereignty. The legitimacy of this authority is not established by the content of the law, the idea of any particular good, but lawfulness as such—peace. The sovereign serves as the necessary referent for the language of good and evil that precedes even philosophy itself, as reasoning about avoiding evil.

It is because of the possibility for the abuse of speech that despite his reputation for having secularized the problem of evil, Hobbes comes to much the same conclusion that Augustine does. In fact, Hobbes doubles down on the identity of religion and reason, and in doing so, leaves no

27. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 143.

28. *Ibid.*, 169.

29. *Ibid.*, 111.

room for even the technical, though fateful, separation of salvation and sovereignty. The sovereign, though mortal in nature, must be a god by decree. Reason is itself the “seed in man” that gives rise to religion as much as it does the commonwealth.³⁰ What distinguishes religion from reason is that religion contains not only counsel, but also the commands of the deity, an “invisible power.” As the frontispiece to the original edition clearly depicts, sovereign authority unites secular and ecclesiastical authority by transcending both. The sovereign himself wields the sword, the guarantor of peace, in the right hand, and the crozier of the Church, the guarantor of reason, in the left. Only together do they constitute real, lasting power. The biblical quotation across the top of the frontispiece reads, “There is no power on earth to be compared to him.” Sovereign commands neither persuade by virtue of sharing a common good, nor alone by threat of force, but by preventing the perversion of speech.

The perversion of reason: Kant

The concept of perversion that is the most relevant for Hegel’s context is found in Kant. Kant is well-known to have remarked that reading Hume woke him from his dogmatic slumber, but in some ways his account of evil responds more directly to the challenge of Hobbes’s materialism than Hume’s empiricism, which he rather appropriates and systematizes. Kant explicitly follows Hume in accepting the compatibility of causation and free will, but as structures imposed on experience by consciousness, not things in themselves. This is why, initially, the Copernican Revolution in philosophy can look somewhat like a regression when it comes to the question of morality. The entire edifice again appears to revolve around the free act of the will, still defined according to its opposition to material incentives, what Kant calls “alien causes.”³¹ On the other hand, because the will is treated as a mere concept with no reality independent of consciousness, Kant is much more concerned with Hobbes’s problem than Augustine’s. His fundamental aim is to establish that “morality is no phantom” of the religious imagination—insignificant speech that

30. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 71.

31. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 52.

only veils the reality of power. He attempts to accomplish this by radicalizing Hobbes's expanded reliance on reason to realize the good.³² Augustine saw the human will was inherently perverse as long as it lacked direct guidance of the eternal law. Reason's only role was to articulate the need for submission, either to God's will or the temporal law. With the Reformation, the practical distinction between these choices decomposes, and Hobbes warned that, without a single unquestionable earthly authority, reason would be incapable of translating the desire for peace into a law. In contrast to rational "proofs" of a divine moral order, or the purely secular order of peace, Kant's "transcendental hypothesis" stipulates that any external dependence of reason is treated as the true source of evil, and the autonomous internal existence of reason the only universal good. As a result, the foundation of his system intertwines reason and morality so closely that there is no longer any intelligible distinction between them. In other words, it is already in Kant that a complete identity between philosophy and religion is established.

Initially, the idea of this identity is formulated as an attack on positive religion. And until the end of his life, Kant denied that morality "for its own sake" requires the external support of the church.³³ Indeed, Kant always insists that any incentive to do good, including the promise of faith to provide "true" or genuine happiness, is just as corruptive of the truly moral principle as any other. This is because it is not enough to freely choose to act such that one is "in conformity with duty" (*pflichtmäßig*). One must act "from duty" (*aus Pflicht*)—one must want to act morally. Furthermore, we must also want to be moral for the right reasons. "It is very beautiful," Kant writes, "to do good to human beings from love of them and from sympathetic benevolence, or to be just from love of order; but this is not yet the genuine moral maxim."³⁴ A moral act by its very definition cannot be a transaction. The rewards promised by religious faith, by the very fact of their immense value, pose one of the greatest threats to moral principles: "Duty and what is owed

32. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 51.

33. Immanuel Kant, *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, Kants gesammelte Schriften, Volume 6 (Walter de Gruyter & Co. / Predecessors, 1902), 3 (hereafter cited as RGV, English translation from Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (Harper / Brothers, 1960)).

34. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, Kant's gesammelte Schriften, Volume 5 (G. Reimer, 1913), 5:82 (hereafter cited as KpV, English translation from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2015)).

(*Schuldigkeit*) are the only names that we must give to our relation to the moral law.”³⁵ We must not let ourselves get carried away even by our duty, lest we come to do it too gladly. It should never be agreeable for us to do our duty because the object of duty is never an object of the senses but only ever of reason. Once pleasure begins to creep into our motivations, they can no longer be considered moral or free.

However, Kant eventually must face the problem of how a purely rational law can determine the will without the supplement of either divine love or secular fear. Practical reason, unlike reason in its purely theoretical function, requires not only that we form a concept of the good but that we actually accomplish it. In the *Critiques*, Kant already has recourse to the postulate of freedom in order to motivate moral action. It must be possible for a purely spontaneous power to intervene in an otherwise continuous series of causes.³⁶ In his third antinomy, Kant draws on the cosmological proof for God’s existence to demonstrate the indispensability of such a spontaneous power. This thesis is not contradicted by reason, but rather the laws of the understanding, the principles by which we comprehend the physical world. Insofar as these laws, taken on their own, lead inexorably to absurdities they must strictly speaking be considered *irrational*. Kant thus posits an identity between the world of things in themselves and reason *alone*. But the problem remains that all actions must appear in sense. Even the disinterested recognition that we have a duty must appear as a psychological feeling that we ought to obey it if we are to act. Kant calls this feeling “respect,” and its value lies in compelling us to subdue our understanding, which otherwise risks becoming identified with our conception of ourselves as agents. He concludes that “the moral law unavoidably humiliates every human being.”³⁷ Moral actions are motivated by the *feeling of humiliation*.

Of course, this conclusion would appear to contradict Kant’s insistence on the practical subject’s autonomy if it becomes, as it must at a certain point, a source of enjoyment or pleasure. For as Kant states, “Once one has laid self-conceit aside and allowed practical influence to that

35. KpV, 5:82.

36. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that this means any kind of pleasure whatsoever can be *compatible* with moral actions, but to conceive of an action as good, the cause must be the free will.

37. KpV, 77.

respect, one can in turn never get enough of contemplating the majesty of the law.”³⁸ This pleasurable aspect of humiliation is what constitutes a moral desire. As such it must be “regarded as a subjective ground of activity—that is, as the incentive to compliance with the law...”³⁹ In other words, we must have an “interest” in acting morally. But this means something entirely different than the *self-interest* that can also exert an influence on the will. For Kant, the latter is really a misnomer, because self-interest isn’t really in one’s interest at all. It is imposed on us by genetics or the effects of our environment, and thus remains external to us. The only true “self-interest” is rational: obedience to the moral law. To the extent the latter is itself a product only of reason, it is compatible with the autonomy of the agent. Nonetheless, it is still an interest that appears in the form of a psychological cause. Its postulated noumenal basis remains supersensible and thus impossible to discern by either the actor or the spectator of the act. The actor will only have the feeling of their own lowness as proof of their fundamental morality, and as a matter of empirical psychology they will naturally take pleasure from it as much as the most heinous criminal takes pleasure in their crimes, and in some cases considerably more so.⁴⁰

In this way, the perfect identity of rational desire with the good will leads Kant to one of the basic problems of his moral philosophy, that of differentiating enthusiasm (*Enthusiasmus*) from fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*). Kant writes that the former predicates an “immediate and extraordinary communion with a higher nature,” something which it can’t possibly have rational certainty about, whereas the latter simply indicates “the state of the mind which is inflamed beyond the appropriate degree by some principle, whether it be by the maxim of patriotic virtue, or of friendship, or of religion, without involving the illusion of a supernatural community.”⁴¹ On the one hand, according to the terms of his own concept of moral duty, neither of these impulses should be considered

38. KpV, 77.

39. KpV, 78.

40. Again, this means that the presence of such pleasure is neither proof nor disproof of the action’s ultimate morality for Kant. As Henry Allison observes, the necessity that we remain to some degree “agnostic” about the source of our motivation does not mean that it is impossible to conceive of a difference between those actions undertaken out of duty and those undertaken out of interest, only that the ideal of a completely disinterested action is not possible in practice. Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary* (OUP, 2011), Ch. 4.

41. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, trans. P. Frierson and P. Guyer, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 57.

lawful or rational, and hence, neither are they strictly speaking good. And almost everywhere one finds Kant talking about taking an interest in the law, one also finds warnings about the dangers of fanaticism. On the other hand, however, Kant often acknowledges that enthusiasm is a natural and inevitable part of moral action, such that “nothing great in the world has been done without it.” In other words, there is an appropriate degree to which the agent should expect to feel a pleasure of being good, and even if this degree is exceeded, it can still produce actions that are not only consistent with universal ends, but some of the most effective and admirable feats of which human beings are capable. Enthusiasm can threaten to become a distraction from duty, but as long as it remains based in a rational interest, the end is rational. Fanaticism, meanwhile, is the destruction of duty, because it places the pleasure of the action in the place of the ends. Desire for the good must be mediated by principles. While fanaticism can and does invoke principles, because it is fundamentally motivated by an unmediated *feeling* of righteousness, it can never be good, even when it leads to actions that are in accord with those principles. Such accordance must be seen as contingent, since in different circumstances pursuit of this pleasure could lead the agent to commit the most horrible crimes. That is, fanaticism by its very nature privileges the authority of the particular agent against the universal principles in whose name they might act and corrupts the character.

But Kant’s rigorous distinction between these two opposite kinds of moral feeling merely reformulates the one he makes between a rational “interest” and a material “incentive.” In the practical world, these are both simply psychological causes—it remains impossible to positively distinguish an enthusiastically good act from a fanatical. Late in his life, this concern leads him back to the question of morality, now in explicit connection with religion. He comes to see it as defining a “radical innate evil in human nature.”⁴² Precisely insofar as reason must become practical (i.e., pleasurable), it involves an unavoidable “propensity” on the part of the moral agent to mistake this pleasure for reason itself, fanaticism for enthusiasm. It is “inextirpable” because without it, the subject could not act in a moral way. Kant thus speaks of a “perversity of the heart”: our desire to

42. RGV, 32.

do good always contains within it the tendency to mistake a fanatical inclination to *be* good with an enthusiastic interest in the good. But it is reason itself that commands that we submit to the pleasure of moral action. Thus, Kant concludes that reason, while capable of distinguishing the structure of a moral action from an immoral one, was not capable of distinguishing its own motivation, and thus stood in constant danger of perversion *by its very nature*. Although Kant consistently argues that religion can exacerbate this problem by emphasizing feeling and ritual over individual conscience, it would always be necessary, because “we cannot very well make obligation (moral constraint) intuitive for ourselves without thereby thinking of *another’s* will—namely God’s.”⁴³ Even a perfectly good conscience needs a sensible supplement to prevent fanaticism and promote enthusiasm, without attempting to interfere with the moral subject’s own innate practical reason. Reason has a need for religion, but it has to be a religion of reason. Religion must constrain reason, but those limits themselves must be rational.

Kant presents the reasons for this constraint for this most clearly in the “Preface” to the first edition of *Religion*. There he writes that “morality leads ineluctably to religion” because ultimately it requires a concept of “a final end to all things.” This is not due to a defect with morality as such, but human nature. While it is possible, actually necessary, that moral duties are determined by the pure application of practical reason, the exercise of even the good will is not possible without an end that serves as an “object of inclination.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere Kant typically argues as if human beings are able to act morally without the guidance of religious ideas; he implies that they may even be morally pernicious.⁴⁵ And here he still insists that formally speaking there is no problem because “morality requires no material determining ground of free choice.” If human beings were purely rational, then no sovereign would be necessary. But they are also sensuous creatures determined by the laws of cause and effect, and in fact in their appearance to others *and themselves* they are only sensuous: “Hence the distinction between a good man and one who is evil cannot lie in the

43. Immanuel Kant, *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 229.

44. RGVI, 21.

45. Immanuel Kant, “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

difference between the incentives which they adopt into their maxim (not in the content of the maxim), but rather must depend upon subordination (the form of the maxim), i.e., which of the two incentives he makes the condition of the other.”⁴⁶ Both the fanatic and the enthusiastic agent can act in the interest of the same moral maxim, and furthermore, they can be motivated both by the, technically speaking, selfish pleasure of being good and respect for the law. The only way to distinguish between the two kinds of will is to make desire, whether moral or immoral, follow obedience. In other words, since human beings are not naturally good, they must be made good, which is to say free, by subordinating one set of psychological inclinations to another.⁴⁷ This is not a matter of spontaneous or even autonomous action but simply the external suppression of instinctive self-regard. When it is restrained to this purpose, rather than being allowed to specify what counts as a moral end, the Christian religion is ideally suited for this subordination of desire.

In a move that reveals the extent to which the spectre of Hobbes is haunting Kant’s thinking at this point, Kant introduces the concepts of an “ethical state of nature” and an “ethical commonwealth” that echoes Hobbes’s *political* deployment of this distinction. In both the political and ethical state of nature, “each individual proscribes the law for himself, and there is no external law to which he, along with all others, recognizes himself to be subject.”⁴⁸ The function of every state is to lift human beings out of a political state of nature into a commonwealth by effort of some external force, or the fear of it. Hobbes thought that as long as there was a legal order, reason would be able to achieve its aims. Kant realizes that this is not enough because reason itself has the tendency to become perverted into fanaticism, and this perversion eventually destroys peace. Religion is required to secure the authority of the state, but not (only) through force and fear. Citizens of such a state remain, Kant says, in an ethical state of nature insofar as their behavior is imposed on them and not their own. Faith in that context, far from making human beings more moral, is simply another tool of evil. “Just as the juridical state of nature is one of war of every

46. RGV, 29.

47. This indicates the sometimes neglected importance of *character* in Kant’s moral theory. For more on this see G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant’s Conception of Moral Character: The “Critical” Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

48. RGV, 95.

man against every other, so too is the ethical state of nature one in which the good principle, which resides in each man, is continually attacked by the evil which is found in him and also in everyone else.”⁴⁹ Its free use therefore undercuts the state rather than making it more secure.

To found a truly ethical commonwealth, Kant now concedes that what is required is a church, but a church of a moral faith. By this he means a church whose articles of faith are identical to the parameters of reason, and whose institutional form is therefore identical to the form of the state. This church performs a crucial preparatory function by teaching citizens to place more value in “performing God’s commands,” that is in obeying, than in individual inclination, though everything they do will inevitably be caused by such a motivation. In order to cultivate the feeling of respect and subordinate all other inclinations to it, the church of reason operates above all through humiliation, the production of humility: “For pure religious faith is concerned *only* with what constitutes the essence of reverence for God, namely, obedience.”⁵⁰ But unlike Hobbes’s sovereign, there can be nothing arbitrary in the commandments of such a church. Any particular end that it imposes beyond the production of humility would invalidate its rational authority and regress to simple tyranny. To achieve this, even and especially the agents of this state must submit themselves to the same standards of humility. The only legitimate ends of an ethical commonwealth are those that emerge in and through this universal subordination of everything particular. This is the vocation of the “invisible church.” But this task is impossible without the aid of a universal, visible church that produces the habits of mind required to enter the ethical commonwealth. Fear is not enough to achieve this end, since fear does not proceed by subordinating self-regard, but in fact by reinforcing it. The true moral center of the visible church is therefore *love*: “The highest goal of moral perfection of finite creatures—a goal to which man can never completely attain—is love of the law.”⁵¹ The “visible church” by contrast is the empirico-historical, and thus always imperfect but necessary servant of the former. The meaning of love has this ineluctably sectarian register: it fosters enthusiasm for the *form* of law itself as absolute, while discouraging fanaticism for any

49. RGV, 96–97.

50. RGV, 105.

51. RGV, 145.

particular law. The aim of love is to prevent reason from seizing authority, and thereby perverting itself.

Kant's critical view of ontotheology is therefore not a critique of theology—or of identity. Rather, it presents a radical post-ontotheological concept of identity. It does this by expunging all positive relation between reason and faith, leaving only their purely negative (i.e. “transcendental”) function with absolute, unreserved legitimacy. This negative identity of faith with reason is reflected in the fact that the index of truth for both is the same: absence of particularity. Just as the only measure of truly rational (as opposed to merely calculative) thinking is the absence of a particular end, the measure of a truly devout faith is the absence of any particular belief. More importantly, this identity is the measure of morality. Reason is perverted into error when it takes its ideas as constitutive, and faith is perverted into sin when it takes its rituals and practices, or even its articles of faith, as *good* in themselves. Just as the *noumenon* is only hypothesized, never grasped, the good is only hoped for, never promised. Nonetheless, rituals of faith are as indispensable as the regulative ideals of reason. Thus, if Kant's last writings on religion constitute an attack on the Christian church, it is not an attack on the Christian religion, and in fact his argument culminates in a spectacularly sweeping apologia for its role in the ethical “Kingdom of God.” If this apologia lacks specifics about the institutional structure, rituals and doctrines of the rational religion, this is not a simple oversight, but a requirement of his philosophical insights into the fundamental structure of its moral basis. The positive role for the visible church of encouraging the subordination of inclination to the interest of law through various “symbolic” rituals, none of which are offered as a guarantor of morality itself, is secondary to a much more important negative mandate. Namely, it must act as a moral police force that prevents and extinguishes the much stronger conviction of *fanaticism* (i.e., religious faith) that posits universally valid ends-in-themselves. It is a radical politicization of negative theology. Its conclusion is that reason cannot deliver us into salvation, but it can provide the necessary conditions of deliverance, in the form of a moral community of enlightened citizens, which is to say skeptics. What Kant calls the “material aspect of religion” can never fall within the view of a philosophical account of morality, and indeed must not be allowed

to.⁵² Instead, it is the “teachings of history” that must be taken as authoritative when it comes to the vital task of cultivating moral character, of which inclinations of human psychology must be subordinated. Post-Kantian philosophy faces the spectre of precisely the demon that Kant claimed critical philosophy had exorcised for good: individual feeling.⁵³ In response, Kant adopts the fundamental strategy of Christian philosophy of invoking an identity between reason and faith—an identity his intent is otherwise always to bracket by means of the transcendental hypothesis, in order to conserve the absolute necessity of good and evil. If Kant marks the end of ontotheology in this tradition, this is because he radicalizes this identity to the point where any real difference between good and evil becomes impossible to imagine. It is a purely formal concept.

For Augustine, the only guide in the “worldly city,” cutoff from the holy city of God by its preference for and dependence on sensible desires, were the sensible teachings of the Catholic church. Despite abandoning any reference to a world beyond sense, Hobbes’s attempt to isolate and eradicate abuses of speech is made to rest on the abuse of disguising a command as counsel. Kant finally acknowledges, however belatedly and reluctantly, that the concept of reason implied by the identity thesis—namely the faculty that imagines ends it cannot attain—is itself responsible for the very coherence of the concept of evil. His attempt to therefore restrict reason to a *transcendental* hypothesis only postpones and condemns in advance the subject’s perverse identification of its reason with either individual inclination or institutional norms.

52. Kant, *Kant: The Metaphysics of Morals*, 230.

53. *ibid.* Arguably, Kant confronts this problem even more directly in the *Third Critique*, where he investigates the idea of the subjective necessity of a representation of the world as a purposive whole, even if such a representation is only symbolic. There too this necessity leads to an insolvable antinomy. On the one hand, it demands a particular representation of the moral law to which reason could thereby subordinate representations of “mere” sense, manifesting a kind of “love” for the very form of lawfulness as such. Viewed in this way, religion ought to be the guarantor of morality’s empirical existence. On the other hand, the formal structure of the law means that this representation could never be dictated by reason in advance, and any external actions prescribed by a church to foster such love could not be in themselves moral. As a result, reason itself had to maintain a skeptical comportment toward the content of the law, prohibiting the (synthetic *a priori*) deduction of any principles of religion. Instead, their formulation had to be left to the spontaneous operation of judgment on the part of the individual moral agent, a judgment which could only be attuned to moral interests by religious training. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 228.

Absolute non-identity

Some sort of identity of reason and religion, and a concept of its perversion, is a vital component of Christian moral philosophy. In the end, it might be possible to locate the very essence of this tradition in the principle of an identity of reason and religion since the consistency of this principle defines its unity since the earliest beginnings of the Christian church, and its revisions coincide with radical transformations like the Reformation (Hobbes) and the Enlightenment (Kant). Kant's contribution to the ascendance of what might be called "negative political theology" is particularly significant for Hegel and his interpreters. Its influence on Hegel from his earliest writings is incontrovertible, and it has served for the basic framework in which Hegel's comments on religion are understood systematically. This has meant that its ambiguities, which in many ways Hegel exaggerates, have given rise to vastly different views of Hegel's own work—as either a kind of crypto-atheism (insofar as it is read in the light of Kant's skepticism) or an apologia for theocracy (insofar as it proceeds from his preference for Christianity). In other words, the debate hinges on the fact that the most important feature of Kant's philosophy of religion has been uncritically imported to Hegel's view—that the only legitimate, absolute use of reason is negative, despite the fact that Hegel will directly challenge that view. What was open to question was only ever whether Hegel pushed Kant to the conclusion that even this invocation of the absolute was hollow ritual, or conversely (as Schelling held), radicalized the identity even further, beyond what reason could sustain, into an abstract mysticism of reason: a thoughtless perversion, or a perversion of thought. The first answer results in an interpretation of Hegel that extends from Feuerbach, Strauss, and the other Young Hegelians to the more recent "non-metaphysical" reading. The second, more traditional approach is still affirmed today by critics and defenders of Hegel's continued appeal to a specifically religious "form" of truth alienated from reason, but somehow functioning as its basis.

My task in the next chapter will be to examine this legacy, including Hegel's most well-known adversaries, the Romantics. I will examine how the basic axiom of this "negative identity" emerges again and again in interpretations of Hegel, from the earliest clashes between Old

and Young Hegelians to the contemporary ongoing and apparently irreconcilable disagreement between metaphysical and non-metaphysical readings. I will attempt to show how each reading is based on a strategic resolution of the fundamental, unresolved antinomy Kant's philosophy of religion presents—between the thesis that the positive content of the law of a moral commonwealth comes from its institutions and traditions, and the antithesis that the positive content can only come from the individual moral convictions of its members. Then, it will be possible to see how Hegel's well-known critique of this aspect of Kant's philosophy, which he calls simply "morality," sets the stage for his own view of religion and an entirely different understanding of its relation to philosophy and the state, one in which perversion is no longer the enemy of morality but its essence.

3 Romanticism and the antinomy of morality

The law of feeling against the feeling of law

In the previous chapter, I examined how the metaphysics of identity was inherent in the history of the moral concept of perversion. This includes even the peculiar formulation found in Kant, despite his reputation as the Enlightenment's quintessential secular thinker. In fact, it is only with Kant that philosophy and faith actually attain a complete identity in the consciousness of the moral subject, insofar as the practical operation of a fully autonomous *faculty* of reason was founded and protected by the institution of a universal, negative *religion* of reason, the sole aim of which was to prevent fanaticism, the root of all evil. Unlike other, "positive" religions, the role Kant envisioned for this state church was not instruction in any particular doctrine, but the universal idea of the common good. As an idea of reason, such an idea could not be represented directly, however, and so Kant's concept of a moral or rational religion introduces a particular dilemma. The only choice seemed to be to grab the bull of radical evil by the horn of either institutional authority or individual feeling. Either choice would be essentially reductive in strategy. And thus, both would require a radical transformation of the nature of reason in terms of its relation to the "absolute," considering both seem to be ineluctably particular.

Hegel's own philosophical system is sometimes defined in contrast to the way his contemporaries and erstwhile allies like Schelling resolve this dilemma. Namely, the Romantics, generally speaking, favor making personal convictions the cornerstone of morality, and thereby vindicating what is widely seen as the core value of Enlightenment individualism, while Hegel has typically

been characterized as divinizing some specific set of norms and institutions exemplified in the Christian republics of Europe, hence crushing it. This interpretation of Hegelianism inherits the Kantian feeling of respect for the law, whereas Romanticism makes the rule of feeling into the only law. Although both perspectives at least implicitly apply a transcendent status to positive content, Hegel's approach has drawn more critical scrutiny for its apparent abandonment of individuality and difference. This is in turn associated with an inflated view of reason's power to grasp the nature of being in anything beyond an obscure and fragmentary way.¹

Schelling's criticism of Hegel's concept of identity on the grounds that it excessively rationalizes the absolute is exemplary of this opposition. Though Schelling himself affirms an identity between thought and being, he conceives it as the unthinkable, "living ground" of thought—a mystical power, not a metaphysical essence. Even if each individual "is the world writ small," they are not so small as to be exhausted in the categories of logic through which they interpret the world.² Schelling's specific complaints against Hegel are representative of a much more general opposition that Hegel also acknowledged, between his philosophical system and a system at least implicitly operative in the thought of the Romantic movement as a whole, in which the individual, the state, and the church are given profoundly different roles in the name of the ideas of critique and its attendant virtues as proclaimed by Kant: scientific progress and perpetual peace. Though Hegel and the Romantics did not address each other directly in print, evidence of their mutual antipathy is well-documented in letters and lectures. For Hegel's part, probably the most recurrent theme is his criticism of the beautiful soul. It certainly features strongly in the *Phenomenology*. In fact, the entire structure of the "Morality" chapter, widely associated with Kant's practical philosophy, can be more systematically understood as a polemical alternative to the Romantic *response* to Kant.³

1. This is especially clear in Schlegel's short essay "On Incomprehensibility" that he offered as a pseudo-philosophical justification for the themes and method for flagship romantic journal *Athenaeum*. J. Schulte-Sasse and H. Horne, "On Incomprehensibility," in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

2. F. W. J. Schelling, *The Ages of the World*, ed. Jason M. Wirth (State University of New York Press, 2000).

3. For this argument I rely particularly on the work of Jeffrey Reid in Jeffrey Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

It turns out that the influence of Schelling's portrait of Hegel as a 'fanatic' of reason sustains an entire legacy of Hegel interpretation, beginning with the schism between Hegel's earliest followers into the so-called Left/Young Hegelians or Right/Old Hegelians—a debate that never questioned the role of religion in Hegel's system but only its value. The former argued that the order and cohesion of even a rational society depended on the unity afforded by a common faith, whereas the latter argued that freedom and reason were sufficient principles on which to build a good society. Both accepted the basic premise of Schelling's criticism that Hegel viewed religion as a sort of supplement to an otherwise autonomous reason. The Young Hegelians tried to recuperate an explicitly liberal and secular reason while the Old Hegelians simply considered this no criticism at all. This debate was revived in the middle of the last century in the opposition between "traditional" inheritors of the conservative interpretation, and a revisionist "non-metaphysical" view, in what has been called the "Hegel Renaissance."⁴ The last of these interpretations updated the Young Hegelian position by attempting to confine the relevance of the categorical structure of thinking as laid out in the *Science of Logic* to a specific historical, discursive context. This view responds to Schelling's criticism by allowing for an "outside" of this kind of thought not comprehensible to it. It radicalizes Kant's transcendental hypothesis by eliminating all claims to the objective necessity of this thinking. For this reason this view has also been called the neo-Kantian reading of Hegel. In contrast, the traditional interpretation reentrenches Hegel's apparent ontotheological claim that reason manifests a transcendent principle operating in and through the world.

To some extent, the major differences in these approaches to Hegel can be indexed by their preferred source material. Typically, the traditional interpretation consults a more comprehensive selection of writings, and regarding religion it relies on both very early essays and later unpublished lectures, both of which feature comparatively clear presentations of ideas that are not out of step with contemporary views on religion. These sources strongly suggest a shift over time from Enlightenment secularism toward an embrace of the Christian church. In contrast, the neo-Kantian interpretation focuses more on the core published texts: the *Science of Logic* and especially the

4. Beiser, *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*.

Phenomenology of Spirit, both of which offer much less systematic analysis of religion. The great exception to this is, of course, the latter's "Religion" chapter, which neo-Kantian readers rarely even attempt to fully account for. It has thus been suggested that the question of which interpretation is more "correct" hinges almost entirely on whether one is more interested in a fidelitous historical study or a cogent systematic analysis. This is the argument made by, for example, Frederick Beiser, a prominent advocate of the traditional, Christian view.⁵ Because of their use of different sources, religion *per se* has been somewhat sidelined in recent conversations, with the result that it is no longer even a point of contention. Both sides accept that the religious writings continue the tradition of Christian ontotheology, and so their debate can be framed as the question of whether there is any value in these texts for post-Kantian philosophy and what it might be. Thus, although they certainly disagree about its significance, both sides agree that Hegel himself drew a parallel between the mutual claims to (absolute) truth in philosophy and religion. In this way, they have come to argue that Hegel took consciousness to consist in two separate but equally legitimate modes of cognition: logic, reason, or most accurately simply thought (*Denken*) and representation (*Vorstellen*)—the sensuous images and mythic stories that comprise the central, material institution of a particular faith. If this parity may be described as a type of identity (Frederick Beiser in fact calls it simply the "identity thesis"), then it is surely one of the most fundamental, paradigmatic manifestations of Hegel's so-called "identity philosophy" because it makes even the consciousness of something beyond reason proof of reason's absolute validity. The fact that this interpretative consensus centers precisely on the systematic role of religion suggests a deeper rift that pervades all of Hegel's thinking, the decisive ambiguity of which is indicated by the sheer range of views that accommodate it.

Certainly, it must be admitted this idea is presented more directly in traditional views of Hegel as evidence for his concern with purportedly ineluctable metaphysical considerations. It is not easy to see how Hegel's promotion of religion could be continuous with Kant's project in the *Critiques*. However, Kant's late turn toward religion already foreshadows many of the major themes

5. Beiser, *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*.

of Hegel's neo-Kantian readers, especially how the church can function simply as a guarantor of the basic requirements of a rational society, and reflect the distinctive importance of the principles on which such a society is founded. Granted, this interpretation largely (though not entirely⁶) disregards Hegel's comments on religion, but ironically, one of the most significant methodological implications of positing an identity between religion and philosophy is that it becomes possible to raise and adequately address any problem in Hegel's work in *either* a philosophical or a religious register, completely independently of the other. It therefore offers the neo-Kantian interpretations crucial philosophical justification for selectively ignoring certain themes that present challenges to their approach. And it turns out that neither take on Hegel's view of religion escapes difficulties reconciling their preferred interpretation with the concept of identity they depend on. For the traditional reading, "separate but equal" roles for reason and faith would seem rather more in accord with secular politics than Christian theology. This issue seems especially pointed in the argument of the *Philosophy of Right*. If Hegel's personal Christianity was an important factor in his "mature viewpoint," as Beiser forcefully argues, why does he consistently criticize the role of the church as a social institution?⁷ Conversely, a revisionist reading must give an account of Hegel's repeated appeals to the "truth" of Christianity. What could possibly be absolute about Christianity's claim to universality if it is supposed to reflect the confinement of reason's claim to a specific historical context?

