The Divinity of Conscience: Forgiveness, Religion, and the Politics of Secularity in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the intersection of forgiveness and religion in G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.* I argue that religion and forgiveness can be profitably understood as parallel communicative practices through which a community affirms its sense of that which has "absolute" value. Religion, as Hegel conceives of it, is a communicative practice that gives expression to the basic "terms of membership" through which individuals both affirm and are affirmed with respect to their fundamental belonging to a community. Such terms are likewise invoked in the practice of forgiveness, for Hegel, insofar as forgiveness activates a community's infinite capacity to acknowledge and incorporate the irreducibly finite nature of human individuality and agency. In view of this similarity, Hegel's philosophy of religion offers productive resources for theorizing religions as "socio-cultural idioms of forgiving," and, by extension, for rethinking the nature of interreligious dialogue in the public sphere. Just as no single act of forgiveness could ever wholly or finally resolve the inherently transgressive potential of human action, so too is religious expression subject to ongoing critique and transformation, owing to the necessarily determinate and particular ways in which the idiomatic language of religion expresses "the absolute." This "absolutely idiomatic" nature of religious discourse, I argue, offers a promising starting point for addressing the political challenge surrounding religious differences. In their intersection with the norm of forgiveness, particular religious idioms not only are exposed to the demand to forgive their religious "others," but also (and for this reason) contain within themselves self-critical resources for the promotion of democratic ideals such as tolerance, reasoning in public, and respect for difference.

Acknowledgments

I first want to express my gratitude to the teachers and mentors who guided me to and through this project, a list of individuals that extends even farther back than my time at the University of Toronto. Shannon Hoff first ignited my interest in Hegel, and has been a model for me not only for how to read Hegel but also of what philosophy ought to be. I am grateful for Shannon's critical and encouraging investment in my work over the years. Jim DiCenso, my advisor in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto, has been a supportive, enthusiastic, and challenging mentor and conversation partner, and has done much to make my time at the DSR enjoyable. I am grateful also for my many conversations with Willi Goetschel, who opened up new avenues for my thinking about secularism, and for Bob Gibbs' challenging questions about the nature of forgiveness. I owe my interest in phenomenology to Rajiv Kaushik, who noticed my preoccupation with religion as young philosophy student at Brock University and turned me on to the works of Marion and Levinas. I am thankful for the ongoing mentorship and friendship of Ron Kuipers, who has continued to be a supportive dialogue partner since I completed my M.A. at the Institute for Christian Studies, and whose seminar on Ricoeur first led me to the question of the relationship between forgiveness and religion. Finally, I am especially thankful to John Russon, who helped me to develop the initial outline of this project, and whose writing and teaching continues to bring Hegel's text to life for me. John has been a reliable guide regarding philosophy and teaching, and I am grateful for the many seminars and study groups that he has facilitated, and for our timely conversations at Holy Oak.

I am also grateful to the colleagues, friends, and family members whose encouragement and support, coming at various times and in various ways, has enabled me to complete this project. Among the DSR community, I am especially thankful to Khalidah Ali, Ian Brown, Anna Cwikla, Maria Dasios, Ken Derry, Jairan Gahan, Sol Goldberg, Jennifer Harris, and Allison Murphy. Jeff Morrisey has been a challenging intellectual companion over the many years that we have been friends, and he has left his mark on this project in many ways. I am ever grateful for the friendship of Todd Dias and Mike Krause, who have offered valuable perspective and insight and have helped me stay in touch with the underlying motivations of my work. It has been a pleasure to progress through graduate school alongside my cousin Nathan Bonney, and I am thankful for our ongoing philosophical dialogue. The small community of individuals—my "Niagara friends"—who were there when I first made the decision to go to grad school has been an abiding source of encouragement, and I am grateful to them for cheering me on. I am also grateful to my family—my parents, Bob and Sharon, for their enduring support over the years, and my brother Dave, for the many times we have sipped Scotch and talked about theology between innings. Lastly, I want to express my immense gratitude to my partner Elena Young. Elena has been a constant source of care and encouragement as I completed the doctoral program and this dissertation, and I am grateful for her patience, perspective, and advice.

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INTRODUCTION: FORGIVENESS AND RELIGION IN HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

At the end of his study of "spirit" in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the "reconciling *Yea*" of forgiveness—the act of mutual recognition that, when expressed in words, realizes what he calls "absolute spirit"—as "God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge" (494, M671).[1] Correspondingly, in the final paragraphs of Hegel's study of religion in the following chapter, we witness the religious community "to which the absolute being is revealed" reach the stage of self-understanding wherein it "intuitively apprehend[s]" itself as the "absolute spirit" that was formerly affirmed by religious consciousness in the form of an absolute object (that is, as "God"). This collective self-apprehension marks the intersection of two key moments in Hegel's phenomenology: first, the theophany of forgiveness, which Hegel describes as "the movement of self-certain spirit which forgives evil and in so doing abandons its own simple unitary nature and rigid unchangeableness," and which, "bursting forth as the *affirmative* between [opposed] extremes," marks the unanticipated appearance of a source of reconciliation that neither opponent could generate by its own strength or initiative (572, M786); and second, the "de-theophany" of collective self-recognition wherein the "self-certain spirit which forgives evil" comes to know (or at least "intuitively apprehend") itself as the presence of God in the world. This correspondence between the (ostensibly human) act of forgiveness and the affirmation of the (ostensibly divine) object of religion assigns a crucial function to forgiveness in the context of Hegel's phenomenology: not only is forgiveness the activity through which "spirit" becomes aware of its "absolute" significance; the possibility of forgiveness is at the same time that to which, in religion, the idea of "the absolute" points.

Whereas commentators on these parts of Hegel's text—especially the transition from Chapter VI to VII—often raise questions about the distinctly religious or theological dimension of forgiveness,[2] my aim is to focus instead in the reciprocal question—namely, how forgiveness serves as the interpretive key for Hegel's understanding of religion. I argue that the intersection of religion

[1] References to Hegel's text are to G. W. F Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970) and to Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). In-text citations refer to the page number of the Moldenhauer and Michel edition, and then to the paragraph number of Miller's translation.

[2] See for example Paul T. Wilford, "The Theological Dimension of Agency: Forgiveness, Recognition, and Responsibility in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 72 (March 2019): 497-527; Molly Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics: Religion, Conflict, and Rituals of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), especially Chapter Four; Liz Disley, *Hegel, Love, and Forgiveness: Positive Recognition in German Idealism