In this chapter, I will examine the general terms of this debate in order to show that, despite their obvious differences, contemporary disagreements about the "metaphysical" status of Hegel's work share an common view of his philosophy of religion. This origin of this view can be traced back to the early criticism of the relation between thought and being in Hegel's work expressed as an identity between philosophy and religion—namely, what Kant called ontotheology. I show that precisely because both sides can marshal convincing evidence depending on which of Hegel's texts are emphasized, each faces equally daunting challenges in reconciling this view with Hegel's own

6. See especially Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (2011),

7. In other words, why do we find Marx, in his otherwise wholly polemical reading of that text, praising Hegel on the sole point that he has "essentially completed" the criticism of religion? Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy Of Right*, 131.

work. Rather than try to moderate this debate, I will uncover how both sides come to rely on what seems to be such a problematic thesis in either case. Additionally, I will argue that their shared premise, informed more by this criticism of Hegel than his work taken as a whole, is undermined by Hegel's own criticism of the Romantics, especially Schleiermacher. Taking a cue from recent work on both Hegel and Romanticism, according to which the "Morality" chapter is a central text in this confrontation, I will show that this chapter implies a sweeping criticism of the Romantics—not simply, as it is usually construed, on the basis of the value they place in imagination and representation, but in the relation they posit between reason and feeling, which will turn out to exacerbate rather than resolve the problems in Kant's view. After defining the position of both general approaches to Hegel's philosophy of religion more precisely, I will show that neither is adequate to the critique Hegel levels against the Romantics, and especially against Schleiermacher. Following Hegel's deconstruction of the concept of morality in the *Phenomenology*, the crux of his position proves to be the need for the sublation of *both* subjective feeling and objective doctrine in order to overcome the antinomy of Kant's philosophy of religion. This argument does not correspond to but is *completed* by an alternate conception of religion that is treated systematically only in the eponymous chapter of the *Phenomenology*. This connection reveals that the question of evil as a kind of perversion is at the center of Hegel's turn to religion in the *Phenomenology* and indeed that religion should be approached as a logic of the perversion, not affirmation, of the positive content of norm, institutions, and law.

The antinomy of identity: two views of religion in Hegel

The identity thesis seems most directly implicated in metaphysical interpretations of Hegel. Alexandre Kojève offers one of its most provocative formulations. Though an influential proponent of a revised, humanist interpretation of Hegel, Kojève unreservedly identifies Hegel's greater system with the Christian tradition. When he writes that "Hegel becomes God by thinking or writing the *Logik*; or, if you like, it is by becoming God that he writes or thinks it,"⁸ Kojève

8. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 120.

is remarking on Hegel's undeviating affirmation that, just as religion has always sought to bring human beings close to God, the ultimate cause of all things, philosophy has pursued the reason that governs all things, what Hegel terms the "absolute." To the extent that he claims to have achieved this, just as Christianity has discovered the "one true God," it would seem undeniable that Hegel wrote and thought as a metaphysician, albeit a radical one, in the tradition of rational theology. After all, his earliest essays explicitly concern the rationality of Christianity and the relation between the truth of faith and philosophical knowledge. And the "mature" Hegel appears to give this thesis his explicit and prominent endorsement in the preface and opening sections of his *Encyclopedia*, where he writes simply that if one accepts that "God alone is the truth" then it is necessary to accept "the basic import [of religion and philosophy] is the same."⁹ He elaborates on this theme even more clearly and in more depth in his lectures, which would have been where the majority of his original audience would have been exposed to his ideas for the first time. There, in a section on "The relation of thought and representation," he goes so far as to observe that even writing philosophically *about* religion can give a misleading impression, insofar as it puts them in "a relationship of distinction":

[O]n the contrary it must be said that the content of philosophy, its need and interest, is wholly in common with that of religion. The object of religion, like that of philosophy, is the eternal truth, God and nothing but God and the explication of God. Philosophy is only explicating itself when it explicates religion, and when it explicates itself it is explicating religion.¹⁰

Just on this basis, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Hegel thought that some doctrines or articles of faith, at least, should be taken as true in some sense, even when they violate the laws of the understanding. Indeed, this was precisely the view of many in Hegel's earliest circle, the Old Hegelians. This alone might implicitly lend credence to the view, since they enjoyed the closest proximity to Hegel himself. The perfectly reasonable conclusion of this story is that Hegel,

9. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, trans. T. F. Garaets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (1991), 11.

10. Hegel, *Hegel: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, The Lectures of 1827*, 152.

increasingly over the course of his life and completely by the time he wrote the *Encyclopedia* and delivered his lectures on religion, endorsed the Christian church as the legitimate arbiter of rational truth.

The intention of this interpretation to more faithfully respect Hegel's own view, but the problem his works are also replete with distinctions between the content of philosophy and religion, usually unfavorable to the latter. In many places, often precisely where he appears to endorse Christianity, he maintains significant reservations about it. In his earliest and most explicitly theological writings, Hegel's criticism of Christianity is clearly the dominant motif. And his complaint is precisely that, while what is true *in* faith is to that extent part of the absolute, it does not actually attain *knowledge* of the absolute. Instead, his initial sympathies lie squarely on the side of Kant's rational reconstruction of morality independent of personal faith. The *Life of Jesus* is an obvious, almost naive attempt to portray the original sense and value of Christianity in purely rational terms. However, in a subsequent polemic that borders on blasphemy, Hegel is already presenting Jesus's mission as a failure. He argues that the very fact that the messiah could be convicted of a crime and put to death by the people he addressed demonstrates that he was not successful in lifting his people out of what he characterized as a kind spiritual slavery.¹¹ The Jewish religion, Hegel asserted, was antithetical to moral freedom because it consisted in positive doctrines rather than rational principles, and this is why even a faith consistent with reason could not influence them. Jesus, being still bound in a certain way to the tenants of that faith, had to present himself not simply as a rational spokesman of virtue, but also a holy person—someone whose wisdom was recommended by divine favor, without which it would be “mere speech.” In order to legitimate his own authority against that of the Pharisees, Jesus needed to refer to miracles and present himself as possessing supernatural powers. It is the account of his miracles, not reason or morality, that formed the basis of his earliest following, the rock on which the church was built. Hegel does concede apologetically that this could not have been the work or intention of Jesus himself, but rather his disciples.

11. G. W. F. Hegel, “The Positivity of the Christian Religion,” in *Early Theological Writings* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 70.

They were, in Hegel's words, "lacking any great store of spiritual energy of their own,"¹² unable to grasp the rational structure of morality, and consequently they sought only to repeat and faithfully pass down Jesus's moral commandments because they were convinced of his holiness, not because they understood the morality of his commandments. This meant that a *doctrine* became the basis for the *community*, rather than the reverse. According to Hegel's argument here, this is what sets the stage for the degradation of early Christianity into a "sect" (as opposed to a genuine living religion) and pits it against the implicit universality of the state.

It is not until a much later revision of this argument that Hegel actually appears to accept a need for Christianity, whatever its faults. Beiser boldly asserts that this essay, "The Spirit of Christianity," is "the stumbling block to all anti-metaphysical, atheistic and humanistic interpretations of Hegel," and that the "inability of left-wing Hegelians to explain this manuscript is blatant and embarrassing."¹³ Hegel appears to suddenly have found in Christianity not a defect in Kantian moral theory but the *remedy*. Namely, it affects a change in the character of the adherents necessary to make them receptive to reason. But this shift also affects what he values as "true" in Christianity: now precisely *not* its rational content, but rather the specific feeling it fosters in its adherents—namely "love." He contrasts it with the central pathos he attributes to Judaism, fear and submission, just as he had earlier contrasted Christianity and Judaism on the basis of their respective rationality and irrationality. He now writes that Christianity offers a morality of feeling that is "a human urge and so a human need," in comparison to various "Jewish sanctities," which he characterizes as bare commandments that must be obeyed.¹⁴ The value of Christianity is to promote feelings of attachment to the community, and by extension its institutions and laws, transforming them into spiritual rather than natural bonds. The object of this love may be represented in a sensuous and fantastical form, but what is important is not that this representation is itself rational but that it fosters a particular inclination consistent with rational duties. Hegel sees

12. Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," 81.

13. Beiser, *Hegel*, 132n20.

14. G. W. F. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity," in *Early Theological Writings* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 206.

this “reconciliation” as the essence of both Christianity and religion more generally.¹⁵ It establishes the concrete universality necessary for practical reason to function, in the form of an ethical community founded on bonds of feeling, not principles.

Although Hegel undeniably describes some kind of identity between religion and philosophy, the idea that religion and philosophy share the same content but take different forms emerges from an attempt to account for the most critical treatments of religion offered by Hegel. In order to explain the value of religion for reason in Hegel when religion and philosophy are apparently opposed in nature, the traditional interpretation actually borrows a very Kantian idea. It defines a sphere of operation for religion separate from reason but sharing its necessity for freedom—the realm of feeling. This can result in a slightly different picture, depending on how much confidence one ultimately thinks Hegel has in Christianity’s ability to accomplish this. Those inclined to give more weight to Hegel’s various criticisms of Christianity argue that religion can find parity (and thus reconciliation) with reason only as a new “civic religion” stripped of mystical doctrines of a transcendent God or future salvation and resurrection.¹⁶ Alternatively, another group, including Beiser, emphasizes the conformity of Christian symbology to the shapes of Hegel’s logic. According to this reading, Hegel’s argument calls more for a reform of Christianity than an entirely new religion.¹⁷ The identity thesis figures heavily in all of these interpretations, but Beiser defends it most directly. He asserts that a basic aim of Hegel’s philosophy is to “translate the representations of religion into conceptual form.”¹⁸ Thus, the idea that different forms of thinking can equally express the same content.

15. The fact that the concept of reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) continues to appear in Hegel’s accounts of the function of religion testifies to the lasting significance of the thinking in this essay.

16. Jean Wahl (Wahl, *Le Malheur de la Conscience Dans la Philosophie de Hegel*) and Jean Hyppolite (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit”*) both evince a similar perspective in their readings of the *Phenomenology*, and later on H. S. Harris makes the point explicit when he argues that from his earliest thoughts on the topic, Hegel was committed to the idea that religion as a “rational faith” was necessary for motivating the feeling of the absolute that rational knowledge could never produce on its own. See Harris, “Frankfurt 1797–1800: Phantasie und Herz.”

17. See also Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundation of Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion* (1990), and Peter Hodgson’s arguments in G. W. F. Hegel, *G. W. F. Hegel: Theologian Of The Spirit*, trans. Peter C. Hodgson (Bloomsbury Academic, 1997) and P. C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

18. Beiser, *Hegel*, 147.

The problem with this is that Hegel explicitly rejects the form-content distinction, precisely where he articulates the relation between religion and philosophy. Again citing the *Encyclopedia* Beiser argues that, in Hegel's view, "all the resistance to the identity of philosophy and religion, all the insistence on the separation of these realms... ultimately had its source in a paradigm of thinking as reflection." Now Hegel does arguably associate thinking with reflection, but Beiser's point is that his concept of reflection is not conceived as indifferent or unrelated to feeling, that is, they are *not conceived as independent faculties*. There is rather a "continuum" of thinking that stretches between sensation (*Sinnlichkeit*), which is particular and *formless*, to representation (*Vorstellen*), where these objects remain particular but are universal in form, and finally thinking proper (*Denken*), which is pure form. But this means that the distinction between form and content does not explain the relationship between representation and religion, but rather the former is produced by the latter. In contrast, Beiser is forced to interpret Hegel as saying that form somehow defines consciousness itself, and thus somehow preexists it.¹⁹ In Beiser's words consciousness "transforms its contents into the medium of thinking" when it "subsumes [them] under universals." But this is precisely what Hegel seems to have begun by directly denying when he says that the form of universality has no existence independent of the content of thought. Beiser is driven to the point of self-contradiction by trying to both acknowledge that there must be a continuity between the structures of sensation and thinking, as well as claim that this link is established only by thought on a given sensational content. The latter is an essentially Kantian formulation that Hegel frequently critiques: content is provided solely by sensation, and the reflective intellect provides the form. Both are according to Kant "representations" insofar as they are modifications of consciousness. For Hegel, on the contrary, no relation of form and content can bridge the gap between the faculties because they define it—the attempt is immediately tautological. Since it is precisely Hegel's objective to undermine this type of faculty psychology in his comments

19. Beiser refers to section §12, but there Hegel is speaking more specifically about "experiential sciences," not religion, and he *criticizes* them for presenting their objects as "something merely immediate and simply found, as a manifold of juxtaposition, and hence as something altogether contingent," which is true of neither religion nor philosophy.

on thinking, the relation between religion and philosophy cannot rely on any essential difference between either the form or content of feeling and thinking.

The non-metaphysical approach has no trouble with issue, because it not only accepts but thematize Hegel's continuity with Kant. But this is precisely why religion, insofar as it takes its content to be *revealed* and not invented by it, has no clear place in its reading. Actually, this absence seems to be its chief self-justification, because as it rescues Hegel from an ontotheology that, as Beiser's otherwise extremely clear account shows, can be extremely obscure, if not simply absurd. It concentrates the majority of its attention on Hegel's systematic analysis of thought in the *Science of Logic*, arguing that it is, a few isolated rhetorical flourishes aside, perfectly comprehensible as a study of the necessary structure of consciousness without reference to nature at all (external or human), much less a transcendent God. Arguably, this tradition begins with German philosopher Klaus Hartmann, who set out to derive a "hermeneutic of categories" from Hegel, strictly concerned with what the latter had to say about how the various judgments consciousness makes about the world relate to one another, completely irrespective of what bearing they might have on the world as it is in itself. This approach actively disregards Hegel's own characterization of the work, which chiefly concerns its relation to the aims of religion. Even so this strategy can't avoid dealing with what is after all the core of the *Logic*, "the Absolute Idea. . . sole subject matter and content of philosophy." How could this be interpreted in a way not connected to a theological metaphysics? Any non-metaphysical interpretation would seem to depend on showing that Hegel shares Kant's anti-ontological concept of objectivity, and that he therefore intends the absolute to be a category of thought, not the world qua being. But defending such a hypothesis ultimately requires evidence from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel's explicit study of the relationship between thought and being, or subject and object. In fact the argument of that book attains at least as much, if not more, importance as the *Science of Logic* for the neo-Kantian reading. It is where Hegel most clearly takes up the theme of consciousness's self-determination. It determines the concept of thought that the *Logic* will take up as the object of its analysis.

The core hypothesis of the neo-Kantian reading is that the *Phenomenology* is a radicalization, not a rejection, of Kant's schematism. It proceeds by showing that these concepts are not irreducible features of all consciousness, but simply a form of culture that happened to develop within history. It studies the attempts of consciousness to justify its view of the world, ultimately succeeding not by overcoming skepticism, but revealing it to be essentially the same as dogmatism. A crucial moment occurs at the point in the "Spirit" chapter that Hegel characterizes in terms of a political crisis. The power of the state has been eroded by the rise of the noble class and the increasing symbolic power of wealth over that of office. The universality that the state had previously embodied as the will of God has crumbled under the skeptical judgment of the people who now see it as the tool of a particular class—the wealthy nobility. Though wealth determines the world, its will cannot represent any *absolute* truth in light of its obvious contingency. But this is not the end of the concept of the absolute, only of theocracy. This negative judgment against itself carries with it a new standard of truth—an individual, subjective standard, since consciousness posits truth as existing only within itself—that of "faith and pure insight." The idea of an objective order to all things has not disappeared entirely, but it has disappeared from the *phenomenal world*, which has been reduced to merely particular, conditional social existence. In this concept, Hegel articulates what the neo-Kantian reading takes to be a reformulation of Kant's idealism in socio-historical terms—the social world awoken from its dogmatic slumber.²⁰ Pure insight is a transformation of religious belief that emerges from the recognition of the fact that the absolute is not accessible in the world of experience. It is a reaction not against belief, which is actually its innermost core, but against 'superstition.' This reaction, however, has the effect of shedding every last semblance of positivity since the sensuous appearance of this concept in the external world has proven to be an illusion. The highest certainty of truth is combined with the greatest abstraction from the reality, a conjunction that manifests in the catastrophe of the Terror. The laws and people that inhabit the world share in the shame of the state and fall victim to the authority of the individual convictions of whatever revolutionary is able to hold sway over the most hearts and minds. Though it does not

20. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*.

itself draw this parallel, this is probably the most Kantian moment in the *Phenomenology*. Hegel clearly recognizes that fanaticism is the definitive threat to Kantian morality, and thus modernity. The “Spirit” chapter is its diagnosis, but what about the cure?

It is precisely at this moment in the development of consciousness that religion asserts itself against the non-metaphysical reading. Forgiveness, or reconciliation, and other religious terms describe what Hegel calls “God manifested in the midst of those who knew themselves in the form of pure knowledge”—the absolute idea. These mystical sounding remarks indicate the transition from the empirico-historical analysis of “Spirit” to the theologico-historical analysis of “Religion.” To avoid the conclusion that this signals a relapse into a pre-critical, mystical framework, the neo-Kantian reading falls into the very same line of thinking that defined the traditional interpretation. Namely, it latches on to Hegel’s description of the identity of the subject of the two chapters—it remains spirit. After all, Hegel writes that “consciousness only has these thoughts, but as yet it does not think them, or is unaware that they are thoughts; they exist for consciousness in the form of picture-thoughts (*Vorstellungen*).”²¹ For the neo-Kantian interpretation, this claim signals that the religious language Hegel uses here only “translates” the more fundamental, secular account that he has just concluded. Christianity, or more specifically, protestant Lutheranism, serves as the institutional foundation for a socio-political answer to the possibility of violent revolution. This implies a set of collective, intersubjective norms for regulating conflict without degrading into chaos and war that would neatly correspond to precisely those essential principles for an “enlightenment” constitution: freedom and equality, but also obedience.²² In contrast to traditional views, any supernatural, metaphysical doctrines associated with these norms would be superfluous, maybe even a threat to the principles that Hegel defends according to this revised reading. The end of the “Spirit” chapter thus achieves what non-metaphysical interpretations always set out to show—that Hegel fundamentally accepts Kant’s doctrine that such principles can only ever have a subjective necessity, even if or rather because the meaning of “subjective” is extended to the

21. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (1977), §527.

22. Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying This May be True in Theory but It Does Not Apply in Practice,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Siegbert Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

historical process that is spirit. Any idea of an objective necessity could only mirror this, and it would only ever be a matter of belief. The neo-Kantian reading simply rejects Hegel's purported view that this belief is indispensable.²³ The fact that spirit has *objectively* operated at the level of religion, to which Hegel goes on to devote an entire subsequent chapter, is irrelevant, since it appears to concern not the rational content of this idea (which has already been attributed to the *Logic*), but only its symbolic representation. That Hegel himself continues the analysis cannot be explained, or does not need to be explained except perhaps as a historical curiosity. The problem, of course, as other explications of Hegel point out, is that the final sections of the "Spirit" chapter, far from being an affirmation of Kant's social theory, which Hegel consistently refers to as the "moral point of view," form a fairly strident critique. So it must be said that the neo-Kantian interpretation of the *Phenomenology*, at least, does not simply selectively read Hegel's argument, but selectively *misreads* it as well.

And so there have been two different paths through Hegel, starting from opposite assumptions about his system and focusing on assorted texts, arriving at the same idea of an identity between religion and reason. Each has its own independent support for this conclusion, and each faces rather obvious difficulties. Both trace this idea in their own way as a response to Kant, in which sensuous feeling achieves what pure reason could not. Their difference emerges on the basis of a persistent ambiguity about the nature of this feeling—namely, whether it has the metaphysico-theological weight of something like intellectual intuition, or whether it is simply a psychological affinity with historically contingent discursive norms—what one might describe somewhat grandiosely as "love," or more simply as "conviction" and ultimately amounts to a disagreement about their fundamental philosophical import. Beiser ultimately defends the traditional interpretation on the basis of Hegel's later lectures and evidence of his personal faith in the revelatory status of Christianity.²⁴

Pippin, among others, favors a revised interpretation on the basis of the sheer implausibility of

23. A recent notable exception to this makes an attempt to reconcile the non-metaphysical approach, specifically Pippin's, to Hegel's view of religion. But it accomplishes this not by abandoning the identity thesis but by reaffirming the psychological value of Christianity. See Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*. A more limited version of a similar reading is also offered by Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation* (2011).

24. Beiser, *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*.

the alternative, since it would seem to amount to a mystical elevation of an accidental product of history and culture to divine fate.²⁵ Again, my aim here is not to adjudicate between these views, but rather to test the strength of the thesis they hold in common: that faith has value and legitimacy independent of reason but with identical meaning. This is precisely the idea that has always been taken as definitive of Hegel's idealism *in contrast* to the Romantic project—the reason why his appeal to the absolute was deemed regressive and dangerous instead of radical and liberatory, as theirs has (sometimes) been. However, Hegel's criticism of the Romantics is not adequately understood as simply a rejection of a role for feeling or imagination in morality. Rather, it is a critique of a mode of feeling directly opposed to reason as an objective, universal standard. This is precisely what Hegel associates with the Romantic concept of irony, which he thinks is the ultimate fate of the modern concept of *morality*. In other words, there is reason to think that Hegel explicitly argues that it is not he but his Romantic peers that are the inheritors of the Kantian framework he in fact wants to revise.

One of the paradoxical results of the consensus that there is an identity between philosophy and religion is that the entire “Religion” chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been neglected. The fact that the same content could be considered interchangeably as “God” or “spirit” has led to special difficulties for attempts to make sense of Hegel's analysis of what he calls “the Moral Worldview,” the conclusion of the “Spirit” chapter and the transition to “Religion.” Despite their radically divergent claims about the value of the religious dimension of Hegel's thought, all interpretations that rely on the identity thesis tend to treat this section as the culmination of a single development, the most fundamental way the concept of spirit can be rationally understood rather than dogmatically affirmed.²⁶ Hegel's method of dialectic famously proscribes the contribution of any concepts not already implied by the object itself—in this case, consciousness (or spirit). But at the conclusion of the chapter we find an appeal to “confession” (*Geständnis*), “forgiveness”

25. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*.

26. There is a qualified sense in which this might be true, insofar as there is evidence Hegel himself added the religion chapter hurriedly, as an afterthought. See Michael N. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (1998). However, this point only makes the question of *why* Hegel thought it necessary even more pressing, whereas the identity thesis renders it moot.

(*Verzeihung*), not to speak of the “appearance of God.” The pretenses of the identity thesis forces us to ask: What can these figures mean in the context of a morality of individual responsibility?

Again, both neo-Kantians and metaphysical interpretations run into intractable problems trying to address this question, for nearly opposite reasons. If secular interpreters avoid resorting to hand-waving when confronted with the religious concepts that appear at this undeniably crucial moment, they must translate them into secular terms. Pippin, for instance, explicitly announces that he will analyze Hegel’s account of spirit “in isolation,” but then laments the fact that Hegel doesn’t resolve the conflicts that emerge there. He dismisses the “enigmatic” invocation of religion, calling on Hegel’s readers to look instead for a solution in the much maligned third chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*, however unsatisfying this may seem.²⁷ Jay Bernstein remains within the bounds of the *Phenomenology* by reading the final antinomy in the clearer terms of the earlier shape of “Ethical Life.” In this illustration, Antigone plays the role of the “acting conscience,” following her personal convictions, while Creon is the “judging conscience” that pitilessly condemns her actions as undeniable crimes. Bernstein’s reading explicitly resists the religious implications of Hegel’s language opting for a secular, generalized suggestion of an inescapable state of opposition, a commonality of disagreement. However, this does not seem to correspond to what Hegel himself says here or in “Ethical Life,” which concerns the *disintegration* of prior unity.²⁸ In both of these examples, Hegel functions as a provocateur who offers a useful diagnosis of a crisis of the modern condition but offers no clear solution. But they ignore the most obvious possibility that the fate of morality is decided in “Religion,” and they do not explain why it would be indefensible on Hegel’s own terms, terms they purport to preserve and defend.

On the other hand, religious interpretations latch onto the Christian resonances of Hegel’s terminology as unquestionable evidence that Hegel considered the “problem” of morality to be resolved only by a specifically Christian doctrine. Quentin Lauer takes these concepts as simple, immediate affirmations of the factual, historical accuracy of Christian doctrine of the birth of a

27. Robert Pippin, “Recognition and Reconciliation. Actualized Agency in Hegel’s Jena Phenomenology,” *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, 2007, 57–78.

28. J. M. Bernstein, “Confession and Forgiveness: Hegel’s Poetics of Action,” in *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and Poetic Imagination* (1996).

supernatural being—Christ—into the natural world.²⁹ Thus, he takes the moment of revelation implied by forgiveness—the equal guilt of all parties through original sin—as the actual content of absolute knowledge. While the idea that Hegel had Christian doctrine in mind here seems indubitable, this approach does not investigate the logic according to which the concept of morality *becomes* a religious concept, according to its own immanent logic. In so doing it neglects the crucial, and most difficult, final passages of the chapter, which suggest a critical *failure* of Christian theology’s conception of reconciliation.³⁰ This gives the false impression that Hegel ultimately substituted an article of faith for a philosophical investigation. It dodges what is most importantly the most important question: What does the philosophical consciousness of the truth of Christianity add to consciousness incarnate in the Christian community, and thus transform it?

It is impossible to answer this question if it is assumed in advance that the end of the “Spirit” chapter yields the same result in a historical context that the “Religion” chapter will analyze in terms of theological doctrine, and that these two narratives will converge as two sides of one “absolute truth”—that is, if it is read in terms of a pre-established, Kantian concept of identity instead of articulating something new. It is not surprising if the result reproduces the very antinomy of morality that Hegel clearly aims to overcome. The only solution appears to be the Kantian separation of the merely subjective necessity of a historical reality, or the objective but abstract necessity of a transcendent divinity. But as I will now argue, this is the path taken not by Hegel, but the Romantics. Taking a cue from Jeffrey Reid’s suggestion that the conclusion of “Spirit,” and especially the contradictory figures of the “beautiful soul” and “evil conscience,” is better read as an account of a fundamentally irreconcilable antinomy of modern morality rooted in Romantic irony, this critique shows that Hegel’s view of religion is intertwined with, rather than independent from, the determinations of rational consciousness.³¹ Hegel’s famous enmity with Schleiermacher in particular thus reveals a profound difference about the nature of religion, and specifically the

29. Quentin Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (1993).

30. Obviously, Christian interpretations of the *Phenomenology* do not also *ignore* the “Religion” chapter. However, they, including Lauer, take the explicit deep criticism of Christian doctrine as a theological critique, rather than a critique of theology.

31. Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism*.

role of “imagination,” that does not support either neo-Kantian or the traditional interpretation, and calls for a re-reading of the “Religion” chapter with an altogether different concept of identity that is neither formal nor ironic, but genuinely *speculative*.

The antinomy of irony: Romanticism and the morality of feeling

The full extent of the complexity of Hegel’s relationship with Romanticism is evident in one of the most enigmatic texts of the period: a short, untitled fragment known as *The Oldest System-Program for German Idealism*. The authorship of this text has been attributed either to Schelling, Hölderlin, Hegel, or all three. Its aim is the formulation of “an ethic” under which “the whole of metaphysics will in the future be subsumed.”³² In accordance with its Kantian roots, the centerpiece of this ethic is to be freedom, but not simply as a postulate of practical reason about the nature of consciousness. According to the argument in the text, the divide between self and world is unwarranted once it is acknowledged that the attribution of freedom in both cases is equally problematic and yet equally necessary. It thus sets out to define a new concept of identity that does not simply guarantee the compatibility of consciousness of freedom and natural causes, but genuinely *unites*, or reconciles, them. The “program” is premised on the idea that freedom is the unifying principle of nature *as well as* consciousness, and thus all possible objects of perception—the absolute. The author writes that not only is “the representation of me myself as an absolutely free creature” the “first idea,” but “only that which is an object of freedom is *called* an idea” since a “free, self-conscious creature” implies an entire world along with it and from it the only “true and conceivable creation out of nothing” can be thought to arise.³³ This formulation confirms that the *Urprinzip* of German idealism is the idea that Kant’s “revolution” in philosophy leads inexorably back to the idea of religion. But what kind of religion can guarantee the freedom and sovereignty of reason against the multitudes of human passions of which religious fanaticism seems undeniably

32. David F. Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*, Studies in Continental thought (Indiana University Press, 2005), 22–25.

33. Unknown, “The Oldest System-Program for German Idealism,” in *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*, trans. David F. Krell, Studies in Continental thought (Indiana University Press, 2005).

the most unreasonable and pathological? This is the central question posed by the fragment, and it is the difference in their answers that will separate Hegel from the Romantics.

First, in a general refutation of Kant's appeal to religious doctrines for guidance, the essay immediately disqualifies all positive formulations of law as a potential remedy, which, as an empirical formation, can only make "mechanical cogwheels" of its free human subjects by subjecting them to coercive measures. It bluntly proclaims that every tether of human freedom to the needs of government, even considered according to the regulative idea of eternal peace, "should cease." But it also and *equally* rejects the putatively rational doctrines of "a moral world, divinity, immortality" as just as rooted in superstition (*Aberglaubens*), at least insofar as they are taken to refer to anything outside of human consciousness. It returns to the model of organic unity that is the act of judgment, manifest above all in the recognition of beauty, calling it "the supreme act of reason, because it embraces all ideas" and insisting that "only in beauty" (i.e., not in doctrines) "are truth and goodness akin."³⁴ The rest of the essay must then confront the consequences this concept of the aesthetic absolute has for its pedagogical ambitions. This is the same lacuna as that which appeared in Kant's account of religion's role in combating radical evil: What are the principles for the defiance of principles?

In formulating an answer to this question, the "System-Program" raises the philosophical possibilities of an "aesthetic sense," ultimately converging on the idea of moral training based on intuition and feeling *instead* of principles: "Poesy will thereby attain a higher dignity; in the end she will again become what she was in the beginning—the instructress of humanity." The general justification for this conclusion is that moral doctrines simply have no practical reality disconnected from their basis in intuition and feeling. The author underlines this point, making it clear that "until we make the ideas aesthetic, i.e., mythological, they will have no interest for the people." This is not simply an observation about folk psychology. It reflects an overarching conviction that the very category of "absolute" applies only to the power of human beings to freely produce representations of their world, to express their desires as objective needs. For reason to attain

34. Unknown, "The Oldest System-Program for German Idealism."

absolute status, it must be given its own mythology that fulfills these desires.³⁵ This “aesthetization” of epistemology is thus not merely a pedagogical-administrative “strategy,” as the “visible church” might perhaps be characterized in Kant, but a necessary next stage in the development of the crowning achievement of Enlightenment philosophy.

Ultimately, the fragment ends on an ambivalent note. It is a turn toward art, surely, but still in the name of science. In other words, it contains the kernel of a new concept of identity in which the human will, more broadly conceived as both feeling *and* reason, is the correlate of being in general. The metaphysical identity of consciousness and world can be properly achieved only by way of a practical identity between feeling and reason. Unlike Kant, in which these two forms of cognition always remain separate, the earliest impulse of post-Kantian idealism, of both Hegel and Schelling, is to unite them again—thus their mutual interest in “identity philosophy.” The question that this direction makes inevitable is to what extent such a “mythology of reason” based in the sense of beauty, as opposed to a rational dogmatism, could claim access to absolute truth, and on what terms. On this point Hegel will distance himself from his mentor Schelling, as well as the other Romantics. Ultimately, however, it will be his strife with Schleiermacher that has the most effect on the direction of his thinking and its reception, especially with regard to philosophy’s relationship to religion.

The polemical aspect of Hegel’s relationship to his romantic peers is known mainly through his lectures on aesthetics, for which their various remarks on art principally served as contrast for his own systematic views. It is only relatively recently that the idea that the Romantics themselves represented its own philosophical school in opposition to Hegel, with contemporary influence and relevance, has gained serious credence.³⁶ But for the most part, Hegel and the Romantics have been interpreted as raising fundamentally different questions about philosophy. Against this ten-

35. Unknown, “The Oldest System-Program for German Idealism,” 25.

36. See especially very early example in Otto Pöggeler, *Hegels Kritik der Romantik*, Philosophie an der Jahrtausendwende (W. Fink, 1999); more recently Manfred Frank, “Unendliche Annäherung”: die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft (Suhrkamp, 1997), partially translated as Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, Intersections (State University of New York Press, 2012); Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

dency, it must be observed that Hegel and the Romantics did not simply part ways; they represented opposing sides in an uncompromising intellectual conflict over Kant's legacy. The defining issue was not some anti-systemic tendency among some of Hegel's philosophical rivals, but rather the spectre of an *alternative* "program" in the sense of the early fragment—one that he thought promoted a decadent and nihilistic worldview. Re-evaluating the significance of the conflict, Jeffrey Reid makes the case for a systematic critique of the various romantic figures according to the unifying concept of irony to be found in the "Morality" section of the *Phenomenology*.³⁷ Irony in the sense Hegel uses it in reference to Romanticism would therefore not only or even primarily be an aesthetic concept, as it is treated in the lectures, but an ethico-political project like the one outlined in the "System-Program." Hegel saw in it the potential to raise negativity to an absolute value, and in so doing, dissolve practical reason and genuine freedom in nihilistic abandon.³⁸ This is the threat posed by the standoff that comprises the conclusion of "Spirit." Hegel's answer, the answer that secures the foundation of speculative science, depends on religion for its resolution.

The core of Reid's argument is that, in Hegel's view of Romanticism, Schlegel and Novalis represent the two options offered by the antinomy of morality: action without justification or conviction without actualization. The first appears in Hegel's analysis as the "evil conscience" that defies all moral limits on action. It recognizes only the subjective necessity of desire. The second is the "beautiful soul" that avoids the possibility of moral corruption by rejecting the world entirely. It respects only the objective necessity of law. Although in some ways they appear to be inversions of each other, they are ultimately expressions of the same identity posited by Kant between the absolute and inner feeling that makes all external action contingent. Their opposition therefore defines the single antinomy Hegel analyzes as "Morality."

On the one hand, Schlegel embodies the most traditional concept of irony. In Hegel's view, his work starts with the premise that the world is divided into objective and subjective dimensions, and all access to the substance of the former is impossible and illegitimate for human thought.

37. Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism*.

38. However, because Reid neglects the positive role feeling plays in Hegel he does not fully put him on equal footing with the Romantics, which are in this sense portrayed as always ahead of him.

However, since reference to the objective is also unavoidable, each artist engages in the business of producing their own preferred vision. Hegel claims that this means that the essence of ironic art is *vanity*. It produces a multitude of viewpoints that present themselves as unconditional and objective, despite their intrinsic particularity to the specific artist. This presentation of the object *as not* objective is the essence of irony.³⁹ The practical implication of the utterly illusory character of the object is that the subject need not treat it with seriousness. Concepts of “sanctity” or “respect” lose all meaning and the ironic artist is therefore free to treat everything as negatable, disposable. In Hegel’s terminology, such a will remains “aloof” from any “substantial interest.”⁴⁰ The case study for this is Schlegel’s novel *Lucinde*, which presents the seduction of its eponymous character *as* freedom, precisely insofar as it pursues a desire without heed for Christian moral doctrine. For Hegel, this indicates a will that is completely subjective, and negative.

What distinguishes the ironic artist above all makes it such a clear correlate to the evil conscience: they do act on principles, but these principles rest entirely on whatever particular interests are currently in view. As principles, they take a universal form, but without any pretense of harmonizing in a kingdom of ends. While such a harmony is retained as a pure abstract possibility of social life, the impossibility of relating to it in the present means that no standard can be applied to the principles in order to judge their limitations or faults. Thus, the only relation that can exist between ironist and their community is that of the “genius” and their audience. The romantic artist is so absorbed in their own individuality that they actively disdain the needs of the existing social world. Despite all appearances of radicality their actions are in fact anti-political since they do not appeal to anything common to all potential citizens.⁴¹ Instead, the ironist prefers to cultivate the attention of a select audience they solicit through their appeal to a particular aesthetic judgment. This

39. This is also why Reid detects echoes of sophistry in the ironic gesture. Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism*, 11–22.

40. Robert G. Williams, “Hegel on Schlegel,” in *Hegel’s History of Philosophy: New Interpretations*, ed. D. A. Duquette (State University of New York Press, 2012), 73.

41. The heterosexual male protagonist of *Lucinde* may find liberation in his seductions while the fate of his female partner is significantly less glamorous. If the dissolution of sexual norms is valorized in itself, this risks legitimizing sheer sexual predation. See the questions Patricia Jagentowicz Mills addresses to David Farrell Krell’s comparison of Hegel and Schlegel on this point: P. J. Mills, “Comments on “Lucinde’s Shame”,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hegel* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 111–112.

audience contributes little to the creative process of the artist, serving rather to flatter their ego and imitate their personal style. Likewise, the evil conscience that identifies righteousness with their own acts does not seriously expect to legitimize their actions to anyone who does not share their inner conviction. In this sense, they are distinguishable from the sophist only on the grounds that while the latter at least pretends to advocate on behalf of the community as a whole, the ironic genius considers the very notion of “social” norms and institutions to be quaint, in bad taste, and even a sheer hypocrisy that can only violate their personal freedom. This means that crime itself becomes identified with justice. Only the law can sin; the individual is always righteous.

Novalis represents an entirely different morality, even the opposite of Schlegel’s vain artistic genius, while remaining in the ironic mode. Novalis describes, and according to Hegel personally embodies, the interiorization of irony, where what is constructed by the imagination of the particular romantic artist is not a beautiful thing, but a beautiful soul. Just as the beautiful soul of “Morality” only *appears* to oppose evil conscience, Novalis’s “yearning,” wishful character, opposed to any actual act, is just as much a rejection of morality in the name of virtue. In contrast to the destructive, whimsical force of vanity, this feeling of yearning is a flight from reality rather than a confrontation and attempt to master it. This disengagement and withdrawal into itself results in a consciousness that not merely lacks seriousness in its relation to the world, but also loses this relation altogether. In the process, irony gains a tragic aspect that lends the appearance of seriousness, even nobility. But in truth its total passivity renders its meekness irrelevant. It can only remain inward as long as the objective world supports its existence. Though it renounces the world, the world does not renounce it, and therefore it is an ironic tragedy that borders on farce.

From this point of view, the absolute has disappeared into an unreachable beyond, and so the moral agent dare not attempt to act on principle at all. Because it must forsake all interests, both vain and essential, in withdrawing from the objective world, this form of irony is reflected by a sort of wasting away into pure narcissistic abstraction. Drawing, somewhat callously and vindictively perhaps, on Novalis’s physical illness, Hegel makes sickness the central theme of his explicit criticism of Novalis’s aesthetics. When social institutions are healthy, the birth of a new person

occurs as a sort of biological syllogism—the generation of a singular new expression uniting the particularity of its will and the universality of social interests. The child grows into a free adult by entering into a conscious relation with the society around them, not merely accepting but selecting from these interests. The individual genius of the child must become autonomous in the sense that its particular nature is reflected through this relation to the social whole. However, this relation becomes pathological when the required mediation fails to occur, and the particular individual only imitates the law without being able to act through it. This results in the misunderstood and reclusive genius whose very detachment from the world is proof of the world’s influence on their innermost core. As Hegel emphasizes in the *Phenomenology* about the beautiful soul, this position is therefore no less hypocritical than evil conscience. Its moral purity is mere pretense for its blind rejection of everything in existence.

The dramatic differences between the work of Schlegel and Novalis are two sides of the same ironic coin. As long as access to the unconditioned is held to be the province solely of individual feeling, the social function of religion will produce anti-social results. The most significant component of Reid’s argument that the antinomy of morality that concludes Hegel’s analysis of “Spirit” is the antinomy of Romantic irony, is the place of Schleiermacher’s concept of religion. Of the three figures, Schleiermacher is certainly the least associated with the Romantic movement or with the aesthetic concept of irony. However, Reid argues that Hegel considers Schleiermacher the most dangerous Romantic because he unites the extremes of the two fundamental tendencies of Romantic irony, vanity and yearning, in the “monstrous hybrid” of “sentimentality.”⁴² Sentimentality does not act but only talks. Neither defying nor confirming morality, but leaving it over to the state, Schleiermacher advocates a religion of pure expression devoid of universal laws, thereby no longer enjoining any particular action. In this sense, Schleiermacher offers an ironic interpretation of the proclamation of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor: when God is dead, nothing is permitted (but everything can be entertained).

42. Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism*, 6, 96, 117.

Insofar as Hegel himself also seeks to overcome these same poles of morality, this common impulse places him very close indeed to Schleiermacher, perhaps closer than any of his other contemporaries. Like Schleiermacher, he sees religion as key to this reconciliation. But for Hegel, sentimentality could only be a false reconciliation, as it reduces the universal element that Hegel asserts implicitly exists in feeling to the purely contingent, arbitrary expression of “self-feeling.” This constitutes a challenge to philosophy as serious as sophistry itself, to which Hegel’s own concept of religion should be seen as a direct response.

The heresy of feeling: Schleiermacher

Although it might be strange to describe Schleiermacher’s apologetic treatment of religion as ironic, there are clear similarities between it and both poles of the antinomy of morality in his description. The figure that Schleiermacher calls the “virtuoso of religion” refuses to reduce their beliefs to any moral principles, or encourage anyone to follow their example, because this would suggest these beliefs have a universal validity that isn’t claimed outside of the feelings they inspire. This figure combines the arbitrariness of the artistic genius (who does embrace the need to impose an order on nature) with the negativity of the reclusive beautiful soul (who futilely renounces all influence of the objective world). The “doctrines” that comprise their religion are ironic insofar as they are not meant to guide action at all. Sincere religious belief would inevitably result in a conflict with other “beliefs” and undermine the ability of all to be recognized. This concept of religion thus directly exhibits the Kantian influence on the Romantic project. Its ultimate, even only, value is tolerance, and its political articulation is the separation of church and state where all other values are left to the determination of the latter. Schleiermacher’s insistence on the subjective quality of feeling allows religion to completely reject the idea of any common, highest good, which would require an articulated, determinate form in order to exist—a form that would inhibit the free expression of individual faith. Unlike Schlegel or Novalis, Schleiermacher identifies the

necessity for religion to resolve the antinomy of morality by articulating an absolute value, but in an absolutely negative concept: heresy.

Schleiermacher proposes his rejection of morality at the very beginning of his central text of theology, *On Religion*. He prefaces his argument with an apology on behalf of himself and his “colleagues” for an apparently outmoded and even offensive taste for “holy mysteries” that have for so long been belabored by “philosophers and prophets,” as well as “scoffers and priests.”⁴³ This ironic conjunction already indicates that he thinks that the authentic “essence” of religion has been overlooked by moralists of *every* kind, its representatives and its critics. In order to recover it, Schleiermacher starts with a consideration of human nature in terms of “two opposing drives” that turn out to reflect the poles of the antinomy of morality:

The one strives to draw into itself everything that surrounds it, ensnaring it in its own life and, wherever possible, wholly absorbing it into its innermost being. The other longs to extend its own inner self ever further, thereby permeating and imparting to everything from within, while never being exhausted itself. The former desire is oriented toward enjoyment; it strives after individual things that bend toward it; it is quieted so long as it has grasped one of them, and always works only mechanically on whatever is at hand. The latter drive despises enjoyment and only goes on to ever-increasing and heightened activity, it overlooks individual things and manifestations just because it penetrates them and finds everywhere only the forces and entities on which its own force breaks; it wants to penetrate and fill everything with reason and freedom, and thus it proceeds directly to the infinite and at all times seeks and produces freedom and coherence, power and law, right and suitability.⁴⁴

Where we find reason and feeling, the traditional operation of the Christian religion, even in Kant, has been to subordinate the latter to the former. But Schleiermacher will endorse a mixture, claiming that both drives more or less equally comprise what is necessarily human, such that no one

43. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. R. Crouter, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

44. *Ibid.*, 5.

can flourish without both. The problem is rather in those individuals and societies in which the *extreme* of one drive is exhibited at the expense of the suppression of the other (such as when Kant advocates that feeling be subordinated to reason). In contrast, Schleiermacher does not call for an ascendance of feeling, but the isolation and protection of *religion* as its proper domain. This means the expulsion of all morality, metaphysics, and politics as the concerns of reason.

Metaphysics, by which Schleiermacher means all rational theology up to and including that of transcendental idealism, finds reasons to classify existence into various orders of being and causes for being that are held to be “eternal truths.” It has too often, in his view, gone hand in hand with morality insofar as it has tried to attempt to determine some final end.⁴⁵ This has, of course, even in Kant’s anti-ontotheological system, gone by the name of the “will of God.” But Schleiermacher denies that religion should be concerned with what can be *known* about either consciousness or the world. Certainly, this is something that has been attempted by those who are either primarily metaphysicians or moralists, but all they can accomplish is to take their primary principles and axioms as a starting point from which to organize the system of the other. Either one takes an account of how the world is and works out how one ought to act from that, or one takes certain principles for action to determine how the world ought to be. In the end, however, Schleiermacher maintains that the two realms resist each other like “oil and water,” since the determination of one by the other would amount also to its annihilation.⁴⁶ His fundamental point is that metaphysics and ethics should remain separate bodies of principles, because they represent different, incompatible forms of necessity. Since they are irreconcilable, religion must therefore be something else besides their mixture, and indeed cannot concern principles at all.⁴⁷ He writes, “Religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.”⁴⁸ The practice of faith involves an expression of pure subjective feeling that cannot be understood by anyone else, or even the believer outside of the moment of the specific act itself.

45. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 20.

46. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

47. Although, this raises the question of politics, omitted from Schleiermacher’s schema here, but seemingly pointing to precisely such a mixture.

48. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 22.

Thus, the defining attribute of feeling for Schleiermacher is not its sensuousness, but its absolute particularity. He fixes on Kant's invocation of the "starry skies above us" as the paradigm for religious intuition, but rather than a symbol for the lowly stature of our own inclinations in comparison to the moral law, this image is a testament to the divinity of the very particularity of that desire. After all, the attempt to systematize the heavens, to demonstrate some underlying principle governing the dispersal of all the stars and planets, completely fails to do justice to their infinite number. And as for the "moral law within us," it can never explain or subsume moral feeling, which is therefore more properly designated specifically *religious*. The kernel of this feeling is not any order or rational plan but "infinite chaos:" "Only the particular is true and *necessary*."⁴⁹ Schleiermacher recommends the "lovely modesty" of the unabashed particularity of independent religious feeling, an ironic rejoinder to the classic Enlightenment critique of religions as the agents of intolerance. He insists the absolute acceptance of religious feeling corresponds to a universal *tolerance*. Conversely, intolerance and exclusionary violence must be seen as the fault of metaphysics and morality insofar as their "mania for system" demands that each member conform to the same single structure. He imagines the highest religious type as a smiling *bonhomme* whose only wish is to embrace those around him in the mutual feeling of indissoluble unity. Feeling lacks all opinion—it can never judge or be judged:

To a pious mind religion makes everything holy and valuable, even unholiness and commonness itself, everything it comprehends and does not comprehend, that does or does not lie within the system of its own thoughts and is or is not in agreement with its peculiar manner of action; religion is the only sworn enemy of all pedantry and all one-sidedness.⁵⁰

This completely inverts the Kantian relation between reason and faith. If Kant argues that only a rationalized religion can provide an objective barrier against fanaticism, Schleiermacher holds

49. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 27, emphasis added. This identification of necessity and chaos in Schleiermacher's concept of religious feeling anticipates in many ways the object of Quentin Meillassoux's account of the "necessity of contingency" in Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

50. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 29.

that any act motivated by religion is by definition fanatical. In his view, true religion furnishes no principles for action. No system of reason, even a transcendental one, can authorize any course of action, or legitimate any body of law, because its division of a more fundamental unity can only be arbitrary. Fanaticism is a perversion not of reason but of feeling—reason coopts its absolute conviction for its own, inherently limited purposes. Kant was quite adamant about the need for “purity” in moral action, holding that feelings were the bestial, instinctive side of our nature that enslaved us rather than freed us. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, argues that religious feeling is the necessary precondition of our freedom because genuine, absolute freedom only exists at the level of the whole (i.e., in God): “That is the level on which religion stands, especially that which is autonomous in it, its feelings.”⁵¹ Consequentially, we cannot as individuals claim metaphysical freedom, but we can experience the feeling of freedom through religion. If we “postulate” our own freedom, then this can only be through a connection with the world that we feel but cannot understand—we don’t know what this means for us, or what it requires of us. As a result, Schleiermacher completely divorces the problem of freedom not only from understanding but also from action. Freedom requires nothing and promises nothing.

The very fact that Schleiermacher’s argument is an inversion of the relation between reason and faith in Kant means that he accepts the concept of identity underlying it. He remains squarely within the basic Kantian schema in which sensation and understanding refer to separate components of consciousness. Though he claims no interest in metaphysics, he does seem to at least accept the fundamental framework of faculty psychology that still dominated the philosophy of consciousness. He is primarily interested in reconceptualizing religious practice in terms of its authentic basis in an independent faculty of feeling, and he does in the same terms that Kant used to distinguish reason from the understanding. Namely, it demands and also supplies the principle of the unity of phenomena, which are otherwise always perceived only in terms of their individuality and difference from one another. “Sense,” and not reason, “strives to grasp the undivided impression of something whole.”⁵² For Schleiermacher, however, sense is not merely separate

51. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 47.

52. *Ibid.*, 61.

from reason, but wholly opposed to it, insofar as in Kant the understanding is constituted by the set of limits reason imposes. Reason as the imposer of an order of limits is implicitly the denial of unity and makes unity into something ungraspable—a mere figment of the imagination, albeit an indispensable one. It is true that Kant says something similar about the opposition between the understanding and reason in the first *Critique*, and in fact thematizes it in his account of the antinomies. But for Kant it is at least possible for reason and the understanding to coexist and even complement one another. Indeed, it could be said that establishing the terms of this coexistence is precisely the goal of critique and the content of the transcendental hypothesis—reason must be allowed to insist on the absolute necessity and completeness of the *noumena*, but only by denying access to them. This is because human consciousness is structured by the laws of the understanding, which founder into contradiction when pressed into the service of reason in pursuit of absolute necessity. But with regard to religion, the ultimate danger Kant himself identifies is not contradiction but fanaticism, and for Schleiermacher rational religion exacerbates, not ameliorates, this danger. The understanding “destroy[s]” unity “before it can have its effect” on sense.⁵³ For this reason, he considers sense and understanding natural enemies that offer two competing and mutually exclusive ways of viewing the world, and fanaticism would refer to precisely the effort of reason to impose its peculiar divisions on the whole, to make them absolute.

Thus, ultimately Schleiermacher takes aim at one of Kant’s central ideas that will also be very important for the young Hegel—that the truth of religion is expressed most clearly in “natural religion,” where the feeling of unity is identified with a set of principles for understanding the world, as opposed to a “positive religion” based in myths and images. Insofar as religion is understood as a church, a church allied with the state in order to impose its views on a maximum of adherents, this hierarchy might make sense. But if religion is understood not as a totalizing doctrine, but something more like a poetic expression of individual feeling, then it must be reversed. Schleiermacher argues that it is positive religion that has value as an ineluctably particular and thus authentic expression of the divine, whereas natural religion is “merely an indefinite, insufficient, and paltry

53. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 61.

idea that can never really exist by itself.”⁵⁴ By this he does not mean that natural religion is an inherently corrupt or inauthentic view of the divine. It only becomes problematic when reason tries to purge it of all particular content, making it universal.

This is why Schleiermacher resists any attempt to classify or categorize religion in terms of types; it manifests an infinite variety of subtle variations, any divisions between which would be arbitrarily applied. There is nothing universal or essential about any one particular view, just because it achieves general allegiance of a people. As an institution it may be inherently determinate, fixed. But as a genuine religion, it is changeable, ephemeral. Thus, Schleiermacher goes so far as to say that “heresy . . . should again be brought to honor.”⁵⁵ Religion is the most deeply personal choice, an expression of pure individuality. He charges anyone who wants to reduce the truth of religion to natural religion in the name of universality with hypocrisy. The most abstract and universal of faiths turn out also to be the most oppressive of genuine religious feeling, which never condemns or excludes except when forced to serve reason. It is only when all positive expressions of the divine are encouraged that the individual can be truly free in their faith. In the end, this leads Schleiermacher to reach the opposite conclusion about religion as did Kant, though in service of the same goal—freedom. Whereas Kant envisioned the possibility of a rational religion in service of the state, Schleiermacher insisted on a plurality of religions of feeling, indifferent or even hostile to the state, at least insofar as the latter would try to seize upon any religious doctrine reify it into a set of formal principles to serve as the justification for its own rule. For Schleiermacher, reason performs the same task as it does for Kant—enforcing the border between itself and faith—but for opposite ends—to unleash rather than discourage the proliferation of faiths. Against the evil of rational theology, he attempts to wield reason as a heretical force.

As Reid notes, Hegel at first finds himself in sympathy with Schleiermacher’s attention to the problem of reconciling reason and feeling in opposition to Kantian idealism, especially on the idea of the indispensability of religion for this task.⁵⁶ At the point where Hegel commits most

54. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, 100.

55. *Ibid.*, 108.

56. Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism*, 98.

fully to religion, he makes feeling its essence. But by the time the two are colleagues at Berlin, Hegel has become bitterly opposed to Schleiermacher's views. Reid argues that Hegel comes to see Schleiermacher's concept of religion in terms of the unresolved deadlock between the twin romantic impulses toward objectification and modesty, the repetition and radicalization of Kantian antinomy instead of a genuine solution. On the one hand, it promises direct access to the highest truth through feeling. However, by pitting this feeling against action, it turns the religious impulse against itself, on the basis that every belief one is willing and able to act upon is a kind of fanaticism. In Hegel's view, communities based on the feeling of the religious virtuoso can never achieve the unity required to express the absolute because each believer only repeats the original particular vision. Like the artistic genius valorized by Schlegel, the *religious* artist creates a public by force of their originality, not by any authentic, that is to say genuine, need of the community. And as in the case of Novalis, Schleiermacher disavows any practical implications of a given religious vision. Most importantly, he denies that they can have any bearing on *secular* institutions of right. Instead, he simply relies on a certain basic "freedom" of religion as the pure exercise of the imagination.⁵⁷ The separation of church and state implied by his discussion of tolerance allows or even requires religion to completely ignore the "concrete good" because the imagination does not deal in universals but only ever in particulars. It might even be possible that the most fundamental conviction of the religious artist is that neither the moral laws of the state, which are universal in scope but limited in their object, nor the representations of religion, which aim at the divine but only through particular means, can be "true" in any unconditional (i.e., *absolute*) sense. Despite this skepticism, we must believe that "our" laws and "our" faith offers the greatest possible participation in a free existence that we nonetheless *know* to be God's alone. This is why Hegel considers Schleiermacher's theology "sentimental," because the absence of a genuine absolute requires ascribing absolute value to things that we know do not deserve it. It compensates for the discovery that sanctity is an delusion by making delusions something sacred.

57. Schleiermacher uses the term *Vorstellung* for this activity.

Reid's inclusion of Schleiermacher as the culmination of his account of Hegel's anti-Romanticism is unique because it emphasizes the site of this conflict in religion, and the opposing significance of the role of the imagination on the two sides. It is more typical for commentaries on Hegel's criticism of the Romantics to make one the ally of the imagination and the other its enemy.⁵⁸ It is undeniable that Hegel often seems to follow the ancient model of placing the imagination, which deals in sensuous, particular images (*Vorstellungen*) underneath the general categories of logic (*Verstand*). But generally, whenever he refers to this relation as a kind of hierarchy it is usually as a preamble to the more important point that neither are adequate to a philosophical conception of truth, which always concerns all things in their undivided and unconditioned unity.⁵⁹ With respect to this mutual deficiency, at least, Hegel's view of the relation between reason and the imagination can make them appear like two interdependent operations of thought itself. It is on this basis that they can be characterized as epistemological equals: two distinct, even contrary, but independently valid ways of grasping the same reality.

But Hegel's criticism of Schleiermacher reveals that his criticism of Romanticism is not a criticism of the imagination in favor of reason, or an endorsement of their separation. On the contrary, it is a competing account of their reconciliation. That Reid is right about the direct connection between the antinomy of morality in the "Spirit" chapter and Hegel's critique of the Romantic imagination seems confirmed by the otherwise confusing fact that this analysis is followed by the "Religion" chapter, featuring an account of consciousness in the shape of *Vorstellen*, or as it has been sometimes translated, picture-thinking. But there is one other published text of Hegel's on the topic of Schleiermacher that even more directly addresses the function of the imagination. At the height of their rivalry in Berlin, one of Hegel's students published a book and asked Hegel to contribute some introductory remarks. They are well-known as a polemic against Schleierma-

58. Tragedy especially is taken as a model for the failure of the understanding to grasp the truth as it appears in the poetic imagination. See Krell, *The Tragic Absolute: German Idealism and the Languishing of God*; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Hölderlin's Theatre," in *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (Taylor & Francis, 2005); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Tragedy and Speculation," in *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (Taylor & Francis, 2005).

59. As expressed in his well-known dictum, "Das Wahre ist das Ganze." *Vorstellungen* are particular even when they represent the whole, whereas the categories of the *Verstand*, while general, are intrinsically limited.

cher, and Reid reads Hegel's foreword to Hinrich's *Religion* in this spirit as fundamentally a critique of feeling. But as he observes, the argument also formulates a critique of the dogmatism of *doctrine*. This leads him to connect the argument of the text most directly to the idea of their dialectical sublation already outlined in "Beyond Faith and Knowledge," achieved in *thinking*.⁶⁰ Comparing this text to the "happy" account of *Phenomenology*, to which he doesn't seem to give much credence, Reid highlights the criticism of the failed reconciliation that Hegel thinks defines the modern world. Thus, while it is true that the document offers mostly a negative argument about the role of religion, it also indicates that Hegel's response to the Romantic project is not primarily rationalist in character, but is defined by a genuine reconciliation of reason and feeling. It indicates that, in Hegel's view at least, the imagination plays a central and not a subordinate role in this process.

Representation and reconciliation

Schleiermacher is the most dangerous Romantic in Hegel's view because, unlike Schlegel or Novalis, Schleiermacher's concept of heresy does not simply endorse one side of the antinomy of transcendental identity, between the acting conscience and the beautiful soul, but rather explicitly claims to reconcile the sides. Hegel makes it clear in his foreword to Henrich's *Religion* that he does not consider this a *genuine* reconciliation. Schleiermacher's religious hero dissolves, not resolves, the opposition in the infinite unity of feeling. This is only possible on the basis of the apparent ascendance of the imagination, conceived as a faculty by which the purely internal desire for unity is externalized, not in the form of law but as an infinite diversity of poetic visions: *representations* of the absolute.

Hegel's criticism of Schleiermacher's sentimental concept of religion is epitomized in a frequently quoted line from the Hinrich foreword, where he compares Schleiermacher's "theology of feeling" to the devotion that a dog has for its master. This is often cited as simply more evidence for Hegel's insistence on the domination of reason over all dimensions of subjectivity and above

60. Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism*, 110.

all personal feeling. However, it also creates a rift in the development of Hegel's thought, since his pre-Jena writings, all of which concern religion in one way or another, seem to culminate in the idea that feeling is precisely what gives religion its original, indispensable value for human freedom, suggesting that it is site of the original connection between the individual and the divine, and only secondarily the rational, moral state. But close examination of the foreword reveals a much more nuanced account of how representation comprises the essential function of religion, which, while certainly a marked development of his earlier vision, does not amount to an outright contradiction, but a dialectical advance. It presents a concept of religion that is reduced to neither the side of understanding nor of feeling, neither something objective nor purely subjective, but raised to the level of the moment of their genuine reconciliation, one in which the imagination plays a pivotal role. His critique of Schleiermacher's valuation of "heresy" is not directed against the imagination, but in its defense as the advent of speculative identity. This critique will prepare the ground for an interpretation of the "Religion" chapter as the positive account of this function.

Hegel begins his foreword by defining the apparent opposition that characterizes the relationship between philosophy and religion, revisiting the topic of his much earlier essay, *Glauben und Wissen*. But here Hegel uses the term *Vernunft* rather than *Wissen*, signifying the less developed form of *Denken* that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* comes to specifically designate a one-sided empiricism, and can also be understood here as something quite close to understanding. Indeed he seems to use the terms interchangeably here.⁶¹ This opposition therefore mirrors the antinomy of "Morality" as reflected in Romantic thought, where the finite laws of the understanding have become opposed to the infinite object of faith. Accordingly, the understanding is conceived as something discursive, and thus objective, while faith is a subjective matter of "pure insight." Genuine *Wissen*, in contrast, is what would be promised by their potential reconciliation—ostensibly the aim of Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion. It is this goal that Hegel both shares and that he argues Schleiermacher's concept of religion makes impossible.

61. Although, he will specify the understanding at issue as "human understanding" and reason as "finite reason" to indicate the way they refer to individual capacities as opposed to moments of spirit itself. See Hegel, *G. W. F. Hegel: Theologian Of The Spirit*, 157.

Hegel announces that, at the time he is writing, in which the Romantic paradigm has become dominant, the struggle for authority over the operation of cognition he described in terms of the antinomy of morality seems to have disappeared. But does this mean that *Geist* has attained the level of genuine knowledge of itself, and hence spirit has actualized its freedom? Hegel says that this depends on the cause for the disappearance—namely, whether the opposition between the understanding and the imagination has actually been resolved, or only abandoned. Eric van der Luft notes in one of the few commentaries on the essay that the term Hegel uses for the kind of “reconciliation” the philosophy of his time takes itself to have achieved, *Aussöhnung*, is a more pejorative variation of *Versöhnung*, the term he generally prefers to describe the successful sublation of a dialectical opposition, including in the final passages of “Morality” in the *Phenomenology*. Although the difference in the original German is slight, Luft suggests that the former connotes something more like two enemies in war that have agreed upon terms of a truce, whereas the latter would be more appropriate for loving partners that have resolved a temporary disagreement.⁶² In other words, the implication is that, although the outward antagonism between the elements of subjective feeling and objective relations has receded, the underlying alienation remains covered over.

Accordingly, Hegel characterizes his contemporary situation as “a frivolous, barren peace” in which “the bifurcation in itself would remain” and thus also the “harm,” becoming therefore “all the more dangerous.”⁶³ He thinks this “barren peace” is implied by a concept of faith that has renounced all necessity from its content, becoming the pure ardor of feeling that can attach itself to any idea whatsoever, giving the imagination full reign to dictate the form of truth because it has detached itself from the process of cognition entirely. In this sense, this kind of reconciliation is as much a formalism as Kantian idealism, or rather, it radicalizes the formalism of transcendental identity into something absolute. This is imagination on strike, perhaps, but also without any

62. Eric von der Luft, *Hegel, Hinrichs, and Schleiermacher on Feeling and Reason in Religion: The Texts of Their 1821–22 Debate* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 126.

63. G. W. F. Hegel, “Hinrichs Foreword,” in *Hegel, Hinrichs, and Schleiermacher on Feeling and Reason in Religion: The Texts of Their 1821–22 Debate*, trans. Eric v. d. Luft, *Studies in German thought and history* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 245.

demands that it expects will be met. It ends any outright confrontation between faith and reason, but only because faith has been reduced to something utterly non-discursive (i.e., wholly subjective). But this would be simple retreat, unless the domain of reason is also curtailed so that it reciprocates by making no claim on subjective feeling, allowing a space for the freedom of conscience to *act* as it *wills*. This would destroy the entire Kantian moral-epistemological apparatus and reduce religion to something objective only in the sense of the external, and thus finite and temporal, three terms Hegel conjoins throughout the essay. The ultimate result of this reconciliation, its “harm,” is a necessary and permanent hostility between the individual and the social world, something hardly amenable to the function of the state or conducive of individual flourishing.

What then would be the conditions of a genuine *Versöhnung*? According to the identity thesis, the religious imagination corresponds directly to rational principles. Its truth therefore is primarily indexed to the truth of those principles and only secondarily to the purely psychological and individual feeling religion inspires. It suggests the conclusion that Hegel thinks that reason must guide or shape feeling in a way that would be quite consistent with the function Kant ascribes to the “visible church.” But Hegel clearly rejects any understanding of faith that is reducible to doctrine any more than to a simple subjective feeling. For faith to rise to the level of genuine truth it first requires the unity of its two sides, subjective feeling and objective doctrine, its unity with reason and not simply correspondence. By reducing religion to feeling, Schleiermacher does not save the imagination but makes it something frivolous, an exercise of pure vanity. But how could it be possible to reconcile the subjective feeling of unity with the objective appearance of contingency without simply reducing one side to the other, by “indoctrinating” the individual into a belief through coercion or simply lies, as some Romantics accuse Hegel, or, as Hegel accuses the Romantics, abolishing objectivity altogether by making religious representation service the caprice of individual tastes?

Hegel observes that, naturally, this reconciliation is opposed most primarily by the individual will (what Hegel calls the consciousness’s “free spirit”) when it finds that the objective world is

not entirely suited for its private purposes and enjoyment. But it is *also* opposed by reason.⁶⁴ They are united in their rejection of any doctrine of truth purely on the basis of its externality, whether it takes the form of mythical representation of religion or rational statute of law. Both express themselves as a form of desire or feeling: the will for freedom—the unencumbered capacity to act—and the understanding for comprehension—the subsumption of the content of the doctrine to the individual’s own experience of the world. Hegel argues that, fortunately or unfortunately, any conflict in the first case is ultimately illusory, since the will of the individual is never really separate from the world, because it must find the satisfaction of its needs there.⁶⁵ This is why animals, which lack the *desire* for comprehension, can never be alienated from the world in the way that concerns Hegel, or Schleiermacher for that matter. Reason, however, can become obstinately attached to its interpretation of the meaning of that world and resist accepting any doctrine not its own, because neither can claim more than a *natural* necessity. In contrast to the will, reason has a *intrinsic* resistance to objective, since the latter can appear to be at best only the fungible means to achieving its desires, but more often simply an obstacle—something either to be used up or overcome.

Thus, the second obstacle is much more entrenched, and it is conceivable that it may never be overcome. Indeed, this is precisely what Hegel fears is the inevitable result of Schleiermacher’s divinization of feeling. In the case that objectivity opposes the individual understanding on every point, then they cannot tolerate each other. Even if the state allows the individual their “faith,” this faith would always demonize any action of the state. It is this situation that makes politics a “field for human passions” and introduces the need for “external authority.”⁶⁶ Philosophically, the result is a principled, consistent skepticism, if not nihilism, and it makes reconciliation practically impossible. However, according to Hegel, such absolute opposition is an illusion precisely because the absolute appears in the form of opposition. “Absolute truth,” he writes, “enters into a temporal configuration together with external conditions, conjunctions, and circumstances.”⁶⁷ In

64. Hegel, “Hinrichs Foreword,” 246–247.

65. That is, the will is naturally, except in the limit case of suicide, the will to live in this world.

66. Hegel, *G. W. F Hegel: Theologian Of The Spirit*, 158.

67. *Ibid.*

other words, judgment of the individual and the judgment of society are intertwined such that their separation into the sides of subjective and objective is only an abstraction. In actuality, even the most alienated person is bound to identify with various institutions, norms, and practices that comprise fragments of their social world. The individual faces the choice between staking everything on a non-existent but pure concept of the world as it ought to be, or an existing manifestation of at least some of its principles in the world as it is. And so, if the individual considers their world to be seriously defective, even in need of a complete transformation, such claims almost always prove to depend on principles already embodied in that world. And it is in trying to lay claim to those principles that they find themselves not only in opposition, but also dialogue with others—and in dialogue one must justify one’s desires. Dialogue in general is the expression of the desire for justification. It may remain a conflict, but it is one that the individual has a real, material interest in resolving (not just an abstract hope). Taken together, those features of the world that the individual freely identifies with their own will cohere into what Hegel calls a “momentary, local, external, given essence [*Beiwesen*].”⁶⁸ Far removed from the “eternal ideal” promised by classical Christian faith, this is a real point of agreement between individual understanding and the law of the world in their very constitution (i.e., not as a sheer regulative hypothesis). The “partial” truth of the existing world thus offers “immediate inducement” for consciousness to participate in the collective determination of the world according to at least some of the principles of that world a choice that then constitutes the basis of genuine reconciliation.

This is why Hegel argues that the grounds of faith, and thus ultimately absolute knowledge itself, are neither something purely subjective (like feeling) nor objective (like doctrines). Faith is always already present in the individual as the idea that there is a way the world is supposed to be, just as much as there is from birth an ever growing understanding of how it actually is. In fact there is no discernible period before consciousness has accepted that this or that part of the world is right and good (if only because it temporarily served the interest of the believer). Actual belief is always

68. van der Luft translates this terms as “ancillary essence.” But despite the fact that the connotation of being secondary, or merely supportive resonates with the overall point Hegel is making here, the term indicates givenness or existence above all.

already belief in something, and this is why it is capable of relation to a discursive social world—it *already is* in relation to it. It is just a matter of making those commitments explicit. Certainly, the believer might find that some of these commitments are in conflict with one another. The apparent opposition between subjective faith and the objective world is in reality the opposition between spiritual forces within the world incarnated within the subject, *as* the subject. Faith is not primarily the marker of the opposition between individual consciousness, but rather the way opposition is itself constitutive of consciousness.

As with other Romantics, the debate between Hegel and Schleiermacher has commonly been framed in terms of the opposition between feeling and reason, specifically with regard to the question of which should have dominion over the imagination. But this distinction would be a purely theoretical matter, and Hegel's argument here makes it clear that he takes it to be fundamentally a matter of practice. Genuine faith is neither something innately possessed nor passively received by the individual. It emerges from the identification of a particular interest as possessing legitimate value: a necessary part of the world rather than an accident of its historical existence and yet a matter of choice rather than compulsion. Hegel calls this practical attitude (comportment?) a "taking-as-true" that is suffused throughout "everyday things of ordinary life."⁶⁹ From this point of view, it makes little difference if the things we choose to value are explicitly signified as valuable—or rather, sacred—since the "grounds" for such signification will prove to be indistinguishable from the practical behavior itself. That is, the sensuous, existing content of religion, consisting in its "finite and external histories," does not have an inherent meaning greater or deeper than that of the norms and practices it endorses.⁷⁰ To refer to the former in order to explain the latter would be circular. But neither can this attitude be referred to as a simple matter of feeling without disavowing its specificity altogether as containing the seeds of cognition itself:

If the criteria on the basis of which belief in such things emerges are sensuous external direct beholding, or internal immediate feeling, the testimonies of others, and trust in their witness, etc. then doubtless hereby a conviction as a taking-as-true mediated

69. Hegel, "Hinrichs Foreword," 248.

70. *Ibid.*

through grounds can be differentiated from Belief as such. But this differentiation is too insignificant to maintain that such a conviction has an advantage over mere belief; for the so-called grounds are nothing other than the indicated sources of what is here called belief.⁷¹

When religion, conceived as a set of discursive doctrines, institutional and social norms, and principles of law, presents itself as absolute truth independent of consciousness taking them as such, it becomes sheer indoctrination.⁷² Such a use of religion is not merely ineffective, it is self-defeating. It stymies the reconciliation of feeling with religion by dressing up the product of the imagination—something inherently finite and temporal—as something unconditional and eternal, when in fact truth in this sense is only produced by the free act of identification of consciousness with a set of practices. Each individual understanding rightfully differs from and resists all others. Before the individual can be reconciled with the objective world, subjective feeling must be reconciled with the objective imagination. In this much Hegel agrees with the basic impetus of Schleiermacher's critique of rational theology in the name of the imagination, even if he fundamentally disagrees with Schleiermacher's *concept* of the imagination, precisely because it would make such a reconciliation impossible. An account of the genuine basis of this reconciliation—an authentic concept of imagination—is the central task and highest ambition of Hegel's own phenomenology of religion.

Thus, to understand the relation between feeling and reason in Hegel, it is necessary to turn to the "Religion" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The singular importance of this text for the problem at hand is fairly obvious. Following the pattern of sublation that defines every transition in the *Phenomenology*, the "Religion" chapter must be the presentation of the sublation of the two antinomies of Kantian morality, as it is reflected in the negative absolutes of irony: empiricism and skepticism. Furthermore, we should expect it to be the inverse of the reconciliation posed by Schleiermacher, which makes the site of the reconciliation the individual subject. Hegel's

71. Hegel, "Hinrichs Foreword," 248.

72. This would seem to amount to an outright rejection of a concept of religion attributed to Hegel by a not insignificant portion of interpretations.

argument will be precisely that such a reconciliation, premised on a transcendent, unreachable reality outside of conscious understanding, is the highest expression of pure dogmatism, and when such an assumption is suspended, it leaves only the givenness of consciousness's representations—the material conditions of the production of morality. It is in these conditions, not in either bare feeling or rational principles but their co-generation, that the reconciling force of representation is to be found. In other words, representation—not reason—will prove to be the site of a speculative and not transcendental identity.

If Hegel's philosophy is rightfully diagnosed as something inherently perverse, it is because Hegel thinks representation, properly understood, has the structure of perversion. If the act of representation is the originary gesture that marks the emergence of spirit, then his philosophical project depends on unpacking the structure of perversion in its necessity. In the *Phenomenology*, this analysis occurs in the "Religion" chapter and thus gives this chapter a systematic significance that interpreters of Hegel have thus far ignored.

4 The spirit of perversion

Religion and the speculative identity of feeling and thought

Hegel's fundamental critique of the Romantics is that they substitute the sheer idea of absolute negativity, an unbridgeable gap between subject and object, for a genuine philosophical account of their relation, and worse, in the mode of irony, for their reconciliation. For Hegel, this can only mean that thought finally abandons existence, leaving its conditions to be determined by purely private inclination, without guidance or restriction. Even science itself, in the sense that includes philosophy, must abandon its pretensions to rise above perspective understood in terms of the discretion of its adherents. It is this discretion that becomes absolute in the sense of the unconditioned condition of all philosophical thought. Philosophy is welcome to *imagine* absolutes, but it cannot make the error, or rather commit the crime, of taking these representations seriously. Schelling, and an entire philosophical tradition that follows, castigates Hegel for failing to respect this interdiction.¹ The evil of Hegel's speculative idealism is not that he constructed a system *per se*, but that he did so without (apparent) irony. For the Romantics, irony is the method of last resort against fanaticism, when it appears that the difference between dogma and knowledge can no longer be sincerely maintained. But Hegel does claim to deduce the true grounds of ethical life from ideas about the absolute understood as religious representations. A consistent theme in nearly every criticism of this attempt has been that Hegel blithely presents the peculiar, even

1. See the first chapter. Engels notes: "Hence in this endeavour Hegel had to raise the philosophy of identity above its limitation, the power of being, the pure ability to be, and to make existence subject to it." Frederick Engels, "Schelling On Hegel," in *Frederich Engels: 1838-42*, Collected Works (International Publishers, 1975), 183.

esoteric beliefs of particular culture—fables—as a singularly universal truth, and the brutal fact of the power of its institutions as the essence of freedom. This criticism has been so ingrained in the legacy of Hegel interpretation that many of his most ardent defenders have failed to challenge it, and the few that have tried found it necessary to reject any systematic role for religion at all. Thus, the question of religion in Hegel has always taken the form of an apology, either for Hegel (offered by the Left Hegelians) or for Christianity (the Right Hegelians). The contemporary debate has broadened this division to concern metaphysics itself. Fundamentally, both sides only question whether Hegel’s account of the structure of reality could be coherently understood *without* any reference to its identity with Christianity, rather than consider the specific nature of this identity. In other words, both approaches define speculation according to a predetermined logic of identity, rather than identity according to the specific logic of speculation.

For interpretations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this has meant that the end of the “Spirit” chapter has been taken on its own as something complete, despite the fact that it depicts an antinomy—the resolution of which is only intimated. Neither the purity of the beautiful soul nor the fatalism of acting conscience, however ironic, is sufficient for autonomous action (i.e., genuine agency, or freedom). Both are guilty of what they hypocritically accuse the other: presenting a particular intuition as universal knowledge. Hegel’s conflict with Schleiermacher confirms that resolving this opposition depends on religion and the significance of representation as the moment when particularity is represented in the terms of universality, a moment Schleiermacher’s theology definitively censures. Since, at all points in the development of the *Phenomenology* through “Spirit,” particularity has been portrayed as something untrue, opposed to genuine knowledge of the absolute, it is not clear on what basis the analysis can proceed. It would seem as though Hegel, if he were honestly obeying the strictures of his own method, would have to announce the failure of consciousness to achieve what it wanted to achieve: certain knowledge about the world. As Descartes observed, this absolute negativity would at least be one positive result: *nihil esse certi*.² But this negativity seems to be precisely what leads Schleiermacher to the sentimental view that

2. This is of course precisely how Robert Solomon argues the “Religion” chapter should be read. See Robert C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G. W. F. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (1983).

Hegel so condemns. How can Hegel seek a truth in religion without either returning to rationalism, in contradiction to his own phenomenological investigation? What other kind of identity could still describe the relation between religion and philosophy, beyond the formal identity of metaphysical ontotheology? Ultimately, the question that the “Religion” chapter most directly confronts is: What is speculative identity?

The difficulty of this question is signalled by the final sections of “Spirit.” While undeniably obscure, they can only make any sense at all when read in precisely the same way as every other transition in the *Phenomenology*. As in every such transition, it takes the form of a “sublation”: a fundamental antinomy is ultimately found to subtend the current “shape” of consciousness under discussion that can only be resolved by a new shape that replaces the previous one. This moment is not achieved until the following section—at whatever level of analysis characterizes the current shape, the antinomy always remains irresolvable. This is the real reason the apparently triadic structure of Hegel’s argument has nothing to do with the figure of thesis, antithesis, synthesis—an idea he refers to in the preface as a “lifeless schema” representing one of the worst excesses of “formalism.”³ Formalism here does not simply mean an emphasis on form, but signifies any attempt to break into parts what only concerns the whole. It attempts to comprehend the whole by determining it according to some external, and necessarily arbitrary, schema. Insofar as the *Phenomenology* refuses this gesture, it is impossible to resolve any moment into three distinct propositions in any kind of fixed relation, such as Kant proposes is given by the factual opposition between understanding and reason. Rather, each moment is defined according to a *single* speculative proposition. Of course, the appearance of separation is unavoidable since any proposition

3. “This formalism takes itself to have comprehended and articulated the nature and life of a shape when it affirmed a determination of the schema to be a predicate of that life or shape. The predicate may be subjectivity or objectivity, or it may be that of magnetism, electricity, or, for that matter, contraction or expansion, East or West, and so forth. All of them can be infinitely multiplied, since in this way of proceeding each determination or shape can be used as a form or moment of the schema for every other determination, and each moment can profitably perform the same service for the other—a circle of reciprocity whose result is that one neither learns from experience about the thing at issue nor does one learn what one or the other of the reciprocal elements is.” For more on this see Gustav E. Mueller, “The Hegel Legend of ‘Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis,’” in *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* (Northwestern University Press, 1996), 302. Mueller directs a disproportionate blame to Marxist interpretations of Hegel for this idea, when in fact it has proved an extremely popular misconception among a diverse array of readers of Hegel. However, as I argue in the first chapter, it may be that Marx’s clear subscription to this interpretative approach is largely responsible for his attribution of a “theology” to Hegel.

can be divided into two logically distinct terms. But in an identity proposition no real difference between the terms is admitted, only in the “direction” of proposition. For example, one can as well say that “Paris is the capital of France” as “The capital of France is Paris.” Obviously these claims are not antitheses. That the same reversal *does* yield an antinomy throughout the *Phenomenology* is due to the unique character of propositions it examines, in that their object is the absolute. They unite the whole of being insofar as it is conceived (in terms of universals) and insofar as it is experienced (as particular sensuous content). This kind of proposition violates the most basic law of traditional, syllogistic logic as conceived by Aristotle, one respected by Kant in his construction of the table of judgments, according to which a proposition can determine a substance in terms of a non-substance, or the reverse, but not both as in a speculative identity proposition.⁴ By identifying a universal concept with a particular thing (or several things), speculative identity propositions commit the “error” of determining *being* in terms of something else: thought, or non-being. Nonetheless, ordinary consciousness in its religious existence identifies the terms because it takes both to have absolute necessity. Kant, of course, follows Hume in denying that there is any possibility for thought to comprehend the objective necessity attributed to objects of sense. But, in accordance with the phenomenological method, Hegel reserves judgment about this in favor of examining consciousness’s own judgment and verification of its claims. This process reveals the religious history of representation. In each case, knowledge of the universal term is treated as something immediate and unconditioned, despite its identification with a particular object of experience, because the latter is taken to refer to “nothing but” the universal in question. Because it is an identity proposition, it should be reversible. When the particular is considered in terms of the universal, this turns out to express not only a different but a contradictory sense, and reveals the identity proposition to be false precisely *because* it is not reversible. But this is not simple self-contradiction, because the reversal also yields an entirely new proposition. Thus,

4. Since Aristotle does not use the terms “universal” or “particular” in this way, this formulation is at least overly simplistic. But it should suffice for the general point at issue here that Aristotle’s categories do not allow for the identification of the whole with a part, and thus cannot account for it. It can only appear as unreason. But as an actual shape of consciousness, viz. religion, Hegel must do so. The question is only whether and how the relationship between reason can be comprehended *dialectically* as opposed to only formally. *Aristotle: The Categories on Interpretation* (Harvard University Press, 1938).

although the propositions at issue in the *Phenomenology* might appear to violate the principle of non-contradiction in their very nature, Hegel himself doesn't, at least as a matter of methodology. As such, the identity of speculative propositions cannot be understood as a logic of *sameness* any more than they could be one of pure difference.

This failure of formal identity is in fact confirmed as early as the section of the "Reason" chapter that explicitly takes up the concept of formalism, showing how it rests on a more fundamental speculative proposition. It examines the idea that everything is determined according to a collection of discrete laws governing human consciousness. In other words, a certain fixed number of logical "forms," what Kant called the "categories of the understanding," are constitutive of reality as a whole (i.e., they are absolute).⁵ But these forms cannot be at all determined except as some set of judgments we make about the world ("The chair is outside the house," "There are many books on the floor," etc.). Since such judgments are empirical and thus contingent, these laws can only be external to reason or spirit. Hegel says that the very idea of "fixed determinatenesses, or of a number of different Laws, contradicts. . . the unity of self-consciousness, or of thought and form in general."⁶ The identity proposition in question is false since reason *cannot* be exhaustively defined in advance in terms of a fixed set of laws, but is *actually* only the result of investigation. Consequently the original proposition transforms itself into an entirely new identity proposition: reason is nothing other than the set of behaviors exhibited by actually existing beings that are designated as "rational" (i.e., it is (empirical) "psychology"). Taken in isolation, the respective propositions that the laws of thought a) are known *a priori* and fixed and b) are known *a posteriori* and indeterminate, contradict each other—they are antitheses. But in the context of the analysis itself, *b* is actually the *result* of (the reversal of) *a*, or in Hegel's usual formulation, its "truth."

5. This is not to say that Hegel's account accurately describes Kant's system. But formalism here is not presented as a philosophical theory but a shape of Spirit. The specific problems Kant addresses and his solution have to do with its justification, which of course is of small concern to ordinary consciousness, what Kant and others called "common sense."

6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede, Gesammelte Werke, Band 9 (Felix Meiner, 1980), 168/§300 (hereafter cited as PG, English translation and paragraph number from Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*).

The special significance of this example for the problem of the “Religion” chapter is that the posited equivalence of the terms of a speculative identity is always disrupted by a peculiar advantage of the particular term. Unlike the universal, which is abstract and thus fixed, the particular as a concrete object of experience always exceeds the identity imposed on it. And it is against this experience *of* the non-identity of the particular that the validity of the proposition is tested, and fails. Its excess means that from this failure a new proposition emerges in the transition from one shape to the next. In the case of the transition from formalism to psychology, the attempt to derive logical laws from behavior was an advance not because it was correct but because it directed the attention of consciousness to an abundance of phenomena to which it had previously been blind:

Observational psychology, which in the first instance records its perceptions of the *general modes* coming to its notice in the active consciousness, comes across all sorts of faculties, inclinations, and passions. . . it must at least go so far as to be astonished that such a contingent medley of heterogeneous beings can be together in the mind like things in a bag, more especially since they show themselves to be not dead, inert things but restless movements.⁷

Thus, the purely negative, formal contradiction in every speculative identity proposition has a positive side consisting in an *excess of particularity*. This positivity of experience and not consciousness understood as something isolated and independent—much less Hegel himself—contributes the basis for a new universal subject, a new shape of the absolute. After the failure of formalism, psychology goes on to determine “reason” in terms of the ego, searching for its essential structure among the various external factors that surround and influence it, “setting itself in opposition to them and in fact transforming them.”⁸ In other words, psychology *produces* the concept of the living individual by trying and failing to resolve consciousness in general to a specific “bundle” of laws. It points beyond itself from the epiphenomenal laws of behavior to the novel concept of a physio-biological entity. Accordingly, this marks a new transition in the development of spirit.

7. PG, 169/§303.

8. PG, 170/§306.

The next section continues according to the proposition that what we mean by “reason” can be nothing other than the expression of this complex, absolutely unique nexus of forces that comprise the physical body. A new speculative identity is proposed: “Spirit is a bone.” Formalism and psychology, as the two antinomies that define the first shape of reason, are not contradictory propositions but moments in a continuous experiential development that is not directed by reason but *produces* reason. The dialectic is not method of thought, but a manner of existence. The *Phenomenology* as a whole traces how speculative propositions produce an entirely new proposition that comes into view as the original proposition itself *when viewed from the point of view of experience*. Although *formally* speaking this second form is the same proposition, it enjoys what might be called a “spiritual momentum” by virtue of its excess reality. This excess of concrete experience yields the criterion by which the limits of a fallen shape come into view and that becomes the basis for a new proposition. It is what makes each proposition of identity “speculative” rather than simply malformed. The postulation of every identity by consciousness produces an experience of non-identity, and this experience advances spirit to its next shape.⁹

Both the intractable opposition and surprising similarity displayed by interpretations of “Morality” are due to their mutual neglect of this fact, stemming from their reliance on a formal notion of identity between “Spirit” and “Religion.” They fail to locate a coherent transition between the two because they mistakenly reduce the speculative identity at stake into two ordinary contradictory, ontotheological propositions: being is finite (the impossibility of God) or being is infinite (the necessity of God). The reconciliation of such an antinomy naturally implies a Kantian, transcendental identity even when it is proposed by interpretations that do not explicitly attribute such an idea to Hegel. Interpreting the “Religion” chapter in a way that is consistent with the specificity of Hegel’s method and the whole of the book is impossible as long as it is assumed that it corresponds to some proposition of “Spirit” rather than subverting, or rather, *perverting* it. This means that in order to understand the shape of religion it is necessary to first of all grasp the final sections of “Morality” in terms of a genuinely speculative proposition of identity in which evil, conceived as

9. For more on the importance of the priority of the experience of non-identity in the meaning of speculative propositions see Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 48–49

the universal principle of perversion (*Verkehrung*), emerges as the ultimate shape of the absolute when consciousness becomes aware of the nature of speculative propositions and recognizes that it can only legitimately make an absolute claim at the moment it undermines that very absolute. This means accepting that non-identity might not be systematically eliminated at the moment when opposition is overcome, at the end of “Morality” or in any other transition, but rather genuinely reconciled with identity insofar as it proves the identity of identity and non-identity must be just as much the non-identity of identity with itself. This is the meaning of the conflict between good and evil dramatized at the end of “Spirit.” Spirit discovers perversion as the principle of representation.

The principle of perversion

The antinomy of “Morality” illustrates the paradoxical status of “fanaticism” in Kant’s late philosophy of religion—namely, that it is impossible to distinguish a “good” act, conceived as one stemming from an intention *only* to act in accord with duty, from an “evil” one, which is guided by a particular end or purpose. According to the logic of what Hegel calls “misrepresentation,” every duty, once acted upon, must necessarily enter into connection to some particular interest, although duty must be utterly *disinterested*. The necessity of faith as a conceptual moment of spirit arises precisely when consciousness faces the world of culture it has built as an intrinsic distortion of what it takes to be true, an “absolute perversion” (*absoluten Verkehrung*).¹⁰ This does not manifest simply as the condemnation of the world, however, since the conscious individual cannot remove himself from it. The response to perversion is rather the formation of an autonomous “religious community.”¹¹ The primary meaning of this community is not what Kant called the visible church but the invisible one. The flight from perversion is a collective flight into the self as the putative pure point of contact with the absolute. In Kant’s practical philosophy, this is the flight from fanaticism that the Romantics took up even as they rejected the authority of the church. In Hegel’s analysis of this flight at the end of the “Spirit” chapter, his primary interest is the confrontation with

10. PG, 283/§521, translation modified.

11. PG, 290/§535.

perversion and the failed attempt to escape it. On the basis of the experience of moral evil, defined as the representation of the absolute in the particular images of religious doctrine, it produces the idea of religion as the absolute necessity of this perversion.

What many Romantics attempted to preserve from Kantian morality was the idea that only the purely internal *feeling* of conscience is truly pure from any and all taint of particularity. This was typified by the figure of the “beautiful soul,” in a purely negative renunciation of action. It judges those who do dare to act, finding them guilty of hypocrisy insofar as their claim to act in accord with universal principles is always undermined by evidence that their particular interest has been served through their actions.¹² But the superiority of this position proved to be illusory because it is also a kind of hypocrisy. Its very act of judgment is clearly also a kind of fanaticism, a zealotry (*Eifer*) that accomplishes the “very opposite of what it means to do,” because in taking the appearance of interest for what is by definition impossible to perceive—the intention of the agent—it implicitly presents its own subjective feeling as something objective. It too is evil according to its own standard.¹³ The “judge” and the “agent” are therefore merely two aspects of a single figure that represents the unity of the identity proposition at the core of “Morality,” that the ultimate principle of right *is* individual “conscience” (*Gewissen*). The immediate, abstract meaning of this proposition is the inner conviction of the beautiful soul. Faced with the ineluctable necessity of acting, the particular decision of conscience appears “evil.” But in actuality, there is no difference between the two. Conscience cannot be experienced outside the practical engagements with the world that subjects designate as having the special character of free or moral ends, whether these ends take the negative form of an abstention from action, or some positive principles. The apparent antithesis of the sides is only an illusion suffered by moral consciousness as stemming from a hypothesis of conscience itself. Experience constantly demonstrates that an objective standard of right cannot exist in abstraction from the particular action; it can only be “known” as a purely internal feeling of the individual. This can only mean that, *from the point of view of experience*, fanaticism is inescapable; evil is the *truth* of morality, not its antithesis. In the end (and thus the

12. PG, §660.

13. PG, §663.

truth) of “Spirit,” Hegel embraces what Kant tried to fend off by means of the regulative function of transcendental ideas as the essence of religion itself: the particularity of the absolute.

The analysis of “Spirit” culminates in the moment when “evil” conscience gains an awareness of its fundamental identity with the beautiful soul as agents of individual conviction. It “confesses” its evil, and in so doing, seeks reconciliation with it, meaning a new universal principle. But the greater abstraction of its concept of right, in fact its absolute negativity, means that the “hard heart” of the beautiful soul still labors under the delusion that it is somehow exempt from the necessity of violating duty and acting in the name of a passionate, particular interest. This allows the beautiful soul to avoid admitting the failure of its speculative position and reciprocating the gesture of confession, directly manifesting the spiritual momentum of the particular in its confrontation with the immovability of abstract universality. The judging soul refuses to acknowledge that its judgment is an act also susceptible to moral criticism. Clinging to its pure feeling of superiority, it “passes off such judging, not as another manner of being wicked, but as the correct consciousness of the action.”¹⁴ Thus, the beautiful soul persists as an independent position through the purely negative act of a refusal, a refusal that is in fact a denial of its own existence as a moral agent. It condemns itself to spiritual stagnation: “It is thus its own self which hinders that other’s return from the deed into the spiritual existence of speech and into the identity of Spirit, and by this hardness of heart produces the disparity which still exists.”¹⁵ The spiritual advantage of evil lies in the concrete experience of the imbrication of rational duty and passionate interest that forces it to renounce the individual autonomy of its “separate being-for-self.” In so doing the evil conscience draws the antithesis between it and the judging conscience into itself, so that it actually occupies and unifies *both* positions, leaving the beautiful soul behind. It continues to act, of course, but it also *judges* itself as not thereby actualizing an unconditional (i.e., absolute law). The political implication of this development is not the repudiation but the radicalization of Kant’s coordination of

14. PG, 359/§666.

15. PG, 360/§668.

the church and the state. It is the reduction of the church to a state whose sacred task is to prevent the inevitable individual feeling of justice from being actualized.¹⁶

But, as Hegel makes clear in his response to the Romantics and above all to Schleiermacher, this is not yet a genuine reconciliation. Due to the intransigence of the beautiful soul, evil conscience has failed to locate a proposition to replace morality, one that would define the imagination as something not *simply* particular. This assessment is at the heart of Hegel's concept of the modern age. The problem is not simply the persistence of the possibility of the beautiful soul. Though existing individuals, institutions, and even whole cultures might stagnate or be transformed, and thus disappear, the unique ideas they represent, and especially those produced by their conflict, live on. Once a new spiritual shape is born, it can never really die. Rather, the peculiar problem of modernity is that none of these forms any longer enter into conflict. Evil conscience sinks into "opposition" (*Gegensatz*) and "exchange" (*Wechsel*) with itself. This is a very strange type of reconciliation, where the duality does not disappear, but enters into a unity of permanent flux such that one side cannot exist without the other, at least as knowledge (i.e., self-consciously). The beautiful soul is a "pure knowledge" of "abstract essence" over and against a consciousness of *being* the essence. The former expresses the truth (universality) of spirit, whereas the latter manifests its existence (particularity). But concretely this means that every individual is certain only about their own absolutely pure identity (*reinen Eins absolute*) with no real connection to the others. This situation is what Hegel calls "absolute discretion" (*Diskretion*). Like many important concepts in Hegel, this doubly signifies the separation of each individual and their resulting unilateral right to judge all the others.¹⁷

In order to move beyond this antinomy, a new concept of consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, or spirit is required—a new concept of "Self." Just as the autonomy of reason was outstripped by the richer concept of spirit as a historical process, the latter is now forced to confront

16. This is why the only consistent positive feature of Kant's political thought is *obedience*. The ideals of equal participation in freely rational deliberation are ultimately conditional. They might be necessary for justice, but they can only be hoped for, never brought about through force. See Kant, "On the Common Saying This May be True in Theory but It Does Not Apply in Practice," 81–2.

17. Although Hegel does not use the term, we can compare this description to Nietzsche's characterization of the passive nihilism of "last man."

the limits of control over this process, a source of its purposes or ends beyond its individual convictions. It produces for itself, out of itself, a new concept. It is “refined” into a “purity” in which “there is no longer in them any existence devoid of self, any negative of consciousness.”¹⁸ Because their distinction can no longer account for a concept of experience beyond the individual agent, the moral concepts of “good” or “evil” no longer have any meaning. Consciousness no longer acts “in accord with” the absolute, but actualizes the absolute through its practical engagement with the world. Evil conscience’s recognition puts it beyond morality, insofar as it gains a cognition of the limits of morality itself, and is thereby the ability to transcend these limits consciously, which is to say, according to a principle. This is what Hegel means by the phrase “The wounds of spirit heal, and leave no scars behind.”¹⁹ In contrast to the apparent self-denial that initially seemed to characterize reconciliation, this is *not* either refraining from acting or from judging. Everyone acts, and every act is a presentation of the universal in the form of a particular. This “evil” act thus has a “purpose” (*Zweck*) in its being-in-itself, which is actualized in its “discourse” (*Rede*). Each consciousness exists in “absolute difference” insofar as each is at the same time fully determined and universal: “The word of reconciliation. . . is absolute spirit.” It is this determination itself that comprises knowledge of absolute spirit, religion.

The speculative universal concept that emerges from this is not a *particular* doctrine, but describes a *practical activity* that Hegel characterizes as the “movement of this antithesis” that is absolute spirit. In other words, it is a kind of relation, opposition, that actually comprises the “identity” that underlies all of its discrete shapes. To exist as spirit is to oppose not an abstract and therefore necessarily unrelated, indifferent other, but oneself *as* the other. Acting and not acting, as self-conscious expression of conscience—defined as the purely inward, individual cognition of the absolute—are not separable in two essential forms that it is tempting to call theory and practice, but remain identical in a single process of the self-overcoming of moral action. The “actual I” is utter abandonment of either side of the antinomy of morality and their return to the unity/universality of their being as forces of pure opposition. But this otherwise essentially negative characterization

18. PG, 361/§671.

19. PG, 360/§669.

has the positive characteristic of affirming the factual existence of both sides, precisely since their self-conscious practical activity of mutual opposition is what constitutes the genuine resolution—self-consciousness of the fact that the opposition is *not* an ontological difference. Perversion, the presentation of a particular as a universal, is the truth of spirit, and thus the essence of religion. It knows that at the level of morality, perversion is the only possible relation to the universal. The history of perverting the universal by particularizing it, by depicting it in accordance with the content of the imagination, is the history of religion. But it is also the history of spirit, insofar as the determinate shape of spirit at each moment of its development reflects the specificity of what is opposed. Religion is therefore the subjectification of spirit by spirit itself.

Religion as self-subjectification

As several commentators have noted, the first appearance of religious concepts in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is far earlier than the “Religion” chapter or even the transition from “Morality.” “Consciousness” contains references to “the supersensible,” the “eternal,” and the “permanent beyond.”²⁰ This last figure appears again in “Self-Consciousness,” and arguably even the figure of “nothingness” in “Reason” has religious overtones. In “Spirit” one finds the “the unknown night of Fate” and the “empty supersensible,” and the entire analysis of “Faith and Pure Insight.” Hegel directly acknowledges the religious significance of these concepts.²¹ But these do not come within the horizon of what is comprehended as truth to consciousness in each moment, but rather form its limit or other. Only in the “Religion” chapter do all these figures appear as a true content known and affirmed by consciousness itself only insofar as it performs the act of representation. Such a new awareness of a previously unrecognized dimension of spirit is integral to every moment in its development. Until “Religion,” every shape of consciousness rested on a particular relation and thus division between consciousness and non-consciousness, subject and object. What defines representation as the kind of speculative proposition specific to religion is the collapse of this dis-

20. PG, 87–89.

21. PG, 363–364.

tion in the identification of the objective principles of the world with the particular products of its own imagination. The “Religion” chapter doesn’t examine the relation between subject and object as much as it examines the *production* of this relation—the determination of the objective ground of subjectivity and thus the component of subjectivity within objectivity. Hegel writes, here we observe how the “Self subjects itself to universal beings” (*Selbst, das die allgemeinen Wesen sich unterwirft*) by positing an identity between the subject (i.e., itself) and its object, the world.²² Consciousness does this by making one part of the world stand in for the whole, and in shaping its world we as observers now know that it is also shaping itself as spirit. Religion is in essence what evil conscience finally accepted as a necessary condition of moral action, presenting a particular interest *as* the universal good. The “truth” of morality was that the absolute can only be what it appears to be for the subject, simply because, by definition, consciousness cannot relate to something utterly alien to it.²³ Religion transforms what was purportedly incomprehensible to consciousness into something comprehensible. It is the name of the moment in which consciousness thereby goes beyond whatever limit it has imposed on its own understanding by virtue of its concept of what counts as truth for it. This moment has occurred throughout the foregoing analysis, but always as something that appeared from the outside. Now Hegel will examine consciousness’s own active role in it.

Hegel calls religion the “perfection” (*Vollendung*) of spirit in the sense of it being an end and a culmination. It is the *Ursprung* from which every shape of spirit has flowed, and in this sense it has to be considered identical to these shapes in some way. It is not surprising that the most common interpretation of this identity finds its strongest support at the opening of the “Religion” chapter:

The perfection of religion consists in the two [spirit and religion] becoming identical with each other; not only that religion concerns itself with Spirit’s reality but, con-

22. PG, 390/§730, translation modified.

23. This of course makes no sense at all if consciousness is understood to mean “mind” or “thoughts” and “reality” is understood to be “body” or “matter.” That all of reality was physical in this sense was apparent at the level of reason. This only induced consciousness to project its own existence into another “supersensible” realm, as a negation of the apparent one. At the same time, this negation did not remain a denial insofar as evil conscience embraced the necessity of “lowering” itself to action. The moment of religion *in* morality occurred when it represented to itself the divine character of this self-subjugation.

versely, that Spirit, as self-conscious Spirit, becomes actual to itself and *object to its consciousness*.²⁴

According to most readings of this claim, the mutuality of this description means that both religion and spirit provide full and complete accounts of the genesis of “Absolute Knowing” according to the limits of their unique forms. The claim that the content of consciousness is the *same* implies a one-to-one correspondence between the shapes of one and those of the other. The only difference between them would be that the former takes a rational and the latter a symbolic-representational form. However, nowhere here does Hegel describe history, or the state, or any of the elements specific to “Spirit,” as “perfect” in the sense he describes religion. On the contrary, we saw that the end of “Spirit” consists in an antinomy that is not and cannot be resolved at the level of an abstract analysis of right. This is why Hegel insists that religion *contains* spirit.²⁵

So, on the one hand, religion is not the same as spirit because it is fuller, richer, more complete in its account of reality. But on the other hand, at the very moment that he describes religion as a kind of perfection, he also identifies it as a limit, or even a defect. No instance of religion can ever be adequate to its object, and in this sense it definitively *lacks* perfection. It is not simply a form of truth: it is incompletely true. This is because religion depends on the the operation of consciousness that deals in *Vorstellung*:

But, in this picture-thinking [*Vorstellung*],²⁶ reality does not receive its perfect [*Vollkommnes*] due, viz. to be not merely a guise but an independent free existence; and, conversely, because it lacks perfection within itself it is a *specific* shape which does not attain to what it sets out to show forth, viz. Spirit that is conscious of itself.²⁷

Far from its meaning being equivalent to spirit, representation is both less and more than the rational account of history offered in the latter. This complete incompleteness is the paradox of

24. PG, 365/§678.

25. This means that spirit *is* religion, that religion is its defining mode of being. In this sense the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be said to be, in truth, a phenomenology of religion.

26. Miller’s choice of this awkward neo-logism to translate *Vorstellungen* is actually defensible precisely because it conveys the link between *Vorstellungen* and the imagination, which would be perhaps more obvious to modern German readers than Hegel’s contemporaries, who preferred the term *Einbildung*.

27. PG, 412.

religion. Representation is itself limited insofar as it deals only in particulars. It is incapable of expressing universality, as Hegel clearly and consistently maintains in all his work, including in the “Religion” chapter. But religion is also the most fundamental account of reality because it accepts no limit to consciousness’s access to the universal. This is what makes it so important to the aims and structure of the *Phenomenology* as an examination of the appearance of the absolute. By immediately presenting a particular as something universal it connects the notion of the absolute most directly to what was discovered to be its true origin: individual conscience. In religion, the origin of the law comes into view—not in spite of but because it is mistaken about the literal truth of this origin. Religion takes its content to be something given to it by an eternal and therefore external source, but its depiction of this relation makes it conscious of the indispensable function of the imagination in the generation of this content.

Thus, it is true that religion has its own history parallel to that of spirit because it is the real production of that history.²⁸ It is the perfection of spirit, the spirit *of* religion, insofar as spirit and religion are brought into unity in the final stage. Religion is always the incipient self-consciousness of spirit, but it can only become fully self-conscious when it abandons the immediacy of *Vorstellen*. It both precedes and exceeds history. Its perfection is at once complete, containing all reality of spirit, but also an incomplete process, a fragment of the unity of spirit. For Hegel, “Spirit” and “Religion” comprise, as in every moment, a complete speculative proposition about the identity of subject and object—the *genuine* absolute. The one-sidedness of non-metaphysical *and* Christian interpretations of Hegel is due to their acceptance of only one of these two senses of the perfection of religion. For the former, religion is simply an unnecessary illusion in a rational society. For the latter, rational society is a mere imitation of truths gleaned through faith. Both reduce a speculative identity into a merely formal identity and ignores the active role of consciousness entirely, although for different reasons. A traditional, ontotheological account takes religion too much at face value, projecting agency along with religious consciousness onto an imaginary being. But neo-Kantian

28. As Jon Stewart painstakingly demonstrates, however, this parallelism is not unique to religion and spirit—it is part of the fundamental structure of the book and applies to all parts. See Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation*.

interpretations make the history of spirit into something that happens to it, a structure imposed on it instead of invented by it.

The most important distinguishing characteristic of religion as a shape of spirit, then, is the fact that it transcends the universal/particular, or objective/subjective divide. Each of its moments is “individual”—a necessary part of the same whole. As such, every religion represents the speculative proposition, which means it follows a different course of development than a progression of shapes: “Religion presupposes that these [shapes] have run their full course and is their *simple* totality or absolute self.”²⁹ To illustrate this relation of each shape of spirit to each other, and to religion, Hegel turns to a metaphor he makes use of elsewhere, of the nodal line.

Thus while the previous single series in its advance marked the retrogressive steps in it by nodes, but continued itself again from them in a single line, it is now, as it were, broken at these nodes, at these universal moments, and falls apart into many lines which, gathered up into a single bundle, at the same time combine symmetrically so that the similar differences in which each particular moment took shape within itself meet together.³⁰

Each shape has its own “peculiar principle,” according to which it can be (and was throughout the *Phenomenology*) distinguished from the others, but it just as much depends on the others with which it therefore exists on a continuum of “similar differences.” Religion gathers these moments into a reunified whole by explicitly illustrating this relation of identity. Crucially, this means that the development of religion is *not* a purely historical development, governed by the external necessity of temporal sequence. Religion also exhibits a conceptual necessity as a result of the universal scope of its claims.³¹ However, neither is religion a return to the purely conceptual shapes of consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason. In religion, these shapes have all “returned as into their ground” as really existing worldviews according to which one moment of consciousness,

29. PG, 365/§679.

30. PG, 367/§681.

31. Thus, while spirit naturally takes its past as something over and done with, religion unites past, present, and future according to its own system of representations. PG, 365–366.

or self-consciousness, or reason is made to stand in for the whole. Religion is both conceptual and historical, or rather, both subjective and objective—it is constitutive of both, and is logically prior to both. Hegel’s account of religion can thus be best understood as an account of the *necessity* of representation that responds directly to the account offered by Kant in the first *Critique*.

For Kant the necessity of representation is grounded in what he calls the “pure forms of intuition”: space and time, the most fundamental structures of subjective experience. From the vantage point of purely subjective *perception*, experience has the character of a static indifferent manifold: space. Insofar as the world is taken as simple independent appearance, it appears as a simple identity. However, every attempt by consciousness to make sense of such a manifold as a unity comes up against the irresolvable traces of subjectivity’s involvement in the moment of “appearance.” These traces ripple out from cognition as the absolute difference of each cognition from every other. Kant argues that the unity exhibited by cognition thus implies a stable unity that is non-spatial. He calls this the “transcendental unity” of apperception. If space is the medium in which the world is conceived *sans* subject, the “view from nowhere,” time is the medium in which the self is conceived as transcending determination by virtue of its self-reflective awareness, the condition of the possibility of “objectivity” as such (although not necessarily of the object itself). Time thus exhibits a certain metaphysical priority with regard to representation that manifests in the overarching ethical concern for autonomy. But, as in the case of space, the purity of any account of the subject turns out to be tainted by the intrusion of its opposite—the subject considered as a thing has its own external, objective conditions. Ultimately, it seems that we cannot understand the object without an account of the subject, and we cannot understand the subject except insofar as we objectify it. In this sense it might be possible to speak of an antinomy of representation that underlies the antinomies of reason. Kant’s solution to this problem is to reserve in advance a territory proper to each, each with a different necessity: the logical necessity of the subjective will, and the real necessity of the objective world. He “makes room” for faith by limiting the understanding, and *vice versa*. The core of Hegel’s response is a rejection of this strategy that, despite being no secret, is precisely what far too many interpretations of his account of religion ignore. He defines religion

according to the idea that these aspects of cognition cannot be simply indifferent “forms” taken on by sense (which is nothing without them): just as space seems more fundamentally grounded in time, both ultimately have their ground in something outside themselves. Kant himself referred to this implicit ground as the “transcendental object = x,” reflecting the fundamental principle of his philosophy to place it beyond consideration, according to his argument that our cognition is not adequate to its comprehension.³² Nonetheless, consciousness does implicitly conceive of this object in its religious representations: the divine is precisely an object reducible to neither space nor time, but that somehow gives rise to them. In this object the two sides of necessity that the transcendental hypothesis holds apart are united. In other words, consciousness makes an attempt to conceive of this object, and even if Hegel has already traced the failure of rationalism to justify this attempt, its failure remains to be assessed *phenomenologically*. The incomplete perfection of religion indicates that its fundamental question is not one of the ability of finite consciousness to conceive an infinite being, since the impossibility of such knowledge is already marked by the identification of representation as the essential operation of religion. Rather, the question is how this impossibility is bound up with the self-engendering process of spirit.

Thus, Hegel defines religion as the representation of the transcendental object. But this definition is only a “notion” (*Begriff*) of religion. It simply describes what the contradiction of morality implicitly requires—the reconciliation of absolute subjectivity with absolute objectivity. Representation always only proceeds by depicting the absolute in terms of time and space. This depiction concerns for the first time the relation between subject and object itself, the *process* by which subject and object are “split asunder.”³³ Religion is this process. In this sense the content of religion never changes: “The series of different religions that will come into view sets forth again only the different aspects of a single religion.”³⁴ Initially it prioritizes one moment as determinant of the other. It depicts the object as something essentially subjective, or vice versa. As “Natural Religion” it prioritizes the objective dimension; as the “Religion of Art” it prioritizes the subjective

32. KpV, A108–9.

33. PG, 368/§682, translation modified.

34. PG, 369/§684.

dimension. Only as “Revealed Religion” is the idea of their *relation* given priority. In this moment, Hegel says that “Spirit has indeed achieved its true *shape*.” It is almost certainly true that by this he meant Christianity. In this sense Christianity completes the perfection of religion. However, as he immediately qualifies, this not only means that Christianity provides the most complete account of the identity between subject and object, but also that it stands in the greatest tension with itself, verging on hypocrisy, by confusing the content of its representation (i.e., imagination) with reason, and insisting on the persistent separation of what itself knows to be essentially union. It can resolve this antithesis only by making this content nothing, the absolute into absolute absence or lack. It represents the *life* of spirit as a spiritual *death*. The “truth of this belief” is how this corresponds to “actual Spirit.”³⁵ In other words, the “true” content of religion is not the representative content of particular theologies, but the “activity” (*Tätigkeit*) by which consciousness produces it, and thereby reproduces itself as subject, since the particularity of the representation prevents it from obtaining truth. The act of reproduction always manifests as an act of representation. Both simultaneously comprise the act of religion. If Hegel is consistent in his method, their dialectical sublimation will generate the concept of “Absolute Knowing.” The truth of religion will be absolute knowing, and its content will no longer be bound to a particular representation, but rather concern the necessary relationship between spirit’s representation of the absolute and its reproduction of itself.

Representation and reproduction

The structure of the “Religion” chapter mirrors the structure of the *Phenomenology* thus far. Before the gulf between consciousness and its world can be bridged, its real distance needs to be comprehended. The aspects of objectivity and subjectivity must be conceived in their extreme opposition between one another such that it becomes clear that neither can count as absolute because one is nothing without the other—the *unity* alone is what is absolute. The central thesis of Hegel’s account of this unity is its essentially linguistic form. Language is more prominently the defining

35. PG, 370/§684.

characteristic of subjective religions, or what Hegel calls religions of “art.”³⁶ However, even the objective or natural religions are linguistic in the sense that they are expressed in narrative form. The transition to subjective religions occurs with the self-consciousness of the essential role of narrativity. Language will continue to constitute the final shape of “revelatory” religions, theology, and the “word of God,” law. With Christianity, consciousness represents the necessity that this law be produced by its own act and according to its own necessity, not from an external, alien being. The three moments of religion then trace the linguistic development of spirit from unconscious representation to conscious representation.

As the most immediate and abstract, and therefore the most dominated by objectivity, the “natural” religions exhibit only the barest recognition of subjectivity at all. The first shape of natural religion, the religion of light, divides existence into the poles of light and darkness, day and night. Light is recognized as the divine source of everything, and thus the only *intrinsically* real thing, the only substance: simple objectivity, or “being.” Everything else is nothing without light. “In virtue of this determination, this ‘shape’ is the pure, all-embracing and all-pervading essential light of sunrise, which preserves itself in its formless substantiality. Its otherness is the equally simple negative, darkness.”³⁷ Consciousness, insofar as it finds itself in the world as a thing among other things, would seem to be implicitly included in this latter category. But unlike other things, other particular objects, subjectivity is shrouded in a darkness that the light of objectivity cannot penetrate. It is something that cannot even appear in this moment. However, already in plant and animal religion, subjectivity begins to take shape in the minimal form of particular objects—*living* things. These exhibit will and purpose, and when consciousness designates this tree, or this snake, as a divine thing, this is less important than the subjectivity posited *behind* the object. Any plant or animal can be identified with the divine precisely insofar as they all exhibit the same purposive nature. This is confirmed by the fact that plant and animal religion is *not* a pantheism—mountains, clouds, rivers, not even the sun are considered here by Hegel, despite obviously being part of a

36. “Linguistic” or even “communicative” might therefore be more useful terms for what Hegel calls *Kunst-Religion*, since English lacks the connotation of “artificial” that obviously opposes the “natural” form of objective religion.

37. PG, 371/§686.

multitude of religious traditions that have coexisted with, even been closely linked with religions that he is describing.³⁸ As soon as subjectivity appears in religious representation, it is identified with the divine. In its natural form, religion always emphasizes the objective, it is projected beyond or behind the content of the religious representation itself.

Objectivity is taken to its extreme in the final moment of natural religion, when “Nature, withdrawing into its essence, deposes its living, self-particularizing, self-entangling manifold existence to the level of an unessential husk, which is the covering for the inner being.”³⁹ At this point, subjectivity is discharged into a transcendent “artificer” of nature. In this shape the idea of purpose is isolated as the aspect of nature that is divine. The representation of this religious shape retreats to an abstraction insofar as it removes the divine from nature entirely, but only by at the same time making it responsible for everything orderly and comprehensible about sensible nature—the rigid form against the “incommensurability of the round.”⁴⁰ The religion of the artificer confronts the defining problem of purely objective religion. What is considered purely objective necessarily lacks a principle of unity since by definition it is indeterminate difference, a pure manifold. But the very act of conception requires one and thus creates its own. The determinateness of representation in objective religion is caught between the visible but lifeless appearance of nature and the invisible idea of life that consciousness in fact projects onto nature. The image of the “artificer” refers to a geometric perfection never directly found in nature but always implied by it. The actual existence of the divine artificer is the living human artist who chooses and fashions the representations, and who therefore knows that these representations are *only* their own and not in truth divine at all. In this tension the predominant significance of the practical activity of representation becomes clear. The religion of the artificer invents particular symbols and structures to represent divine power, but in actuality, the practice of this religion requires that consciousness itself *produce* them and say what they really mean. At the same time, even though religious consciousness at this stage

38. It might be possible to consider these kinds of religions that find divinity more generally exhibited, but still in particular kinds or even specific things, intermediate forms between the first and second shapes of natural religion.

39. PG, §696.

40. Again, it is tempting to observe that Hegel seems to be referencing Egyptian culture here, and this is in fact confirmed in his lectures on religion but the Egyptian gods were a pantheon of vividly imagined human-animal hybrids.

takes its own work and contribution to be inessential—not necessarily a sacred act—its influence inevitably comes to bear on the material, and its subjectivity is mixed in despite efforts to isolate the objective. The symbols of natural religion can never be adequate expressions of the divine; the purported inessentiality of the act of their production infects their representative function. They represent more than they intended. This excess opens up the idea of an entirely new world for the divine. The organic, or natural, forms that adorn the rigid form of the symbols of this religious shape no longer contain any meaning. The “truth” of the symbol is said to be beyond the actual object of reverence:

The artificer therefore unites the two [subjective act and divine object] by blending the natural and the self-conscious shape, and this ambiguous being which is a riddle to itself, the conscious wrestling with the non-conscious, the simple inner with the multiform outer, the darkness of thought mating with the clarity of utterance, these break out into the language of a profound, but scarcely intelligible wisdom.⁴¹

If the outer form of representation is a mere shell of the inner truth, then what object can be plausibly designated as the true home of divinity? Only the productive act itself, the work of art, whose real significance lies in the stories consciousness tells about it.

Thus, although this moment marks the first appearance of an “art religion,” it is not the first or last form of religion that involves art. In fact, because religion, according to Hegel, always functions by representing the absolute, they are all essentially *aesthetic*. For Hegel, all religions are art religions, and all art has a religious function. The religions of nature depicted the divine in the form of this or that plant or animal, and this depiction has the same status as the more traditionally recognized art forms Hegel will now analyze as religion. This is because, as he states in the introduction to his lectures on aesthetics, “the beauty of art is the beauty of spirit,” and religion is the ground of spirit’s actual existence. What marks the beginning of the religions of art is not the sheer practice of art, then, but the recognition of the necessity of this practice for knowledge of divine. The religions of art are guided by the principle that the divine can only

41. PG, 375/§697.

appear in and through art, and in that sense they prioritize the *subjective* aspect. As such the form of art proper to it will eventually prove to be the *temporal* structure of the narrative.

But initially this shift begins with the simple recognition of the incommensurability of the *symbolic* representations that characterized the natural religions with the absolute. The direct “imitation” of the form of plants and animals has already given way to the abstractions of geometric shapes. But these have now proved inadequate as well because they bear no positive relation whatsoever to the actual divine nature they were supposed to represent, which is now projected beyond or behind the representations themselves. The essential connection is rediscovered in the activity of the artist. Thus, the religion of art properly speaking begins with the explicit positing of an identity between the human and the divine. Accordingly, humanity itself is the content of the representation of art religion. In the first instance Hegel seems to have in mind Ancient Greek sculpture—statues that idealize the human form. But unlike in the case of natural religions, where such a static medium was appropriate in the depiction of a wholly objective concept of divinity, it is not adequate here, where divinity is conceived in thoroughly subjective terms. A statue is just a motionless *thing*—a rock. Its not adequate to the task of capturing the dynamism of subjectivity:

The work of art therefore demands another element of its existence, the god another mode of coming forth than this, in which, out of the depths of his creative night, he descends into the opposite, into externality, into the determination of the Thing which lacks self-consciousness. This higher element is Language—an outer reality that is immediately self-conscious existence.⁴²

Language is the necessary element for religious art because only language is capable of uniting the actual activity of the production of the work of art with the actual spirit of human existence that it represents. Despite what Hegel names the first shape of art religion, “the abstract work of art,” language is not somehow *intrinsically* more abstract than other mediums. Insofar as it is religious, it remains within the domain of representation and is therefore ineluctably particular. Rather, the signifying component of language distinguishes it from the more imitative forms of representation

42. PG, §710.

observed in natural religion, insofar as these are embedded in an entire grammar comprehensible only in terms of the unity of an actually existing community.⁴³ Hegel continues:

Just as the individual self-consciousness is immediately present in language, so it is also immediately present as a universal infection; the complete separation into independent selves is at the same time the fluidity and the universally communicated unity of the many selves; language is the soul existing as a soul.⁴⁴

The essential function of language is the unification of what is otherwise irremediably separate. But as a thing that exists in the world, that is, something *objective*, it appears as something given to consciousness from the outside (i.e., as something divinely inspired). In order for language to accomplish its religious function, to represent subjectivity, it attempts the impossible task of excising from itself all traces of objectivity.

Taken together, all of this means that language in the first shape of art religion is only abstract because the content of the representation does not yet have an essential link to the divine. In fact, it does not even incorporate language as an essential component of the production of religious art. The shift from objectivity to subjectivity empties the content of representation of its religious significance and transfers it indiscriminately to any and all acts of representation. This explains the strange fact that first shape of art religion is really three shapes. The first reflects the fact that the artist, who is already occupied with the production of religious symbols, begins to focus on the form of the *human being* as a better representation of the divine than any geometric, or other, shape. But the most immediate *linguistic* form of religious art is the spoken prophecy of the “Oracle.” Speaking in riddles, the Oracle immediately and indiscriminately connects the external, apparently contingent objects of nature—“from birds, or trees, or the yeasty earth, the vapour from which deprives self-consciousness of its self-possession”—with the idea of a universal truth that

43. On this basis, it is unclear whether Derrida is accurate when he says that semiology “does not belong to the science of consciousness, i.e. to phenomenology” (Jacques Derrida, “Speech and Writing According to Hegel,” in *G. W. F. Hegel: Critical Assessments*, ed. Robert Stern (Routledge, 1993), 458), at least insofar as this implies that Hegel does not think that a theory of signs is necessary in order to conduct that science. This undermines his fatal conclusion that Hegel prioritizes speech over writing.

44. PG, 380/§710.

Hegel explicitly associates with the “ethical nation.”⁴⁵ There is no apparent connection between such random images and the necessity of law. The Oracle speaks for the gods but she cannot be made accountable for her speech. As a result, the mediation—that is to say—interpretation of these “signs” cannot constitute a truly universal science. Rather, it is left to the deliberation of the individual supplicant, who can only draw on their own idea of what will they express. Naturally, this tends to correspond to whatever is suited to their own best interest. The truth of subjectivity at this point is an entirely individual matter. Its connection to the universal dimension of spirit is only implicit. Thus, finally, a self-conscious connection between the representation of the divine and the community is only established when the rites of what Hegel calls the “cult” are raised to the level of an enduring institution.

The cult (*Kultus*) has special significance for the development of the concept of the religion in the *Phenomenology*. Superficially it seems to share many of its essential characteristics with the figure of the sect (*Sekte*) from Hegel’s early writings, especially *The Positivity of Christianity*, where it stood for everything “positive” in religion, in contrast with the latter’s rational content—that is, (for the young Hegel) its truth.⁴⁶ Nearly all of Hegel’s early criticism of Christianity centered on its institution as a sect surrounding the historical figure of Jesus. But he also acknowledged a kind of historical necessity for the existence of a Christian sect. He observes how often Jesus speaks on concrete, individual, and even personal terms about virtue, though never in a way that contradicts the idea that the content of his speech is essentially universal. Hegel speculated that this was required by his opposition to the thoroughly positive ecclesiastical authority of the time. This authority made a genuinely rational appeal impossible. A teacher “who wished to convince them of the inadequacy of a statutory ecclesiastical faith must of necessity have based his assertions on a like authority.”⁴⁷ So one of Hegel’s early insights about religion was that the opposition between the positive and the philosophical elements of religion must take place *within* the realm of the positive. But at that point he suggested that the result is only that a “false virtue has been

45. PG, 381/§712.

46. Hegel, “The Positivity of the Christian Religion,” §5.

47. *Ibid.*, 76.

produced.”⁴⁸ The first revision of this argument in *The Spirit of Christianity* turned to the immediacy of feeling to overcome the opposition between the rationality of Christianity’s moral message and its irrational faith. But with the figure of the cult, Hegel introduces an entirely new idea about the value of positivity in religion, based not in feeling but action.

In contrast to the figure of the sect in *The Spirit of Christianity*, the *Phenomenology*’s portrayal of cult religion centers on the social mediation of ritual acts, especially the symbolic self-renunciation of sacrifice. This communal act of sacrifice, though demanded by divine powers, is what constitutes the community, rather than any natural order. This shifts the locus of agency from individual reason to social representation that precisely dissolves the members’ objective individuality, and all its associated needs and interests, into a subjective unity that is now the designated vehicle of divinity:

The act of the Cult itself begins, therefore, with the pure surrender of a possession which the owner, apparently without any profit whatsoever to himself, pours away or lets rise up into smoke. In so doing, he renounces before the essence of his pure consciousness all possession and right of the property and enjoyment thereof.⁴⁹

The sacrifice initially appears as a self-denial, where the members’ possessions, and more fundamentally their own person, are destroyed. This would seem to suggest that access to the divine whole requires the individual part to perish. And it’s true that the explicit meaning of ritual is the transcendence of divine power over earthly goods and human desire. But for the phenomenological observers not committed to the belief in these supersensible beings, the performance of the ritual actually demonstrates the power of human *self-transcendence*. It marks the first appearance of the idea, absolutely inescapable today, that the world was made for human consumption—things make themselves available for appropriation for our own peculiar purposes. Indirectly, the cult depicts human beings as the “lords” of nature, able to dispose of it as we see fit, not only for the satisfaction of a need but also as a wanton act of pure destruction. And of course, the ultimate prerogative for

48. Hegel, “The Positivity of the Christian Religion,” 76.

49. PG, 384/§718.

what may be consumed and in what matter belongs to the human lord and law-giver of the nation: “The dwelling and halls of god are for the use of man, the treasures preserved therein are his own in case of need; the honour and glory enjoyed by the god in his adornment are the honour and glory of the nation, great in soul and in artistic achievement.”⁵⁰ This comment marks a profound turning point in Hegel’s concept of religion, in which temporal authority no longer marks the corruption of “philosophical” or rational religion, but a necessary advance in its development. The cult forms around the convergence of the subjective, temporal identity of spirit as a *people*, and its objective, spatial identity as a *nation*, both produced by an act of consciousness. What is primarily important about this act is not that it is sacrificial, or even simply destructive, but that it creates a community that is therefore not simply a product of natural need. Thus, it engenders what Hegel calls the “spiritual work of art,” and in it the general form of picture-thinking is fully realized in language, specifically in the literary worship of Ancient Greek drama.

Given its marked novelty, it is not much of an exaggeration to specify this moment as the definitive advance of Hegel’s concept of religion in the *Phenomenology*. Of course, the significance of Ancient Greek culture for German philosophy at this point in time is well-known and difficult to overstate. Sometimes it functions as a kind of nostalgic ideal or past golden age that serves as a measure of the degeneracy of contemporary European culture. But for Hegel, it is clear that what was so significant about Greek culture was its achievement of an authentic unity between individual citizens and the laws and values of their nation, a unity the modern world had yet to regain after the Enlightenment’s skeptical attack on religious authority. Along with most other German philosophers of his time, including the Romantics, Hegel conceived of his own philosophy in terms of the attempt to reestablish the foundation that such unity rested on. It is crucial to recognize that, on the basis of the analysis in “Religion,” the principles that unified Greek life were not to be found in Greek philosophy, but in poetry: the epics of Homer and Hesiod, the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and the comedy of Aristophanes. These works of art not only depicted a pantheon, but also constituted a law. This law did not take the form of a rational

50. PG, 385/§719.

system comparable to the modern institution, but rather defined an ethical practice designed to reconcile subjective desires with the objective world. The Romantics predilection for the form of tragedy reflected their skepticism about this reconciliation's ultimate success as a result of the limits of human knowing. Although there is an obvious resonance between Greek tragedy and Hegel's own description of the development of spirit as a "way of despair," it is actually *comedy* that finally grasps the "truth" of this reconciliation: that the divine is a product of the profane, the absolute the creation of human representation.⁵¹

The unity of Greek consciousness with the world is reflected in the direct connection between their religion and the fundamental political structure of their society. The division of the region into individual city states is represented as a pantheon, famous citizens as gods and goddesses with limited, though exalted, powers. Though Zeus is the highest of these, his power is not that of legal right, but superior force. Likewise, the Ancient Greek world is dominated by the most powerful of the city states, and thus not *fully* united. Zeus reigns over Olympus without actually serving the interest of the other gods. In this sense he can command them by virtue of his usually greater power, but finds himself constantly at odds with them: "They stand, too, under the supreme command of the one, rather than under his sovereignty."⁵² While the gods ostensibly represent universality, their very plurality makes that impossible. Their actions are not consistent and unified but chaotic and oppositional. They are as "free" as human action. This direct parallel between the content of religious representation and human social life makes art religion a *political* theology in a more recognizable, if not purer, form than those that preceded it. In this sense, it does strongly suggest a transcendental ideal form of identity.

But understood as a speculative identity proposition, the truth of Greek religion does not display such a neat equivalence. According to Hegel, Greek religion actually exhibits a double reflection, between what is imagined—the pantheon—and what exists—the warring city states that comprise

51. Here Hegel's reversal of Schleiermacher's line of thinking is clear. Rather than falling back from the negative distance between representation and an ideal comprehension back into feeling, Hegel draws out the positive connection between representation and what it *makes* comprehensible—the actual socio-historical shape of consciousness that produces it, or rather, produces itself through it.

52. PG, 389/§728.

the Ancient Greek political world, and between what exists and what Hegel calls the “actual” idea it implicitly contains—the unity of a Greek nation. In the spiritual work of art “the extreme of universality, the world of the gods, is linked with individuality, with the Minstrel, through the middle term of particularity. . . the nation in its heroes.”⁵³ The importance of Greek religion is the way that in its consciousness freely creates the particular term in the act of representation. It creates its own truth, rather than finding it in the given present or as a historical legacy. The role of the middle term, here the “nation in its heroes,” is not simply a predicate shared by the artistic form of religion in the song of the minstrel and the Ancient Greek historical situation. The epic as a religious form actually produces the idea of a nation as something more than the sum of its city-states. This occurs when a contradiction emerges between the supposed order of the world the gods are supposed to represent and the disorder that characterizes their relations, which of course reflects the actual disorder of war and chaos. The epic nominally hails the gods as masters of every real force, but at the same time, in so doing necessarily reduces them to references for the actual potency of the actions of the heroes. The truth of the epic therefore is how the socio-political reality of “Greece” is a product of the universal right of the people who live and act there. For Hegel then, the epic is a demonstration of how the notion of divinity, when consciously/subjectively grasped in linguistic narrative form, proves itself incompatible with division. Insofar as the gods can actually be observed maintaining their distinct independence from one another, they can only appear merely human. What survives is only the abstract notion of an *unseen*, impersonal power that directs events—fate—to which even the gods themselves are subject:

They are universal, and the positive, over against the individual self of mortals which cannot hold out against their might; but the universal self, for that reason, hovers over them and over this whole world of picture-thinking to which the entire content belongs, as the irrational void of Necessity—a mere happening which they must face as beings without a self and sorrowfully, for these determinate natures cannot find themselves in this purity.⁵⁴

53. PG, 390/§729.

54. PG, 386/§722.

In Greek religious mythology the role of each deity therefore dissolves into that of the fates (Μοῖραι), whom Plato called the “children” of Necessity (Ἀνάγκη) despite their official parentage of Zeus and Themis.⁵⁵ This has the advantage of making more sense of their relationship to Zeus, who despite ostensibly being their lord also appears subject to their influence. The mutual submission of gods and human heroes, along with the cities they represent, to fate becomes the central theme of Greek tragedy.

At this point, the linear narrative form is no longer suitable because the plot, as a linear sequence of events, no longer reveals the object of the representation—the hidden operations of fate. Rather, it becomes concerned solely with the manner in which consciousness itself is always the concrete vehicle for a fate it does not comprehend. This manifests in the dual structure of tragedy: on the one hand, heroic speech in which the central character proclaims their will and intentions, and on the other, the choral ode, where the larger context and consequences the hero cannot foresee are revealed to the spectator, who is therefore able to observe the growing convergence between individual will and fate itself. As drama (from δράμα or “action”), tragic mythology is enacted rather than merely described—the hero himself is the one who articulates his role. The significance of the theatrical form is that an actual human being—the actor—steps into the role of the hero who “prove[s] the rightness of their action.” In the famous example of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Hegel emphasizes how the actor who “plays” Antigone “acts out” the principle of the right of the family. Similarly the actor who plays Creon embodies the principle of law. The deities themselves withdraw into the background.

Antigone is singled out by Hegel because not only does it bear the form of a tragic drama, but more specifically its content itself depicts the fundamental duality of tragedy. Human laws “of the heart,” feeling, custom, and personal bonds stand opposed to divine law. But both forces are portrayed as competing *within the human realm* such that no law punishes except that for which

55. Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy, The Loeb Classical Library, v. 1, bks. 6–10 (Harvard University Press, 2013), 617c. Whether Plato wrote these lines as a philosopher or a theologian is certainly debatable. It is worth noting that they come at a point in the argument where he reports himself full of regret for banishing the poets from the city and wishes to restore their art to prominence on the condition that its meaning be edited to more clearly express its inner rationality. It is clear that for Hegel, at least, this amounts to a matter of religious representation.

individual human beings choose to die. The ultimate ground of legal authority is directly presented as human will. Creon does not foresee is that it should be *he*, and no other external power, that is responsible for Antigone's death, and thus that he has not truly acted in accord with divine justice as much as his own authoritarian will: "Ethical rightness, which holds that what actually is, is in itself nothing when opposed to absolute law, learns that its knowing is one-sided, its law only a law of its own character, and that it has seized on only one of the powers of the substance."⁵⁶ Creon's objective law is the "nether right" that "sits with Zeus" beyond human affairs, but Zeus never appears to confirm or execute this law. Rather, it is fate that reveals itself to Creon as his own "unknown" will. This is why, although it might be Antigone's selfless devotion that often attracts more pity and sympathy among modern audiences, according to Hegel's reading she is not the heroine. As Tina Chanter rightly observes, Hegel rejects the classic Aristotelian definition when he insists that the tragic hero acts in the name of legitimate right, and thus is not necessarily presented in order to arise pity at all. In light of the fundamental hierarchical and patriarchal structure of Greek society, neither women, children, nor slaves could plausibly play such a role.⁵⁷ As a matter of Greek culture, Antigone's actions appear under the sign of necessity, however freely and thus beautifully embraced, in contrast to Creon's willful obsession that she be punished. It is Creon that is guilty of hubris, in a way that depicts his subjection to the absolute power of fate.

Tragedy as religious art points to an epistemological problem: that of incomplete knowledge. We can never be perfectly assured of the rightness of our actions, not only because we never have a complete command of the facts in any situation, but that as a divine truth the concept of absolute right *exceeds* the very factuality of the world order: "The ravings of the priestess, the inhuman shape of the witches, the voices of trees and birds, dreams and so forth, are not the ways in which truth manifests itself; they are warning signs of deception, of an absence of self-possession, of

56. PG, 395/§738.

57. Tina Chanter, "Antigone's liminality: Hegel's racial purification of tragedy and the naturalization of slavery," in *Hegel's Philosophy and Feminist Thought: Beyond Antigone?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 65. The question of the extent to which Hegel affirms and reinscribes this hierarchy in his own philosophy of right, I leave aside here. At any right, Hegel gives no sign that the "truth" of Ancient Greek political life depends on such divisions, except perhaps insofar as the very concept of the emergence of a "nation" implies a problematic overdetermination of the category of "humanity" by preexisting, arbitrary relations of power. Hegel seems perfectly willing to embrace the hierarchy elsewhere, but it doesn't seem to inform what he thinks is significant about Antigone, or Greek tragedy in general.

the singularity and contingency of the knowing.”⁵⁸ The structure of tragedy reflects the fact that the human connection is revealed through an essential incapacity. The critical moment of reversal is not the effect of an external, invisible force, but Creon’s own realization that despite doing as custom would seem to require, he is guilty. What is tragic is not simply that he ought to have acted differently, but that precisely *by acting as he ought*, he has committed a crime. At this moment, the very idea of principle becomes an empty farce. It is the farcical element of belief that is all important for Hegel—the “truth” of Greek tragedy is comedy.

This is a crucial point in the development not only of Greek religion but spirit as a whole. All individual principles loses its divine “patronage” insofar as it is subordinate to an unmasterable whole, and as a result “they sink to the level of passions of the hero.”⁵⁹ The divine pantheon is depopulated leaving only abstract power of necessity. Because actual principles lose their divinity, human beings lose their connection to the divine. It once again appears as a foreign object. The actors in the tragedy, precisely insofar as they show the insufficiency of human action to meet the standards of the absolute, lose their divine status. Accordingly, the heroic aspect of these characters begins to take on the look of the ridiculous, because they only prove that human action constantly fails to live up to its own divine pretensions. The claim of righteousness of the tragic hero becomes hypocritical. When the gulf between finite human existence and divine perfection is exposed by tragedy, consciousness does not sacrifice itself. The individual must abandon its attempt to embody the divine. At the same time, this means that the existence of the gods is nothing beyond human existence:

The self-consciousness of the hero must step forth from his mask and present itself as knowing itself to be the fate both of the gods of the chorus and of the absolute powers themselves, as being no longer separated from the chorus, from the universal consciousness.⁶⁰

58. PG, 396/§740.

59. PG, 397/§741.

60. PG, 397/§743.

The comedic hero, while playing at universality, is revealed to be only too human. And the human spectators witness in comedy this fall from grace.

The pretensions of universal essentially are uncovered in the self; it shows itself to be entangled in an actual existence, and drops the mask just because it wants to be something genuine.⁶¹

Consciousness must at the same time think of itself as the ultimate arbiter of truth, since no higher standard presents itself, and yet acknowledge the failure of its attempts to actually control its own destiny. It is caught in the contradiction of being the highest authority of what is true, the only authority, and obviously not comprehending the truth in its fullest extent. This hypocrisy of any universal principle comprehended by human intelligence to actually account for reality produces a vacuum in which any particular inclination is as good as any other. Since no body of knowledge can claim absolute validity, any inclination can be defended. Or rather, any pretension to divine authority can be mocked. At the level of its representation, comedy parades the divine symbol before the laughing audience as just another mo, despite its lofty claims of absolute authority, but in doing so it actually unifies the nation, reconciles the subjective and objective dimensions of experience by submersing the latter completely into the former. Thus, this divine fall is experienced by the spectator as a *levity*: “The proposition that expresses this levity runs: ‘The Self is absolute Being.’” Comedy yields gospel: the faith of Christianity.

Considered as the heir to dramatic art, Christianity can therefore be categorized as the tragicomic religion. In recognizing the need for mere humanity to produce the kingdom of God by reproducing itself as a devout community on Earth, it is conscious of its tragic inadequacy for such a task. But comically, it portrays the divine in the collective attempt to do so anyway, and this implies, as Kant quite clearly asserts, that there at least be *hope* that it is possible in some way. In Christianity, what is “revealed” is the real necessity of representation finally united with a conceptual understanding of the meaning of “forgiveness” as the absolute form of goodness. This appears in an even more developed form of narrative: the “story” of the appearance of the Good—gospel,

61. PG, 397–398/§744.

or good news. The central, pivotal event of this story, the moment of absolute forgiveness, is that God is dead. The Christian religion calls its faithful to be *glad* that God has died, because it is an act done *for them* that enables them to accomplish the divine will. The question of the nature of the identity between religion and philosophy hinges on what Hegel accepts as true about this vocation to gladness.

The good news of the death of God

The concept of the “death of God” is commonly associated with the thought of Nietzsche, despite its centrality in Hegel’s account of Christianity. Perhaps this is because it is much more appropriate to Nietzsche’s premier reputation as an anti-Christian thinker—for him it refers to the apparent socio-historical fact of an end of belief in the Christian God.⁶² In contrast, Hegel presents this “hard saying” as the key doctrine *of* Christian belief: the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. For the ordinary Christian believer, of course, there was also the resurrection, and so even in this specific sense God could hardly be considered “dead.” It might seem that Hegel’s reference to the idea is unclear or inappropriate to authentic Christian belief, or both. In fact, its significance as a belief for Hegel is precisely its ambivalent or even paradoxical status. This ambivalence makes it paradigmatic of Christianity as a whole.

In the structure of the *Phenomenology*, Christianity marks the perfection (*Vollendung*) of religion in the same sense that religion itself is the perfection of spirit. It achieves the most advanced state of development, and correspondingly suffers from the greatest degree of tension between its concept and its existence—a tension that already appeared in “Spirit” under the figure of conscience. However, this connection does not yet signal an identity between Christianity and the moral view. Rather, it is the profound ambivalence of Christian representation that grounds the

62. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), §125. However, as Jaspers has argued, Nietzsche’s relationship to Christianity, as the history of philosophy, is more complicated than is often believed. See especially Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity* (H. Regnery Co., 1961). It is certainly true that Nietzsche evinces a certain respect for the power of Christian belief, precisely insofar as it has created the conditions for the appearance of the last man, and hence, the *übermensch*. From this point of view there may be more commonality between Nietzsche in Hegel than is typically credited.

moral world. It conceives of the most complete unity of subject and object in the representation of humanity as divine. But it also conceives of this unity as an absolute separation of its existence from a salvation that is always yet to come, since it cannot be directly realized by passionate human action. Contrary to Hegel's earlier reservations about the positivity of Christianity, it is this absolute negativity that now poses the central problem of Christianity, but *also its promise*. This promise is not found in the particular theology of Christianity that will amount to a "symbolic" representation of "Absolute knowing," but in its annulment of theology. Its detachment of faith from every positive expression both leads to the failure of the moral worldview and creates the ground for a real perversion of representation. In Christian doctrine, every particular action or institution is revealed to be a perversion of the absolute, even Christianity itself. The perversion of its theology or its perversion of theology is the representation of the *absolute necessity* of this perversion—the divinity of perversion itself. But as a representation, Christianity is not yet conscious of this speculative truth. That it renounces its own nature as something evil in its opposition to the alien autonomy of a still also transcendent God means that it must be overcome before genuine absolute knowledge is possible, or rather, it must be allowed to overcome itself. For Hegel, the core truth of Christianity is not, as it was still for Kant, the eternal existence of God or the promise of salvation, but the revelation that God is dead. In terms of Christian representation, it is Jesus who has died and who lives again. But in terms of its speculative meaning, it will have to be the idea of transcendence that "dies" without any chance of resurrection. This "critical" understanding of Christianity will thus lay the ground for Hegel's answer to the question he raises in the introduction of the *Phenomenology*: How might it be possible for cognition to operate without such a principle to guarantee its "truth" in advance?

Christianity is above all the religion of what Hegel will eventually call the "rabble" (*Pöbel*).⁶³

In the development of religion, comedic drama brought low everything that was once high; it evac-

63. Not simply an economic or even social class, in the *Philosophy of Right* the rabble signifies the condition of an entire society when there is no common standard of right. This is a point emphasized by Frank Ruda in his recent treatment of the concept, although it would seem to mark precisely the point where Marx's valorization of proletariat class interest breaks with any Hegelian conception of right. Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Continuum Studies in Philosophy (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

uated every ritual and symbol of their meaning, and deligitimized the laws created to express it. Into this void of divinity steps, for the first time, consciousness itself. Comedy yields the speculative proposition that “The Self is absolute Being.” But as always in a speculative development, the initial shape of the “Self” is a simple abstraction of self-consciousness, the negative power of judgment that comedy deploys. It is only a placeholder without any determinate content of its own. Hegel therefore says that “in this self-consciousness over against which there is nothing in the form of essence, Spirit has lost its consciousness.” This is the extreme of the development of subjective religion, which approaches the antithesis of religion as the representation of the absolute. Nothing is objective, therefore “the” objective can only be conceived as nothing(ness), a “total loss:”

Trust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles, which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone. The tables of the gods provide no spiritual food and drink, and in his games and festivals man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with this divine.⁶⁴

This loss nevertheless has a positive aspect. While on the one hand it might seem like empty self-aggrandizement, the insistence that this negative judgment is alone beyond criticism actually elevates opinion above something merely particular. Its defiance of the gods demonstrates that spirit is finally prepared to step into the actual place of the divine. It “gains its self-certainty from the crushing of gods and men.”⁶⁵ According to Hegel, this divination of the individual is articulated in the Roman idea of “personhood,” and in it the idea of a Greek nation becomes actual. Instead of worshipping a multitude of gods representing a diverse array of conflicting principles, a truly universal though abstract and negative concept of freedom—*libertas*—unites the nation.⁶⁶ The representative of this new god cannot be any particular person or nation, but humanity as such. This is why, despite its historical significance as a political entity, Rome is only an ephemeral

64. PG, 402/§753.

65. PG, 402/§753.

66. Steven B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context*, Political science/Philosophy (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 122.

moment in the development of spirit between the destruction of comedy and the articulation of genuine individuality. The substitute divinity of the will of the emperor and sanctity of its state is incompatible with the very abstraction of its spiritual shape. The world that Christianity produces begins with the fall of Rome and the end of the world thereafter designated “Ancient.”

These two aspects correspond to inverse movements Hegel has been tracking in the *Phenomenology*: the first from abstract particularity (light as the indeterminate source of all being) to concrete universality (formation of the institutions of culture), and the second from abstract universality (sculpture of the idealized human body) to concrete particularity (comedy of living actors on a stage). According to him, these inverse tracks meet in the middle in a “true union” of concrete universality in the event of the birth and death of Jesus Christ.⁶⁷ Jesus’s words and deeds mount an invasion of objectivity into the empire of the subject. One could even say that the only genuinely Christian *work of art* was this life itself. But as a life, it necessarily culminated in a death. The central mystery of the articles of Christian faith is its identification of abstract universality—God—with abstract particularity—this human life. This is the representation of the metaphysical idea of freedom as a genuinely speculative proposition. Furthermore, it is a speculative proposition that has the form, or concept, of speculation itself—the identification of universality with particularity—as its *content*. As a result, it fundamentally belies any difference between the two. In other words, the idea that Jesus could himself be God implies a concept of being irreducible to either subjectivity or objectivity. In its representation of Jesus as divine, Christianity therefore “thinks” what Hegel will call “Absolute Knowing:”

What we are conscious of in our Notion, viz. that Being is Essence, is what the religious consciousness is also conscious of. This unity of Being and Essence, of Thought which is immediately Existence, is both the thought of this religious consciousness, or its mediated knowledge, and equally its immediate knowledge.⁶⁸

67. PG, 403/§755.

68. PG, 406/§761.

Christianity identifies the particular existence of Jesus with the absolute divinity of God, but it also thinks of itself as the community of believers that manifests the divine through belief. As an identity proposition, its two terms thus necessarily comprise the illusion of two separate, even contradictory, propositions about the absolute:

Spirit has in it two sides which are presented above as two converse propositions: one is this, that substance alienates itself from itself and becomes self-consciousness; the other is the converse, that self-consciousness alienates itself from itself and gives itself the nature of a Thing, or makes itself a universal Self.⁶⁹

Hegel is quite clear that what is true in each proposition is the same, but far from being differentiated in “form,” both actually only mean the identity of form and content—the union of the two propositions, the comic and the tragic, the birth and the passion of Christ, that the self is God, and that God is dead. Christianity does not arbitrarily designate something particular as something absolute; it worships the becoming-particular of the absolute.

Thus, the union of the two sides comes to be represented by Christianity in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and the closely associated idea of the Trinity, that God is three separate persons. The father becomes the Son so that spirit may live in the world. This idea is the core of what Hegel calls “absolute religion,” the truth that all other religions also represent, though with less perfection. But is it because these religions were somehow less “rational”? Certainly, in Hegel’s early writings, it is the positive element that he seems to criticize, and positivity meant the content of a religion that referred to its particular, historical conditions, as opposed to the rational content. In Christianity too, Hegel raised the strongest objections against the deification of Christ by his disciples and in theology. During the Frankfurt period, Hegel considered all religions essentially positive. Only Christianity exhibited a “mix” of rational moral truth with its irrational creeds, all of which centered on the supernatural status of Christ himself: his singular divine status, his ability to perform miracles, and above all his resurrection. Initially, Hegel criticizes the disciples, and ultimately even Jesus himself, for the “error” of polluting moral truths with fantasies of the

69. PG, 403/§755.

imagination. However, even by the *Spirit of Christianity*, Hegel has begun to acknowledge the necessary role of the imagination in overcoming the alienated condition of Roman ethical life. It is precisely this element that is unavoidably positive. If the function of the imagination was still conceived as a matter of feeling that corresponded to a rational, moral truth, something like an identity between philosophy and religion might be attributed to Hegel's analysis of Christianity. By the time he writes his criticism of Schleiermacher, Hegel does not think the role of religious representation is simply to inspire feeling. So how does the *Phenomenology* alter the course of his thinking about religion?

Hegel's analysis of Christianity completely inverts the original dichotomy of positive and negative that framed his early "theological" essays. The "rational" content of religion is not grasped prior to its "irrational" representation and hence only obscured by it. Rather, Hegel shows how the truth of the speculative proposition as the thought of the absolute is something generated in and by the work of art that was Christ's life: an ordinary life lived as if it were divine. The doctrinal aspect of Christian theology is "one-sided" precisely insofar as it isolates the objective character of the moral law from the subjective representation, and in fact sanctifies the separation itself. This separation, or alienation, is what Hegel calls "fanaticism," in direct contrast to Kant. It is what reduces the concrete representative function of religion into one of mere fantasy (*einbilden*).

Insofar as self-consciousness one-sidedly grasps only its own externalization...Spirit is in this way only imagined into existence; this imagining [*Einbilden*] is the visionary dreaming [*Schwärmerei*] which insinuates itself into both Nature and history, into the world and into the mythical ideas [*Vorstellungen*] of earlier religions, another, esoteric meaning than that which lies on the surface.⁷⁰

Representation is the process by which every stage of religion had imbued some particular image with the status of an absolute value. But in Christianity the alienation is exacerbated by the theological content of the representation: negativity. The pure immanence of its object, spirit—itsself alienated—appears for the first time as an utterly transcendent object. The threat of fanaticism is

70. PG, 457404/§757.

not unique to Christianity, but it is extreme, because an absolutely transcendent God rationally justifies no particular principle—it is absolute nihilism. Thus, it practically justifies any principle—it is absolute fanaticism. The image of incarnation is crucial for Hegel due to disruption of this extreme transcendence in its emphasis on the divinity of the “actual individual man” that Christ is.

That absolute Spirit has given itself implicitly the shape of self-consciousness, and therefore has also given it for its consciousness—this now appears as the belief of the world that Spirit is immediately present as a self-conscious Being, i.e. as an actual man, that the believer is immediately certain of Spirit, sees, feels, and hears this divinity. Thus this self-consciousness is not imagination [*Einbildung*], but is actual in the believer.⁷¹

Christianity is the revelatory doctrine, but what is revealed is the supernatural “mystery” of the trinitarian God, which cannot be known, but what can be known, self-consciousness: “Consciousness is revealed to itself only in its own certainty of itself.”⁷² The fact that the “subject” of religion, something representative and thus necessarily limited, particular, finite, is for the first time identified with its divine object is not a “humanizing” of the divine if that is to mean a reduction of what was originally hoped for: transcendence. It is not a disappointment. The Christian doctrine is “gospel” because what was hoped for is revealed to be already within grasp. The death of God reveals that the divine is human, and thus every single human being shares in this divinity. The object of revelation therefore cannot be “the individual by himself” but rather the human community (*Gemeine*)—spirit. Spirit has already revealed its existence depends on the particular represented as universal. Thus, the content of the religion of revelation is the form of the speculative proposition:

Speculative knowledge knows God as Thought or Pure Essence, and knows this Thought as simple Being and as Existence, and Existence as the negativity of itself, hence as

71. PG, 404–405/§758. This contrast highlights the way that Hegel wants to distinguish his concept of *Vorstellung* from his contemporaries, and from Kant, who uses the term *Einbildung*.

72. PG, 405/§759.

Self, as the Self that is at the same time this individual, and also the universal, Self. It is precisely this that the revealed religion knows.⁷³

This is the representation to which evil conscience appealed when it made its confession and confronted the hypocrisy of the beautiful soul's stubborn refusal to abandon its claim to innocence. The truth is not something hidden or inaccessible to particular will, or desire; it is this will that perverts the purported transcendence of any given representation.

As knowledge of the speculative identity of content and form, object and subject, positive and negative, this is knowledge of the absolute. But insofar as it is represented, not thought, by consciousness, it remains a finite, limited doctrine, which is precisely why it justifies both sides of the antinomy of morality. Its truth is not yet understood. It is not adequate to describe this difference, the difference between religion and philosophy, as one of form. The alienation of form and content affects and distorts both. On the one hand, faith remains at the level of fantasy, a collection of images in a connection lacking all conceptual necessity. On the other, the principles of "reason" reflect simply a habit of mind, without real necessity. Both the world and the self are misunderstood, respectively, as an indifferent nature and as a discrete individual, and as a result are by definition impossible to reconcile. The "lack" persisting in religious spirit that manifests as "remoteness in time and space" means that consciousness is alienated not only from the world but from every other consciousness as well: "Spirit as an individual Self is not yet equally the universal Self, the Self of everyone."⁷⁴ As a result, the absolute, although inwardly present in the conviction of the believers, is outwardly banished to a past event and continues to exist only in the form of a *hope* for a remote future to come, as something once again unknown, incomprehensible. Its truth is an "intuitively perceived necessity," but not yet the "cognition of necessity."⁷⁵

The first fact that must be acknowledged here is that Hegel immediately rejects any theological solution to this problem. For Kant, the rational truth of Christian morality had to be extracted from the authority of ancient wisdom in order to truly *be* moral. But for Hegel, it is neither a

73. PG, 407/§761.

74. PG, 407/§762.

75. PG, 404/§757.

matter of determining who or what Christ “really was” (or was not) as a historical figure or what his genuine message could be, nor of recreating the life and community in which the man himself lived. Hegel clearly says that such “tracing-back” (*Zurückführung*) is misguided insofar as it tries to repair the sundered relationship between form and content—the conviction of the believer with the meaning of their own beliefs—with a *further* separation between them. Despite the initial sympathy displayed in his earliest theological writings, he has already reached the conclusion that the Kantian “rationalization” of doctrine is doomed to fail before he even begins writing the *Phenomenology*. But how else can the positivity of the Christian work of art, the life and practices of Christ himself, become something comprehended by consciousness, not only by skeptics but the believers themselves? Hegel makes a comment of momentous significance for the status and function of the “Religion” chapter in the *Phenomenology* and thus the system as a whole:

Picture-thinking constitutes the middle term between pure thought and self-consciousness as such, and is only one of the specific or determinate forms; at the same time however, as we have seen, its character—that of being a synthetic connection—is *diffused through all these elements* and is their common determinateness.⁷⁶

What Hegel is emphasizing here about the character of representation as a middle term in the development of thought is not its identity with reason but its generative function. Rather than simply the inert, non-philosophical copy of absolute truth, representation constitutes the determinate existence of truth as such. Insofar as consciousness thinks, it first of all represents. Religion is thus not simply one form of consciousness among others. It is an essential condition of its existence. The primordial status of religion means that, in a sense, *all* forms of consciousness are in essence religion, including spirit itself. It is therefore an indispensable milestone on the way to “Absolute Knowing,” not merely a different route. This is overlooked if the tenets of Christianity are regarded as just another “heirloom handed down by tradition” with no bearing on contemporary existence, as when the active crisis of modern morality transforms into a passive nihilism.⁷⁷ Only

76. PG, 409/§767, emphasis added.

77. PG, 411/§771. Hegel’s criticism here thus brings him quite close to what Nietzsche would come to identify as the core of nihilism—that there is no difference between belief and disbelief—since even if this tradition is affirmed,

in Christianity therefore is it possible to find the solution to the antinomy of morality, because Christianity represents the absolute necessity of conscience for consciousness by overcoming the antinomy *within* evil conscience.

The Scylla and Charybdis of conscience are nihilism and fanaticism. The former results if one accepts the necessity of evil without embracing it, the latter when one continues to misrepresent evil as something immediately good. In Hegel's analysis, both are criticized as hypocritical, dishonest responses to the modern world. How can Hegel's speculative gambit navigate this dilemma? With Christianity, representation is taken to its conceptual limit in rational theology, and in articulating that limit, necessarily overcomes it. It shows that the perversion of representation is necessary—no God can save us from it. God is long dead, even if consciousness has not fully caught up to this fact yet. There is no question of preserving Christianity as a living value. The only question is whether its end is a matter of “instinct” and “compulsion” or self-conscious affirmation.⁷⁸ The latter option is the promise of Hegel's speculative philosophy. He posits a moment of recognition that echoes the well-known dynamic of the master-slave dialectic, which ultimately produced the apparently individual Christian figure of unhappy consciousness. This recognition is the precondition of the *social* reconciliation that Hegel promised at the end of the “Spirit” chapter—between the side of the evil conscience, which has embraced its particularity at the cost of the divine, and the beautiful soul, which saves the divine only by denying its own particularity. The slave was not recognized by the master because the slave does not risk death. But nor was the slave able to achieve conscious recognition from the other slaves. Rather, the slave's identification with the world took place implicitly in the concrete, but therefore *subconscious*, activity of social labor, the resulting analysis of which Hegel calls reason. This was to be the final chapter of the book according to its original plan. What occurs now in “Religion” is a recognition on the part of the religious unhappy consciousness, characterized here by its nihilistic rejection of

it is as something “dead.” Insofar as some continue to affirm it, it lacks any intrinsic value beyond sheer cultural repetition, as a cynical dissembling of the most extreme subjectivism as objective truth. This is what Nietzsche means when he proclaims that God is dead. But this is why Nietzsche is the natural heir to the Romantic worldview, even if he offers a radically different response to Christian hypocrisy. Hegel rejects the very premise of this evaluation when he makes the idea that God is dead central to Christianity itself.

78. PG, 410-411.

the authority of the absent, divine master, of its own representational act of “creation” of its world and therefore *also its own alienation from it*. It bears the responsibility not only for its “evil” acts, but also the very concepts of good and evil. This recognition marks the appearance of the idea of “Absolute Knowing,” which therefore directly arises out of the particular representation of creation found in Christianity in which the world is created in order to be redeemed through faith itself.

While a doctrine of creation is not unique to Christianity, for Hegel it is uniquely fundamental to it and in particular to its ethic. An act of creation is implicit in the concept of religion in general insofar as representation marks the differentiation of subjection and object. But in Christianity both have their end in reconciliation with the other, precisely *because* their differentiation is also intrinsic to their unity, known as the process of spirit: “Thus the merely eternal or abstract Spirit becomes an ‘other’ to itself, or enters into existence, and directly into immediate existence. Accordingly, it creates a world.”⁷⁹ Insofar as this act is represented as a free act of a supernatural being, it suggests the emergence of evil. Prior to this act the divine “can be called ‘innocent’ but hardly good.”⁸⁰ Good *needs* evil in order to be good. The world, therefore, far from being intrinsically evil, is actually the truth of divinity—God is more divine in nature than simply as God, because nature is not just meaningless disorder also but Spirit (represented now as the Garden of Eden). But neither is it “good,” because at this moment humanity itself included as a part of nature. It is only when consciousness represents the absolute that it becomes thought as something distinguished from nature, bringing both good and evil into being:

Immediate existence suddenly turns into thought, or mere sense-consciousness into consciousness of thought; and, moreover, because the thought stems from immediacy or is conditioned thought, it is not pure knowledge, but thought that is charged with otherness and is, therefore, the self-opposed thought of Good and Evil.

The centrality of morality to Christianity makes Christianity central to Hegel’s analysis of spirit. Humanity loses its “innocence,” but gains its divinity, in the moment it consciously recognizes

79. PG, 412/§774.

80. PG, 412/§775.

itself as the other it produces, realizing its potential and bringing order to nature. This power to unify nature is identified with the divine and called good, while that which is accidental and unordered about human nature is called evil. But really, this creative power is itself evil insofar as it requires a certain violence, and this is precisely how Christian thought rationally conceives of evil: the designation of a particular will as universal. “The becoming of Evil,” Hegel concludes, “can be shifted further back out of the existent world even into the primary realm of Thought.”⁸¹ There was no “evil” before consciousness appears—actual evil, as well as good, is defined by the particular shape of consciousness at any given moment in its development. This is why, as long as consciousness remains in the grips of its own representations, it can never be moral *in the Christian sense*, because it will be commanded by these representations instead of commanding them:

Good and Evil were the specific differences yielded by the thought of Spirit as immediately existent. Since their antithesis has not yet been resolved and they are conceived of as the essence of thought, each of them having an independent existence of its own, man is a self lacking any essential being and is the synthetic ground of their existence and their conflict.

Human beings are not essentially good or evil but rather the site of their differentiation. The existence of spirit is the division of what is into good and evil to the same extent that it is the division into the true and the false, object and subject. The question is what knowledge is gained by the recognition of Spirit’s power to create a world, in understanding its essence as being a moral legislator, and not a vassal to any higher law? In what sense can knowledge be called knowledge of the absolute? There is no answer that does not involve a perversion of theology, which is to say, a perversion of the concrete shape of modern spirit.

Christian theology represents the knowledge of this power in the belief that Christ “cures” the world of evil through dying. The reconciliation of the “evil” acting consciousness and “good” beautiful soul is depicted as the sins of humanity being wiped out by the sacrifice of God. Hegel

81. PG, 413/§776.

sees in this not only the dissolution of the concepts of good and evil, but also an abstract, distant God. The product of this divine act is the community of believers:

The transcended immediate presence of the self-conscious essence has the form of universal self-consciousness. This Notion of the transcended individual self that is absolute Being immediately expresses, therefore, the establishing of a community which, tarrying hitherto in the sphere of picture-thinking, now returns into itself as the self; and in doing this, spirit passes over from the second element constituting it, i.e. from picture-thinking, into the third element, self-consciousness as such.⁸²

Universality, represented as “divine” by religious consciousness, is now brought down to the existence of spirit itself. What now makes spirit a community, rather than just an historically existing group, is its self-conscious recognition of itself in its own representation: the “word” of God is its *law*. Any concept of a reality beyond the laws of the community now appears as something that is at best abstract, or worse an actively regressive or reactionary attack on the community. Human law thus attains a sacred or divine status and effects a miraculous reversal. The absolute is the product of the existence of the community, and thus knowledge of the community—its constitution—is knowledge of the absolute. But this self-certainty conceals a contradiction. As the *author* of the law, spirit creates evil as much as good: “If Evil is the same as Goodness, then Evil is just not Evil, nor Goodness Good: on the contrary, both are suspended moments—Evil in general is self-centered being-for-self, and Goodness is what is simple and without a self.”⁸³ While natural existence was depicted in religion as anti-thetical to the divine, and thus evil, the Christian community confronts the fact that this designation of evil distinguished it from nature already. The community cannot serve as “the Good” represented in a transcendent God lacking particular existence any more than it makes sense to consider it inherently evil because it fails to conform to such a purely negative, abstract standard. It is the origin of the very concept or knowledge of the

82. PG, 409/§767.

83. PG, 416/§780.

Good—that is, something not merely natural. The community is the withdrawing from itself as natural, or “good,” into itself, as “evil”:

It is not natural existence as such that is forsaken by consciousness, but natural existence that is at the same time known as evil. The immediate movement of withdrawal into self is just as much a mediated movement; it presupposed itself, or is its own ground: that is to say, the ground of the withdrawal into self is that Nature has already withdrawn into itself; on account of evil, man must withdraw into himself; but evil is itself the withdrawal into self.

If perversion is precisely the representation of a particular will as absolute, then *spirit is essentially the perversion of itself*. Self-conscious reflection introduces the notion of evil, and attaches it to particular existence in opposition to the universal, but self-consciousness is itself nothing other than nature’s “particularization” of itself. Without self-consciousness, nature is the simple organic unity of universal being (i.e., innocence). Only self-consciousness differentiates nature into self and other, thus creating the possibility of evil through the perverse act of representation. This goes far deeper than the cliché that the dark always goes along with the light. The perversity of representation means that the Good is only the latest bloom on the flower of Evil. But this is not the subjective evil of an individual crime or the objective evil of Godless nature, but the absolute evil of spirit: its fundamentally perverse structure.⁸⁴ Hegel thus describes the reconciliation of morality, in the Christian terms, as the death of the discrete and arbitrary individual subject of passions and its resurrection in the necessary perversion of the community:

Death loses this natural meaning in spiritual self-consciousness, i.e. it comes to be its just stated Notion; death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz. the non-being of this particular individual, into the universality of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected.⁸⁵

84. On this account, therefore, Baudelaire’s poetic representation of *Allégorie* could be understood as a deeply Christian panegyric on spirit: “Elle croit, elle sait, cette vierge inféconde / Et pourtant nécessaire à la marche du monde, / Que la beauté du corps est un sublime don / Qui de toute infamie arrache le pardon.”

85. PG, 418/§784.

“The abstraction of the divine Being” no longer has any comprehensible existence outside of this community. Spirit has returned to itself by cancelling out any substance that it does not comprehend in its cancellation of nature. What religious consciousness comprehends through its depiction of the death of God is precisely its own divinity, and therefore, since religion essentially represents its own existence as other, the end of religious consciousness. Factually, however, at the time Hegel is writing, consciousness remains burdened by the illusion that necessity is split between its own finite perception and an infinite being of its imagination. For Hegel then, Christian doctrine— theology—cannot be genuine knowledge of the absolute. It must be overcome:

This unity of essence having been implicitly achieved, consciousness, too, still has this picture-thought of its reconciliation, but as a picture-thought. It obtains satisfaction by externally attaching to its pure negativity the positive meaning of the unity of itself with the essential Being; its satisfaction thus itself remains burdened with the antithesis of a beyond. Its own reconciliation therefore enters its consciousness as something distant, as something in the distant future, just as the reconciliation which the other Self achieved appears as something in the distant past.⁸⁶

Insofar as it represents the idea of God as *beyond representation*, Christian theology is essentially negative theology. Though it progressively takes onto itself all the positive actuality of its representation, finally reserving the word “God” for the pure absence or nothing which is other than human existence itself, it projects all reality or substance onto this absence, insisting that its own existence is essentially cut off from what is essential. Hegel repeats, “Its reconciliation, therefore, is in its heart, but its consciousness is still divided against itself and its actual world is still disrupted.”⁸⁷ What is essential remains incomprehensible for Christian consciousness, and this is what unites all moments of religious consciousness including the highest: the truth is by its own self-conception beyond its reach. The fundamental illusion of this thinking manifests concretely in the fact that even while it denies the possibility of knowledge of the absolute, Christian consciousness still di-

86. PG, 420/§787.

87. PG, 420/§787.

vides itself along the lines of “true” and “untrue.” This contradiction can only be sublated in a new form of consciousness, one that embraces perversion as the indispensable principle of its existence, *absolute* perversion. The articulation of the necessity of perversion, its universal essence, is Hegel’s task in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*. Its infamous difficulty is at least partially due to the misunderstanding of the identity of the objects spirit and religion as a transcendental ideal, rather than actual perversion. Although Christianity unconsciously represents the perversion of the absolute, Hegel’s own contribution is to raise it to the level of knowledge in a science of absolute perversion.

5 Perversion of the absolute

The end of religion

With the end of his analysis of Christianity, phenomenologically defined as the representation of representation, Hegel claims that his account of spirit is both complete and incomplete with respect to the relation between philosophy and religion. This refers to the paradox of religion's "perfection." On the one hand, consciousness remains within the sphere of representation and thus has not obtained genuine knowledge of itself. Thus, it is clear already that the identity cannot be one of *formal* identity invoked by the identity thesis, because representation was discovered to *ground* the existence of spirit. As such it is something both ontologically and temporally prior to any knowledge of spirit. As Hegel writes, "The content of religion proclaims earlier in time than does Science" what the nature of spirit is, but this proclamation is not yet knowledge and so it must itself be analyzed.¹ On the other hand, this ground appears to have a final, ultimate, or absolute status precisely because of its self-referential structure. Christianity perfects representation by turning it against itself. What it represents in the "mysteries" of the incarnation and the trinity is the conceptual structure of representation. The divine must be born *and* die in order to return to itself, to be *absolute*. This necessity has already been uncovered in the examination of Christianity, and as such Hegel says "its truth must have yielded itself" completely as the representation of representation.² And so the process of spirit's development has completed itself. In Hegel's view, there are no other possible shapes of religion—only variations of those that have already existed.

1. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 488/§803.

2. *Ibid.*, 479/§788.

But what distinguishes Christianity is its depiction of the *necessity* of representation. There is no way forward, back, or out from representation. What kind of knowing, philosophical knowing, could therefore be beyond religion?

This paradox of an incomplete completeness is already a kind of preliminary shape of “Absolute Knowing,” and it will structure the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*. Taking this preliminary shape for absolute knowing itself is the central error of the identity thesis, which takes one of its clearest formulations from the opening section of “Religion.” If there does appear to be a formal identity between the circular structure of Christian doctrine and the concept of “Morality,” which was distinguished by its extreme formalism, this is only because this structure is itself still something purely formal. As Hegel states, it is only the “notion” of the absolute. What remains to be seen is the meaning of this representation, of the necessity of representation. This account will neither be part of “Religion” nor “Spirit.” Religion itself does not *know* the identity it produces—it does so unconsciously, or rather, it even mistakes itself to have produced nothing at all, everything is taken to be *given to it*. Thus, “its *actual* self-consciousness is not the *object* of its consciousness.”³ The externality, or alienation, of representation makes this illusion unavoidable. Not only does the representation of Christianity not reconcile the two sides of moral consciousness, it is also the source of the opposition itself, because it posits the absolute in an unknowable beyond. Its meaning is “not only that the object as such presented itself as vanishing, but rather that it is the externalization of self-consciousness that posits the thinghood [of the object] and that this externalization has not merely a negative but a positive meaning.”⁴ But the absolute absence of God is compensated for by the figure of Jesus, and the community of the church, in which Christianity implicitly recognizes the worldly origin of its own doctrine. This absence undermines the illusion of alienation by tracing the ground of spirit to the concrete practices of representation itself. This means that whatever is “rational” in spirit does not correspond to some “eternal law” that guarantees the truth of consciousness’s representations ahead of time, for all time. Christianity is ultimately not defined by Hegel as it is coopted by Kant, as a purely negative, logical doctrine in

3. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 479/788.

4. *Ibid.*, 479/§788.

contrast to the positive religions of the past, but as *a positive religion of negativity*. There is no transcendent law to be refined out of the fantasy, and this is precisely its truth. As Hegel plainly states, “This Knowing of which we are speaking is not Knowing as pure comprehension of the object.”⁵ Thus, the question becomes how a historical product like Christianity can yield a conceptual structure with a unique, transhistorical claim to truth—a knowledge with both subjective and objective certainty.

This knowledge is not simply of the different (objective) historical “periods,” or of their different (subjective) self-representations, but also the knowledge of their differentiation in and through the production of the subject-object relation. It doesn’t refer to anything particular in time and space, and yet, because it is conditioned by the historical emergence of a particular religion, it cannot exist beyond or outside time and space. The paradoxical appearance of this definition may explain why there has been a persistent temptation to deny one side or the other, and take Hegel to be “absolutizing” either a concrete, but finite, set of historical norms or claims, or an eternal, but empty and abstract, idea. This has been the basis of the opposition among traditional interpretations of Hegel. The novelty of the “non-metaphysical” approach has been to simply dismiss the idea of absolute knowledge altogether and accept what Hegel is describing only in terms of a contingent description. Finally, a revived attempt to take Hegel’s claim seriously acknowledges the paradox without accounting for it, as two equally valid and necessary “standpoints” on a single idea: the finite, historical time of spirit and the eternal infinity of God. Ultimately, therefore, this interpretation is more faithful to the spirit of Kant’s system than it is to Hegel’s. Hegel is consistent and clear in his demand for a genuine reconciliation of these standpoints. This reconciliation will involve raising the historical process of representation to conceptual necessity, reducible to knowledge of neither a “free contingent happening” (à la Spinoza’s God-as-Nature) nor the simple result of a “slow-moving succession of Spirits,” but rather knowledge of the “two together, comprehended history.”⁶

5. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 480/§789.

6. *Ibid.*, 492–3/§807–808.

In the first part of the “Absolute Knowing” chapter, Hegel argues that it is “the form of objectivity” itself, the alienation of subject and object (the individual from their world), that still persists in religion and must still be overcome.⁷ This alienation is intrinsic to representation insofar as its function is to create a world over and against individual consciousness. In Christianity both the alienation and its necessity are actually represented. In order to overcome the alienation, the necessity must not merely be indicated but fully comprehended. Hegel argues that this is to be accomplished through a “recollection” of the development of spirit (not in the earlier shapes of consciousness or self-consciousness), in terms of its own representation. In other words, what is recollected by Hegel is the fact that the history of spirit has been of its own making all along, by virtue of its act of religious representation. It is therefore a recollection (*Erinnerung*) of history that is also an “originary interiorization” (*Er-innerung*). What it originates is the knowledge of spirit of what it is in truth. This must be understood as distinct from either of the shapes of spirit or religion, which far from being independent, indifferent forms of this knowledge, as the identity thesis would have it, are in fact both one-sided and incomplete accounts. Their one-sidedness manifests in the fact that neither accounts for the peculiar temporality of spirit. According to one it is a contingent event; to the other, a transcendent essence. Thus, in the second part of the chapter, Hegel claims that genuine knowledge of spirit requires understanding spirit *as* time, or in other words, why spirit can achieve knowledge over, or through time, and why this knowledge nevertheless qualifies as something absolute, or unconditioned. In what follows, I will show how representation, and the nature of its self-referentiality that I have called “perversion,” is crucial to understanding what Hegel means by this claim, which has been neglected in most accounts of the *Phenomenology*.

The alienation of representation

Hegel takes pains to show how the subject of revelatory religion, what he sometimes calls “devotional consciousness,” has in fact already grasped the truth of representation—that it creates its own world through its activity of representing the universal as something particular—but in the

7. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §788.

form of representation itself—namely, the identification of an individual man with God according to the articles of faith. This means that religion still posits the ground of this world to a remote, alien cause—God. But, as phenomenological observers, we know that the agent or subject of representation is not a transcendent divinity, but devotional consciousness itself. We therefore know that the “perfection” of Christianity is at the same time a defect, in the sense that it contains this error. However, this is not a defect that can be overcome in religion, since it is inherent to the nature of religion as representation. The externality of the identity it posits between the activity of human beings and truth is contained in the articles of faith in terms of the deferral of salvation: the “remoteness in time and space” of the divine. As the ground of spirit and thus a precondition for knowing it, the alienation of representation has been revealed as a kind of necessary illusion. The challenge Hegel faces in articulating the conceptual content of “Absolute Knowing” is dispelling an illusion that nonetheless remains in some sense necessary, constitutive. Thus, the first step he takes is to define the alienation of spirit more precisely.

Christian doctrine is not unlike any other representation in that it is rooted in the immediate givenness of its particular, sensuous content—the “pictures” in which it thinks. As such, religious consciousness does not understand what it “means.” It does not understand the necessity of what it represents, but accepts it as an external compulsion. On the other hand, it is equally clear that Hegel considers the object of Christian faith, abstract theological doctrine, a categorically different kind of representation. Especially in his lectures, he emphasizes the singular aptitude of Christianity for thinking, at least on a symbolic level, the relation between thought and being in terms of a kind of subjective necessity that Kant identified as its rationality. It was necessary for the god of Christianity to become human and form this *particular* community in order to accomplish its will, that is, in order to truly be God. This is what the formalism of “Morality” fails to think, or rather has forgotten, insofar as it opposes action to will on the ground that the former constrains itself to a particular end and thus “forsakes” universality. Admittedly, Christian doctrine can think the actuality of the divine will, salvation, only in terms of negating all particularity, including the real existence of the community. But it doesn’t seem plausible on that basis to turn the “Religion”

chapter on its head, into a polemic against Christianity, either against Hegel or in his “Spirit.”⁸ The “self-alienation” of representation means that “the negative of the object, or its self-supersession has a positive meaning for consciousness, i.e., consciousness knows the nothingness of the object,” but it also knows “itself as object.”⁹ Both sides of the relation that Christianity represents, the positive side of the particular givenness of history and the universal form of the negative, involve their own kind of necessity, real and logical. Genuine absolute knowing implies the unity of these two kinds of necessity. Thinking this unity is what is required to resolve the antinomy of religion, and it is what Hegel says has “not yet been exhibited” by representation itself.¹⁰

Christianity cannot escape the illusion that the object of representation has its being or ground outside of the subject of representation because this is an inherent feature of representation that follows from the nature of its sensuous content. Christianity represents the absolute as reducible to this content—a particular human being, who also therefore appears to it as something long dead, something that no longer *is*. But as a result it recognizes truth not in the form of this person but their “word”: law as such is the manifestation of the divine. In this sense it is purely formal or negative, and this means infinitely deferred. Since the particularity of the community makes it inherently inadequate to the idea of universal communion, salvation is imagined as something that comes from outside of the community (as grace), or worse still, on the basis of an impossible ideal of the individual’s relation to the community (in the command to “love thy neighbor”). These are in fact the interpretations represented by the evil conscience and the beautiful soul. This leads to the separation of the universal product of representation—the laws of the community—from its particular origin in the *will* of the community, projecting the foundational unity of the two into an unknown but hoped for (future) possibility when the law of God will be fulfilled. Thus, “Religion,” in the figure of Christianity, also culminates in an antinomy—the absolute antinomy—opposing the (contentless) form of law with the (formless) content of love, each as the truth of the other. The identity thesis insists on their mutual, separate identity. The latter is signified by

8. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G. W. F. Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*.

9. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §788.

10. *Ibid.*, 482–3.

the particular, historical existence of the Christian community that represents its world in this way, whereas the former is signified by its claim to universal validity. At this level, their identity is only a vicious circle in which the moral status of the law depends on its realization in a genuine community, in turn defined by its recognition of the moral law. Hegel therefore concludes that, in order to obtain genuine knowledge of their identical truth, absolute knowledge requires that we “supercede the form” of representation entirely, which is what is responsible for the appearance of their “alienation” into the categories of subject and object of knowledge.

This is where the perfection of Christianity presents a special difficulty. Normally the excessive particularity of one term always yields the shape that follows and reconciles the antinomy of the previous one. But the antinomy that comprises the speculative proposition of Christianity, that the absolute (object) is human (subject), is unique in that it does not appear to possess what I have referred to as “spiritual momentum,” because it does not appear to contain a particular term. But in fact the particular term is *representation itself*; it is particularity as such that is now both opposed to and identified with universality as such. Both therefore offer a claim on the absolute in terms of different kinds of necessity. Namely, the antinomy of religion/representation opposes the necessity of modernity’s particular historical condition that brought this knowledge into being with the transcendent necessity of universality as the form of the objectivity as such that marks this knowledge as true according to its own standard, something that does not apply to any other historical shape of spirit. Thus, this peculiar difficulty that makes this antinomy unique in the *Phenomenology* also makes it indispensable to evaluating the success of its project. The defective perfection of the Christian concept of “particularity” is that it does not seem to offer the necessary excess, and so it is difficult to see how its antinomy can be overcome. This is, of course, why the Christian religion takes itself to be true *only* as faith. It is also why, in the first part of the final chapter, Hegel for the first time finds it necessary to add something to the development not already present in the claims themselves.

What Hegel introduces and is not found in the concept of Christianity is the idea of the whole of the development to this point being the essence of spirit itself, rather than its fall. For Hegel, the

“fallenness” of spirit, understood as its alienation from its own essence, is the overarching illusion of Christianity. However remotely other religions projected the divine principle, it remained within reach of their concept. Only Christianity makes God fundamentally inconceivable except as the negative of all existence: “For this reason the object does not yet appear in consciousness as the spiritual essentiality we affirmed it to be.”¹¹ To the form of representation that is represented by Christianity, Hegel adds the content of the actual representations considered now as a “totality.” This is not part of the moral worldview, which takes an inner, individual principle to be this essence, or the claims of Christianity, which projects it into a transcendent being. Rather, Hegel presents this idea as constitutive of a new form of spirit: Science. This introduces a systematic difficulty that reflects the central question of the chapter, since the integrity of Hegel’s method would seem to proscribe any addition to the development that it merely sets out to observe and describe. And yet the sublation of representation into Science is only possible on this basis. Hegel’s “addition,” however, is nothing but spirit’s own development, now “recollected” by him. But this repetition introduces a difference insofar as this development no longer appears as something external to spirit but the product of spirit’s own activity, of representation. Neither the form or content of Science (since it is precisely in Science that they are inextricable from each other) can be reduced to any moment in its history, including Christianity. On the contrary, it is specifically the particular illusion of Christianity (when form and content are most opposed) that Hegel insists Science is to overcome, by understanding the true content of representation as nothing other than this recollected process in which spirit has formed itself through representation of its world.

The recollection of representation

That the reconciliation of spirit with its genuine ground in representation has not been “exhibited” only means that it has not been grasped conceptually, either by “we” phenomenological observers or spirit itself. But we know that it *has* been accomplished as a historical reality, and this is reflected in the equal validity, and thus deficiency, of the moral and the Christian points of view.

11. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 480/§789.

The “rationality” of the former proved bound up with a kind of faith just as, inversely, the particular “faith” of the latter rests on a construct of reason. This indicates the exhaustion of the subjective and objective points of view, each of which, when taken to its extreme, has proven to yield the other. Christianity, for Hegel, is a categorically different kind of religion in that it *primarily* deifies its own social practice rather than an external being, whereas morality is a categorically different shape of spirit insofar as it locates the absolute standard of right in individual conscience rather than an external command. Their essential difference lies in the locus of agency: the society or the individual. This difference is clearly not a matter of mere form. But their identity is reflected in the fact that both the moral and Christian point of view self-consciously occupy themselves with law, and this identity reveals itself to be that of the individual conscience with the social order, or the universal right with a particular society. And so the “truth” of representation that is to be exhibited now is the character of a law that could govern both.

In this way, a kind of “spiritual advantage” does reveal itself on the side of religion in contrast with spirit. This might seem counter-intuitive at first, since in many ways it is more natural to associate universality with the divine object of faith and particularity with the worldly existence of individual life. But in the terms of Hegel’s analysis the opposite proves to be the case: whereas morality had projected the universal ground of its claims to an unknown, inaccessible void—the pure interior self of feeling—religion rediscovers its source in the concrete, but collective, practice of representation. The shape of Christianity revealed that the ultimate function of representation is precisely to unite abstract form—reason, or law—and content—feeling, or conscience. In other words, religion as representation is not simply one side of a static identity relation, but the dynamic *production of identity*, of the “process of its coming-to-be.”¹² Content does not remain the same between each moment in the development of spirit, but as the form has developed, so has the content. In the phenomenology of religion, it was possible to observe this process of “subjectification” of spirit even if religion itself could not. Only now is it possible to articulate a *knowing* in which

12. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §789.

its very form expresses the content, making both necessary.¹³ This will not occur as a discovery or an invention on the part of Hegel, but simply a description of what has already been accomplished through the movement of the *Phenomenology* as a whole: “We have only to recall the earlier shapes of consciousness.”¹⁴ Accordingly, in order to articulate ‘Absolute Knowing’ Hegel must retroactively conceive the development of spirit according to the principle of representation, where each moment manifests spirit’s self-alienation.

In this recollection, Hegel does not return all the way to the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, but begins at the point when “Observing Reason” culminates in the proposition that “the being of the ‘I’ is a thing, and, moreover, a sensuous and immediate Thing,” the advent of “Spirit.”¹⁵ This is the point when consciousness apprehends its object as something temporal, essentially belonging to a time. What Hegel emphasizes is spirit’s relation to the development this temporality implies. In the first place, the absolute is posited as an externally given, contingent, and thus meaningless nature—in other words, a “vulgar” materialism. Hegel calls this idea fundamentally “non-spiritual or rather *the* non-spiritual itself.”¹⁶ But with regard to the “other two moments” of the chapter, he emphasizes that the “inner significance” of this “infinite judgment” turned out not to be a loss of consciousness, but the suffusion of it throughout the whole world, now apprehended as “only in the relation, only through the ‘I.’”¹⁷ So in a reversal, the culmination of the shape of reason in the proposition that “spirit is a bone” most fundamentally means that the world is the product of consciousness, and hence the manifestation of consciousness. It is not something other than consciousness, but *as consciousness*. He connects this idea to the enlightenment and its principle of “utility,” which makes explicit consciousness’s “self-certainty” in its right to determine all values

13. Obviously, this would comprise the distinction between Foucault’s and Hegel’s use of the term, which is otherwise quite close. While Foucault is certainly quite interested in how particular forms of social organization, themselves the product of collective practices, also form individual subjects, he expresses no interest in seeking or producing a form of knowing that would make this process transparent to either. In fact, in the spirit of Nietzsche, much of his work arguably aims to understand such attempts as simply more subtle forms of subjectification themselves. This, however, makes the problem of developing a technology of resistance that does not rely on the Romantic move of granting individual feeling absolute legitimacy problematic.

14. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 480/§790.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, 481/§790, emphasis added.

17. *Ibid.*, (481/§790–1).

for itself. But since the world as product still appears as something separate from consciousness, its status as the value-positing being, a *zoon poetikon*, becomes a problem for consciousness. In the terms of the understanding, it is of course impossible that a part of the world should somehow “contain” the whole. As a result, it is forced to regard this capacity as a “pure willing and knowing,” against everything physical.¹⁸ Thus, we find here Hegel’s consistent formulation of Kant’s concept of identity, in which the moral intention is the only expression of unconditional value, in exclusion of the act itself. The agent’s own claim is the only objective sign of this purity, one that is immediately proof of its hypocrisy, since it reveals that consciousness knows the difference between its intentions and its acts, and that all value is in the former. As a result, consciousness appears as split into the opposing positions of judge and actor, beautiful soul and bad conscience.¹⁹ The reconciliation of these two sides heralded by forgiveness means the recognition that the two sides are part of one and the same act of the representation of Christianity. Like roles in a Greek drama, they stand for the sides of, respectively, the “knowledge as universal” and the “purely individual self” that are united in the proposition that the divine is human, that “the individual self. . . is immediately a pure knowing or a universal.”²⁰ However, this only makes explicit the question announced by Hegel’s comments about the alienation of representation. How is this antinomical identity resolved in thought? What can it mean for a particular way of life to be “true,” and to what extent does modernity meet this standard?

For interpretations guided by the identity thesis, according to which the meaning of identity can only be interpreted according to one side of the antinomy of spiritual-historical contingency and speculative transcendence, there is no final answer to these questions. They tend to emphasize one side of the identity relation as if it expressed the truth of the relation as a whole. As each side points back to the other, the task of recollection becomes Sisyphean. For the religious interpretation, the historical legacy of the community that affirms a specific faith is key, but the meaning of this faith is left undetermined for fear of rupturing that community. The promised forgiveness can only

18. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 481/§792.

19. *Ibid.*, 482/§793.

20. *Ibid.*, §793.

come as the result of a private search of feeling. For the rational interpretation, the culmination of the development in a universal moral standard is clear, but its connection to its historical legacy is suppressed. Its legitimacy is a matter of sheer fact of individual consent, negatively “proven” by a failure to revolt.²¹ Both cases rest on a constitutive exclusion. With a view to law, the first forsakes all logical necessity; the second all real necessity. These must therefore come from elsewhere—the authority of some church, the decisive action of some leader. If the truth of Christianity for Hegel was precisely to comprehend such necessity, neither option can be adequate to a genuine reconciliation of the two sides. Importing a transcendental notion of identity into Hegel’s system is therefore inevitably reductive.

Hegel’s account of reconciliation here goes far beyond what he has said thus far about about the religious moment of spirit—the forgiveness of evil—or the rational moment of religion—the constitution of the community. Hegel returns to the antinomy of morality at length because it presents the extreme alienation of subject and object that his act of recollection is meant to overcome. He explicitly connects the two sides to the shapes of religion and spirit, and asserts that although in his analysis these “at first fell apart” and their “union has not yet been exhibited,” the act of “recollection” is fulfilled only when “Spirit attains to a knowledge of itself not only as it is in itself or as possessing an absolute content [as in religion], nor only as it is for itself as a form devoid of content [as in spirit].”²² The beautiful soul, which is certain of itself in its own absolute status, now appears as the essence of religion. Its self-referential structure makes it not only “the intuition of the divine but [also] the Divine’s intuition of itself.” As such “it contains both itself and its opposite” in the sense that religion is affirmed as the real ground of spirit. But the beautiful soul, because it stubbornly refused to act, could only “disappear into thin air.” Only insofar as it chooses to “positively externalize itself and move forward” by acting, is it able to actualize the unity it represents.²³ Through the “movement of action” the evil, or acting conscience, “raises existence [*Dasein*] into Thought,” by presenting its particular act as something universal.²⁴ It is

21. The core axiom of all liberal theories of political legitimacy, from Hobbes to Locke.

22. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 483/§794.

23. *Ibid.*, 483/§795.

24. *Ibid.*, 485/§796.

only through evil conscience that spirit “gains the *form* of universality.”²⁵ Hegel’s invocation of evil here confirms its importance for understanding the nature of the identity of religion and spirit that Hegel is trying to articulate. Religion and spirit cannot be the same truth in two different forms because representation as the real structure of perversion *is* the truth of spirit.

Religion achieves the idea of “concrete universality,” the utterly unconditioned, the unity of subject and object, “absolute content as content,” and only as a result spirit “accomplishes the life of absolute Spirit.” Evil is necessary to realize the good, not because it reflects the good as its negative, but because it creates it. Thus, whereas Kant turned to religion in order to preserve the absolute distinction between the good and evil will, the figure of religion in Hegel unites and cancels it: “So far as this self-sundering is the process of becoming for itself, it is evil; so far as it is the in-itself, it remains good.”²⁶ Good and evil are revealed to be only ciphers for the structures of objectivity and subjectivity, and it is Christianity that identifies the subject of representation itself as evil, that discovers perversion. Insofar as it remains at the level of its own representation, it denies itself by attempting to renounce and denounce representation. If its truth on the other hand is found in the act of “forgiveness,” this is the dawning recognition of the necessity of representation, as the unity of the two figures of the beautiful soul and the evil conscience.

The speculative meaning of forgiveness, or the recognition of the identity of good and evil, is recollection of representation. But how does spirit advance in the “movement of action,” since this activity appeared to take the form of a contradiction—the opposition of the two figures religion unifies? Hegel says that it is only possible if the beautiful soul, as the principle of religion or goodness, “renounces the obstinacy of its abstract universality,” and conversely, if conscience “disowns itself.”²⁷ In other words, spirit must abandon the idea that the necessity of its good will can transcend its conditions, and, the idea that the necessity of this will is grounded in its own individual conviction. The comprehension of spirit as representation reveals that the only necessity is the perversion at the core of its development: it breaks its own laws on the ground of its

25. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §795, emphasis added.

26. *Ibid.*, 484/§796.

27. *Ibid.*, 485/§796.

existence and in so doing founds new ones. The result is an identification of the “Self” with its historical world that it initially confronts as its object. Knowledge of this identity is necessary in both the sense that its condition is given (as a historical process) and the sense that its condition is known (as a logical connection). Thus, it cannot be reduced to either the subjective side, that it is something known and affirmed by spirit, nor its objective side, that it is a real act. It is only the process by which what is known becomes real by becoming other than itself as something “merely known,” which is to say believed—when it “differentiates from itself. . . in the dividing of itself” into the subject and the object. This is nothing other than the act of representation, the temporality of which now appears as the truth of history. For Hegel, therefore, *time* is key to understanding the unity of transcendence and imminence, subject and object, conceptual and real necessity, absolute knowledge. Specifically, Hegel presents an account of the connection between representation and time in terms of perversion that directly opposes the one Kant gives of illusion.

Time as absolute illusion

The introduction of the concept of time through the recollection of representation allows Hegel to pose the central question of the final chapter, and by extension, the *Phenomenology* as a whole. How is it possible that “Science,” defined as absolutely necessary knowledge, such that it even conditions the appearance of history itself, can appear at a particular time (and place) in history? Insofar as every religion takes itself to be absolute, it seems possible that the perfection of the Christian representation of perversion is an illusion. For Kant certainly, the contradiction at issue between freedom and necessity is the irresolvable stumbling block of all metaphysical ontotheology. Hegel, however, writes, “As Spirit that knows what it is, it did not exist before, and nowhere at all, till after the completion of its work of compelling its imperfect ‘shape’ to procure for its consciousness the shape of its essence.”²⁸ The temporality of Hegel’s grammar seems to manifest just the sort of absurdity that Kant regrets about traditional metaphysics. If “Absolute Spirit” did not exist, how could it have been at “work”? This work that Hegel says spirit has now finished

28. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 486/§800.

is just the “movement” from one shape of spirit to the next, which he has already shown is accomplished by representation. “Substance,” which Hegel defines as “self-less being,” the object as it is in itself, is supposed to have existed long before absolute spirit or science arrives on the scene. It is in fact the ground of all appearances conceived in the most general way as a succession of representations. Hasn’t Hegel just established that every representation of religion has been a perversion of the idea of such an object by making just one stand for the whole? What precisely does Hegel mean when he defines substance as the “pure form of objectivity” and “the object of representation in general”?²⁹

To understand the problem Hegel is raising, if not the answer, more clearly, it can be contrasted with Kant’s. Kant also defined representation in terms of something like the “form” of particularity. All representations have the form of space and time. These “pure forms of intuition” serve to distinguish representations from each other, and have no content of their own. So what is being thought in the thought of space? Kant says that it must be the relation between “the object *and* the subject.”³⁰ In other words, the nature of cognition itself, as the subject perceiving an object, implies space as their differential relation. Likewise, the act of reflecting on its own thought, which Kant names apperception, generates the unity of representations in sequence. Time, he says, “can be nothing other than the way in which the mind is affected by its own activity” and thus “the subject is the object of this [inner] sense.”³¹ It is not that in the contents of our minds we find time and space, but rather we produce them by thinking. Self-consciousness implies commitment to the idea of a subject, but because that subject is only “the simple representation of the I” without further content, and thus “requires inner perception of the manifold that is antecedently given,” it also implies the existence of an object separate from it.³² This means that the act of representation is constitutive of consciousness and the ground of all its thought, its absolutely necessary condition. It is this necessity that has led to the illusions of ontotheology in what he calls the “perversity of reason.” Because the thinking subject cannot exist without the conditions of space and time, it

29. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 486/§801, translation modified.

30. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A49/B69.

31. *Ibid.*, A49/B68.

32. *Ibid.*

cannot avoid treating their existence as just as real as its own, even as the cause of its own existence. This is what leads reason into antinomies from which it cannot escape. Hegel's solution is to draw on the idea of a transcendental object—an absolute condition *beyond* itself as well as time and space, infinitely remote and consequently able to contain all without contradiction—because it suffers no determination.

On this basis, Kant concludes that it is an error, one that will directly connect to the moral error at the center of radical evil, to deduce from the necessity of “the form of representation” any evidence of its reality. The appearance of rain is not a sign of what is really occurring in itself in the way a rainbow represents the presence of the drops of rain themselves in a certain way dependent on the manner, obviously peculiar to us, that light interacts with our eyes. Unlike the subtle but still observable interplay of rain and light, there is absolutely no way for us to examine the relation between our sensible intuition and the transcendental object because the latter is beyond all representation: “Not only are these round drops mere appearances, but even their round form, indeed even the space through which they fall are nothing in themselves.”³³ In other words, Kant insists that representation is the conceptual ground of cognition, but not its real ground, which is posited as something infinitely remote from us. Kant calls this “transcendental ideality” as against any metaphysical reality. He is adamant that time is the necessary form of all objects. But this necessity is only for consciousness. The basis of his insistence is that otherwise necessity seems to lose all meaning independent of our imagination, as Hume argued. In order to avoid Hume's resultant skepticism by deriving necessity of the appearance of the object from consciousness rather than the object, Kant could not avoid giving credence to the idea of a “absolute real necessity” (i.e., God). He overcomes the defect of Christianity not by abandoning it or rationalizing it, which is precisely what he thinks is impossible, but rather by severing it from representation.

It is in this sense that Kant's system fundamentally rests on a moral axiom. The transcendental hypothesis is necessary to avoid the perversion of reason, which, as we saw, is the ultimate ground of evil. If consciousness takes its own representation of its relation to the world as something

33. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 170/A46.

actual, and not merely ideal, then it cannot avoid imposing its own particular will on the world as a whole. It should now be clearer why this danger is an inextirpable one. For Kant, the essential activity of perverted reason is teleology.³⁴ It takes something particular and makes it the meaning of the whole. Since reason is grounded on representation, it cannot avoid this “transcendental illusion,” as he shows in the “Transcendental Deduction,” because it combines the grounds for two ordinary kinds of illusion, optical illusion and logical illusion. Reason is subject to something like optical illusion, because an error is part of the constitution of reason and thus not avoidable. But it is also like logical illusion, insofar as it is extended without ground.³⁵ Kant emphasizes that unlike logical illusion, which “entirely disappears” as soon as one’s attention is drawn to the error, transcendental illusion “does not cease even though it is uncovered and its nullity is clearly seen into by transcendental criticism.”³⁶ Criticism, which is based on the separation of the universal from the particular, is not enough to avoid the perversity of reason’s insistence on their unity. This is why reason must be subordinated to the transcendental idea of God, “necessary and all-sufficient being,” for which all real necessity is reserved.³⁷ Reason therefore must be prohibited from thinking the identity of thought and being, so that it can be left to faith, which in turn, although segregated, remains indispensable to the teleological need of reason.

Hegel’s account of religion has inverted this imperative. In Christianity, the idea of a transcendent God is denied in the representation of incarnation: God is dead. The only possible fates for reason are absolute skepticism, a denial of the reality of its object amounting to a denial of itself, or science, which embraces the identity of representation with being itself. The latter is no different than any other shape of consciousness. This representation was “at first only a meager object,” a highly particular, individualized will of consciousness that of course was completely inadequate with respect to the actuality of the whole substance.³⁸ By taking its representation for the truth, it

34. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A692/B720.

35. *ibid.*, A295/B352–A298/B354. For more on the relation between error and illusion in Kant’s account of representation see Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, *Modern European Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

36. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 386.

37. *Ibid.*, A621/B648.

38. PG, 428/§801.

was truly in error—subject to an illusion in precisely the sense that Kant warns. As Hegel states, its “disclosure or revelation” was much more “concealment.”³⁹ But representation, precisely because it is not merely a formal principle or a particular content, but the assertion of their identity, does not rest in its illusion. Instead, as Hegel shows, the shapes of religion “spontaneously impel themselves onward.”⁴⁰ This is possible because the actual content of the representation exceeds its form. In the religion of light, which takes the condition of all existence to lie within nature, the representation of the sun was made to stand for all existence. But nature is not light and darkness, since this simple, abstract concept is exceeded by the vast diversity of living beings. No could not account for their multiplicity. Thus, natural religion had to transform into plant and animal religion, in order to be adequate to its own idea. The movement of representation is, at first, the movement from abstraction to a greater and greater degree of determinateness, until it has “absorbed into itself the entire structure of the essentialities of substance.”⁴¹ This occurs when it hits upon its own activity of representation as the principle of any possible truth.

Error, or “misrepresentation,” is indispensable for the development of representation. Without it, only inert unconscious substance would exist. But substance contains this process, consciousness, and to be substance it must pass through the moments of representation as they unfold in this sequence, which is to say “in time.” To conceive of substance without time is to conceive of the purely negative side of this process, that which remains after consciousness has collected all existence for itself. This “image” of the absolute beyond time and space that has emptied itself into time and space is precisely the representation of Christianity, which projects the absolute condition of the world beyond the world. With the transcendental hypothesis, Kant tries to arrest this process by making the illusion of Christianity the *absolute illusion*, in the sense of the final illusion. Reason is defined as the thing that is formed “in time,” and thus limited by it: “Time is the Notion itself that is there and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, Spirit necessarily appears in Time, and it appears in time just so long as it has not

39. PG, 428/§801.

40. PG, 428/§801.

41. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §801.

grasped its pure Notion, i.e., it has not annulled time.”⁴² Kant is not without good reason since, as Hegel has shown, this representation is unique, and perfect, in the way it captures the process of representation itself. What Hegel accomplishes in his act of phenomenological recollection is that reason, or rather spirit, is nothing other than this process itself. It is not limited by it but exists as it. Religion is the necessity behind the historical development of spirit, but it remains blind to this development insofar as it goes on behind its back, outside of what is represented. Religion does not, and cannot, represent history as such, because representation is bound by it. This is why Hegel’s central claim about “Science” is that it “sets aside its Time-form.”⁴³ Of course, this cannot mean that consciousness ceases to exist temporally, which would be to say that it ceases to exist. Rather, it means that “Time... appears as the destiny and necessity of spirit” when spirit “comprehends this intuiting, and is a comprehended and comprehending intuiting.”⁴⁴ In the moment of science this means that “Spirit has completed itself as world-Spirit.”⁴⁵

Spirit as absolute perversion

The fundamental paradox of the formulation of “Absolute Knowing” as conceptual history (and one should also say, as an “historical concept”) is that it is precisely at the moment when spirit recognizes itself as representation that it frees itself from the bounds of representation, from being limited to a part of nature, or a moment in history. It is impossible that consciousness no longer represents. How can it be possible for a being whose ground is representation to “annul” its own temporality? Or, to phrase the question in more general terms, how can knowledge free itself from the form of belief, if it is produced by or as a belief? It is at least clear that, on Hegel’s terms, it is not by clinging to “hope” that some unknown final purpose to historical development exists beyond our comprehension and disavowing all particular belief, as Kant’s philosophy of religion calls for. Such an attempt fails to escape representation and actually makes its alienation

42. PG, 429/§801.

43. PG, 429/§801.

44. PG, 429/§801.

45. PG, 430/§802.

permanent and more extreme, as Hegel argues has occurred in Romantic irony. It demands we accept a world, the meaning or purpose of which we fail to understand, on exactly the basis of this incomprehension, substituting a faith in a radical beyond. In contrast, Hegel maintains that it is “not until consciousness has given up hope of overcoming that alienation [of religious representation] in an external, i.e., alien, manner” that it overcomes alienation.⁴⁶ The alienation of representation can only be overcome by internalizing its content: by recognizing that it was produced in and through human will, and has no meaning beyond human will.

This means that what consciousness must accept in order to actualize “Absolute Knowing” is that it is only time, the “unity of Thought and Time.”⁴⁷ This is the truth of the identity of thought and being that formed the notion of “Absolute Knowing.” As soon as he introduces it, Hegel warns against reducing it to one side or the other—pure concept/form, or pure representation/content. In the first case, the I of consciousness, though absolutely independent from any object, is nothing other than the movement of reflection, arrested in the empty structure of self-referentiality. It bears no relation to any existing spirit precisely because it applies equally to all. Conversely, the latter case lacks any structure. It is therefore the shapeless, formless manifold. Interestingly, Hegel notes that the result in either case is the same. Since neither empty nor indeterminate claims can be in any sense “absolute,” knowledge would have no meaning. If it were “to be spoken of anyway, it would, on the one hand, only be spoken of in order to cast it into the empty abyss of the Absolute, and on the other, it would be a content picked up in external fashion from sense-perception.”⁴⁸ This is, of course, the empirical method that carefully refrains from inscribing its own meaning on what it experiences in order to avoid the “perverted reason” of teleology. It does so by carefully policing the boundary of identity. This is why Kant defined critique as the operation by which we recognize this boundary, in the sense of being aware of it and refusing to cross it.

In contrast, for Hegel reason is *constituted* by trespassing this boundary. He takes his analysis of religion, and the reconciliation of the beautiful soul (good) with evil conscience, to have shown

46. PG, 430/§803.

47. PG, 430/§803.

48. PG, 431/§803.

that spirit is “neither merely the withdrawal of self-consciousness into its pure inwardness, nor the mere submergence of self-consciousness into substance and the non-being of its difference.”⁴⁹ Spirit is precisely the migration back and forth between taking action and the raising of this action to a concept, between positivity and negativity. This is the perverse “uprising of existence” that makes spirit what it is.⁵⁰ Without this constitutive act of trespass, spirit can be neither good nor evil, because it would not *be*. Strictly speaking, perversion should therefore not be aligned with evil any more than it is with the good, though neither is it innocent. Perversion, as Kant was so careful to define it, is the very basis of the difference between evil and good. In this sense, if it is radical evil, it is also radical goodness, which is why Kant struggled to differentiate fanaticism from enthusiasm. That said, it is really neither, since it has turned out that good and evil are representations of spirit. Spirit, in its ground, *is* perverse, because it is inherently teleological. However, it is neither a teleology of God, as in Christian eschatology, nor of the state, as in Kant’s liberal religion of reason.

The question of the precise character in which the development of spirit is something teleological is bound up with the question of absolute knowledge itself. If spirit is bound to the process of representation such that it “overcomes” it only by embracing it as its “destiny and necessity,” how does this knowledge change spirit in the sense Hegel seems to mean when he says that it inaugurates a new shape of spirit—namely, “absolute” spirit? Hegel says that “Spirit has won the element of its existence” and “displays its existence in this ether of its life and is science.”⁵¹ Concretely, it stops “passing back and forth from consciousness or picture-thinking into self-consciousness.” In other words, it is no longer “religious” in the sense that Hegel uses the term. Instead it is able to grasp the *necessity* of its “onward movement” as a rational precept rather than in the form of representation: “The pure movement of this alienation, considered in connection with the content, constitutes the *necessity* of the content.”⁵² That is, consciousness gives itself a standard directly, rather than receiving it as a command of an external will. It does not leave judgment up to the

49. PG, 431/§804.

50. PG, 432/§804.

51. PG, 432/§805.

52. PG, 432/§805.

judgment of any existing church or any messiah to come, but rather knows that it in order to be itself it must form new representations that pervert the old.

However, this is not because the standard is the purely negative, critical, and thus merely “regulative” one that Kant describes. It is because the “Self” that gives itself this standard is not individual consciousness, but spirit. So this does not mean that in science consciousness is freed from “the necessity of externalizing.”⁵³ The standard it gives itself must be tested, and indeed, insofar as all such standards are merely historical, or have the form of time, they count as standards only to the degree which, by virtue of their externalization, they in turn must also be negated. The difference is that this negation is no longer cause *either* for hope or despair—feelings irrevocably tied to the individual and their fate. “Absolute Knowing” does not concern the individual in isolation, but the individual in relation to their world, which can only take the form of a perversion or destruction of that world. Hegel proclaims: “To know one’s limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself.”⁵⁴ The basis of this knowledge is therefore not faith, but the certain knowledge that, insofar as it perverts the prevailing world shape, inaugurating a new one, this action realizes the truth of that world itself.

The achievement of “Absolute Knowing” is not, therefore, the end of history, in the sense that spirit transcends time, stops being time. Rather, it is the beginning of “comprehended history.”⁵⁵ The object of comprehended spirit, its “goal,” is recollection of the movement of spirit now understood properly not as something that happens to it but that it accomplishes. It is the concept of what it is making itself. Hegel coins the term *Er-innerung* to capture the constitutive sense of this knowledge. It is not philosophy or reason that is the motor of the development, but perversion. But consciousness understands this structure and thus possesses an absolute standard for what counts as truth. This is no more, or less, a formal principle than it is a feeling of desire or will. It is the Science of perversion.

53. PG, 432/§806.

54. PG, 433/§807.

55. PG, 433/§808.

6 Conclusion

The science of perversion

I conceived this project with two closely related, but fundamentally distinct, aims in mind. The first, more straightforward goal was to re-examine the precise nature of the contentious relationship between philosophy and religion evident in Hegel's work, and specifically the hypothesis that this relationship exhibits a logic of identity. I wanted to challenge the characterization of Hegel's interest in reconciliation and unity, so closely associated with this topic, as a subordination of difference to sameness. Thus, a secondary but more vital interest was to uncover a different kind of logic operative in the systematic role of religion that could resist many of the challenges raised by contemporary philosophical critiques of the metaphysics of identity in general—one that would recover this system's radical potential and political relevance. Based largely on what I discovered in the pursuit of the first goal, I came to recognize this logic as that of perversion. Since Hegel himself invokes but does not thematize this concept, my argument principally rests on its potential for clarifying the otherwise obscure role of religion in his argument. Taken together, these two general guiding principles comprise the argument that Hegel's abiding interest in religion and his insistence on its substantial importance for philosophy is not a barrier to his contemporary relevance, as has long been assumed either implicitly or explicitly, but rather the condition of its possibility.

It was apparent even at the outset of this project that there was an extraordinarily wide-ranging consensus on this topic, not only in recent scholarship, but throughout the entire history of inter-

pretations of Hegel's work. This struck me as remarkable not so much because of the profound disagreement that otherwise pervades this history, or the particular importance Hegel himself unambiguously attributes to the question throughout his work—but above all because how incompatible with the most basic idea of his phenomenological method the accepted answer seemed to be. Thus, although these traditions draw on a large array of sources, I have focused on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which this method receives its definitive determination. Although there are both more extensive, and arguably clearer, accounts of religion, the sixth chapter of the *Phenomenology* is the only substantial, philosophical treatment published by Hegel in his lifetime, intended for a philosophical audience and not students. In my view, any important difference between it and other sources, in particular the lectures, only increases its importance for understanding Hegel's thought as a whole.

In the "Introduction," Hegel informs his reader in no uncertain terms that in the *Phenomenology* he will engage the problem of identity, or more precisely, the generally held "natural assumption" that identity is a problem—the first problem of philosophy, and possibly, in the view of a certain kind of (modern) skepticism, the last. "Philosophy," he writes, is concerned with the "actual cognition of what is."¹ The assumption that has followed directly from this concern is that cognition is not yet actual, and therefore that the first task must be to determine which of the "different types" of cognition is most "appropriate" to the subject matter. And so, a difference among or within thought is transformed into a difference between thought and being—an ontological difference—and "uneasiness" (*Besorgung*) about the task of philosophy into the "conviction" (*Überzeugung*) that it is "absurd."² This is why Hegel introduces two competing ideas of cognition in terms of identity between thought and being only to reveal them as different expressions of the same assumption: "that consciousness stands on one side and Absolute on the other."³ Hegel's response is not to propose an alternative concept of identity that would cover this ontological difference, since that would tacitly make the same self-defeating assumption at the heart of every ontotheology, but

1. PG, §73.

2. PG, §73.

3. PG, §74.

above all in Christian theology. Instead, he accepts the diversity of cognition and insists that this diversity is always already “actual.” The *justification* of cognition, since it cannot be given in advance without making it impossible, must therefore be given through this appearance of cognition. The immanence of Hegel’s method demands that it should not rely on any concept of identity determined in advance of the act of cognition, which would commit the very same error he begins by critiquing. Nor, however, can this act arbitrarily declare itself to be justified. As Hegel writes, “One bare assurance is as good as another.” Insofar as cognition does recognize, or at least proves itself capable of recognizing, that whatever concept of identity it sets out is based on a more fundamental assumption of non-identity, it “spoils its own limited satisfaction.” As a result, if we want to determine what actual cognition of what is would be, and whether such a thing is possible, “all that is left for us to do is look on” as this dialectical process proceeds.⁴

If we take Hegel at his word when he says that he offers no criterion for genuine cognition in advance, then the identity of religion and philosophy—understood as the cognition of what truly is—will have to emerge from cognition’s self-justificatory activity. It seems that is precisely what happens in the moment of this activity that, in the *Phenomenology*, he calls the “Moral Worldview.” It has been widely recognized for some time that this section seems to contain a critique of the rational structure of Kant’s concept of “practical reason.” To a lesser extent, it has been acknowledged that this critique culminates in an apparent turn to religion, and in particular to Christianity. But there does not seem to be an adequate account of the relation between the two that traces their identity to a proposition of moral spirit itself, and more specifically to the *sublation* of that shape. Thus, in order to understand this transition more clearly I devoted the first two chapters to the historical question of the development of the Christian concept of identity corresponding to this proposition. The first chapter focused on the increasing importance of the autonomy of the individual, arguing that this reflected the peculiar dynamism of the Christian understanding of evil as the perversion of the divine act itself, and thus the identity between the divine and the profane. In conjunction with this idea, I argued that Hegel’s critique of Kant in the *Phenomenology*

4. PG, §85.

is inseparable from the latter's philosophy of religion, in which Kant confronts a kind of necessity of evil understood as perversion, while also trying to contain and limit it.

The second chapter then followed Jeffrey Reid's suggestion that the bulk of the conclusion of "Spirit" concerns not Kant directly but the Romantics' competing response to the problems of Kantian morality that made feeling and the representation of the imagination, rather than the understanding or reason, the ultimate justification. The Romantics were unified in the idea of the incomprehensibility of such a justification, and thus the absolute non-identity between religion and philosophy. The only philosophically conceivable evil would be identity itself. For Hegel, this clearly amounts to a denial of the actuality of cognition. Spirit does not simply perceive and feel, but it *also* judges. To the extent an individual renounces their judgment, they have only transferred it to someone else—the artistic genius, but also the state. "To have done with judgment" actually means the investment of all interest in a single judgment—a new absolute critique of identity.⁵ The entire force of Hegel's critique of "Morality" hinges on the demonstration that the latter itself rests on an ontotheological foundation: absolute negative theology. This theology posits a concept of the imagination as the expression of a pure inner feeling. The centrality of Hegel's critique of the Romantics to this transition suggests that his own concept of the imagination would be essential to his own view of this relation. This is confirmed by one of Hegel's rare non-systematic, published texts in which he attacks Schleiermacher precisely on the grounds that he reduces the imagination to feeling.

One of the reasons the vital connection between Hegel's criticism of the Romantics and the argument of the *Phenomenology* has been overlooked, besides the fact that Hegel himself doesn't make it himself, may be the term Hegel uses to characterize the cognitive operation of religion: *Vorstellung* and not the more common *Einbildung*. This choice is the first clue to his own view of the imagination. Hegel gives little credence to the idea of an individual faculty in the *Phenomenology*—in fact, it is a concept that is explicitly overcome in reason. For him the imagination

5. In contrast to the Romantics, Deleuze's critique of judgment never pretends to offer reconciliation, on the contrary, he quite explicitly aims to incite "combat." See Gilles Deleuze, "To Have Done with Judgment," in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Verso, 1998), 126–135.

is fundamentally an activity in which spirit *collectively* participates. Consequently, the definition that Hegel gives the activity of *Vorstellung* as an act of cognition invokes the logic of perversion: the presentation of a particular for a universal. Accordingly, the central occupation of the third chapter was not only to show how this applied to each shape of religion, but also how, in the case of Christianity, Hegel thinks that consciousness hits on a justification for cognition as a whole, which is to say, an actual description of the real conditions of cognition: *to perceive is to pervert*. However, Christianity, as a religion, does not grasp this concept. Rather, it *produces* it through representation, and spirit judges the morality of individual acts in conformity with it in the manner Hegel analyzes as “evil conscience.” But the content of this representation manifests an antithesis so complete that it is not resolvable through representation itself. Its cognition is not yet absolute, because it does not understand, or perhaps accept, the necessity of its own representation. It equally strives to deny this necessity, the defining impulse of the beautiful soul. It hypocritically clings to its representation, the specific meaning of which is that representation is perverse! For Hegel, the threat of Schleiermacher’s theology of “heresy” is not that it depends on the imagination, but that it substitutes for a genuine reconciliation of the necessity of representation and the necessity of reason a permanent, “absolute” *tolerance* that finally closes the door to a future unity that Kant holds open as a rational interest as much as he holds it at a distance as a theological “hope.” In his opposition to this idea Hegel’s interest in religion becomes clear: the overcoming of spiritual alienation insofar as it depends on a particular religious representation.

This reading of the Religion chapter thus presents a double challenge to the “identity thesis,” the idea that spirit and religion are different forms of cognition of the same absolute, two different aspects of “Absolute Knowing.” Although religion produces spirit and therefore corresponds to it in the sense that they are moments of an identical process, this is true of every moment of the *Phenomenology*, and like every moment of the *Phenomenology*, the more advanced moment is more complete than any previous moment—in fact it contains all of them. Hegel says exactly this about the relation between religion and spirit. This would seem to preclude the possibility that they are the same, either in form or content. Furthermore, neither spirit nor religion is yet

genuine knowledge—neither is absolute. Each is limited by that which it does not comprehend—spirit by the absolute object of history, and religion by the absolute subject of God. Thus, neither can have the same content as “Absolute Knowing,” which is rather knowledge of the actual nature of their identity. Consequently, the identity thesis, to the extent it has been adopted by standard interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in particular, has severely misrepresented the nature of his method, whether it has done so sympathetically or critically. The role of religion cannot be evidence for any priority of sameness over difference in Hegel, even if it is true that he retains at least a preliminary assumption of identity, if only as a result of his strategy to accept only result of consciousness’s own attempts at self-justification.

This conclusion, which addresses the first aim of the project, appears strictly negative. It only demonstrates that Hegel himself cannot subscribe to the typical concept of identity typically used as a lens to interpret the relation between religion and philosophy in his system. But what then is the nature of this identity? Hegel’s rejection of transcendental identity does not mean that his own concept is any more “radical and nonfoundational.” It is not even surprising, since one would hardly expect Hegel to apply a method in the case of religion—a concept that he explicitly criticizes in various other contexts. The fact that it is possible to find such an interpretation even in scholarship that explicitly aims only to better understand Hegel’s intent surely speaks to the difficulty of the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*. Given what Hegel says about the “perfection” of Christianity, it seems plausible that he is in fact espousing some version of a rationalist theology that ultimately accepts an *irrational* belief in place of a *rational* justification. If this belief is not strictly speaking a positive dogma approved by the Christian church, it might be the liberal state that the Christian community produced. Either would make Hegel’s method both fundamentally regressive and foundationalist in the sense that it aspires to a transcendent principle of cognition. This is in fact Marx’s view, a view so influential that attributing a Kantian concept of identity to Hegel seems generous in comparison.

In order to challenge this view, I finally needed to consider the way in which the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* concerned religion, and especially its relation to spirit. Hegel writes there

that science appears as the result of a recollection of spirit in its progression, now understood as the product of representation. This recollection is not itself an act of *religious consciousness*, but an entirely new shape of spirit. It does not take the form of representation. However, neither does it reach outside the accumulated content of spirit in order to “correct” cognition by delivering an external, absolute idea. The truth of Christianity is precisely that no such deliverance is possible: the essence of the absolute is representation. The revelation of this truth in Christianity did not come from a transcendent God, it was the historical accomplishment of a community. Thus, we do not need to refer to any existing positive doctrines for salvation; in fact, this is precisely what we know we cannot do. Instead, we ourselves must invent new ones. This is the first dimension of the science of perversion, its criticality or radicality. It means that in order to fulfill its essence, spirit must transform its existence. The appearance of the concept of time in “Absolute Knowing” in the assertion that spirit *is* time signifies the conceptual content of the necessity of representation, and hence perversion, that Christianity represents.

This, however, might seem to disrupt any nonfoundational reading. It certainly seems to confirm the idea that “Absolute Knowing” marks the end of a certain kind of philosophical history, tied to the question of the relation between what Kant, tellingly adopting a legal metaphor, called the *quid iuris* and the *quid facti*.⁶ For Kant, the entire investigation of the “transcendental” rested on proper respect for this distinction, and in particular, the kinds of necessity proper to each domain. But this is nothing other than the separation inaugurated by the “natural assumption” about cognition that Hegel speaks about, when it opposes itself to the absolute even at the moment it postulates a potential identity. In the moral realm, it is the distinction between enthusiasm and fanaticism. By making it absolute, Kant ensures that reconciliation and faith and reason must remain matters of *hope*. This conviction is reflected with particular clarity and breadth in his consideration of the question “What is Enlightenment?” Against the “pastor” (among others) who says, “Do not argue—believe!” Kant declares that only freedom is of absolute social value: “The public use of one’s reason must be free at all times, and this alone can bring enlightenment to mankind.” But

6. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A84/B116.

freedom is threatened not only by tyrannical rule, but also every other human being who would seek to censor or prohibit this right in some area. About the head of state Kant thus warns that while “salvation is none of his business; it is his business to prevent one man from forcibly keeping another from determining and promoting his salvation to the best of his ability.”⁷ The freedom of a public reason thus implies the careful control of a private one. Kant’s slogan is that of the “enlightened ruler”: “Argue as much as you like, but obey!”⁸ Religion does not altogether cease to be political in the modern, “liberal” age. Rather, its political character is altered—it has become a matter of private pursuit rather than communal unity, since no one can claim knowledge of the necessary conditions of salvation. Public enlightenment ultimately not only entails the privatization of salvation, that is, secularism, but it also presents privatization *as* salvation, what Hegel called the “absolute discretion” of the social world. Hegel’s rejection of the natural assumption of cognition is a rejection of the distinction of *quid iuris* and *quid facti* in order to treat justification as a fact, as the actuality of cognition. When Hegel says that “Absolute Knowing” grasps the necessity of spirit’s perversion, he is attributing to spirit a *new power* to justify itself. But what is the nature of this power? What does it allow spirit to do?

As Rose points out, the separation of the *quid iuris* and *quid facti* persists through neo-Kantian sociology despite Hegel’s criticism.⁹ Given the interpretation of his phenomenology of religion, this is not surprising. But in order for Hegel to take his place alongside critics of this conception of freedom, something minimal will need to be established with regard to the status of the necessity grasped by “Absolute Knowing”—its presentation of a *logic* of perversion as the end of history insofar as it demands the collapse of this distinction. This, of course, also raises the question of how the absolute status of perversion might reflect on the later parts of Hegel’s mature system, but for now we can only outline what is distinctive about it as a logic. As a response to Kant’s slogan of enlightenment, Hegel’s slogan of perversion might run as follows: “Stop arguing, and *disobey*.” The necessity for argument in Kant’s conception of what he calls “public reason” is due

7. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Siegbert Reiss (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54–60.

8. *Ibid.*, 55–56.

9. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 13.

precisely to the fact that it is alienated from “private reason”—the need for obedience follows from its dependence on it. Its openness to the future rests on the regulative projection of its *telos* into an unknown, unknowable, but still hoped for future. “Absolute Knowing,” in contrast, realizes the “end” of religion, in the sense of both its *Vollkommenheit* and *Zweck*, by overcoming religion. The *telos* is brought back into the activity of cognition—no longer as a particular will or interest, but as the *particularity of will* in the necessity that it overturn the existing shape of the world in order to realize the truth of that world, which is also its own truth. The genuine mode of existence of this truth is not in the structure of an individual consciousness or individual deeds, but rather *collective action*. This might be called the fundamental autochthony of Hegelian perversity as opposed to the autonomy of Kantian morality. The *khthon* should not be understood anachronistically as a nation or border, which in fact much more directly refers to the *nomos*, its derivative. It refers not to any specific group, but the fact that justification for a shape of what Hegel calls spirit can only come from spirit’s own act, in which a diversity of wills and interests group together in the name of the whole precisely insofar as they transform the whole into what it is not, which includes, of course, everything it has ever been. In this light Hegel’s systematic philosophy could be read, not as a universal doctrine, but a method of self-knowledge.

*We do not indeed say of our feelings,
impulses or interests that they serve us,
rather do they count as independent forces
and powers, so that to have this particular
feeling, to desire this, is what we are.*

Science of Logic, §20

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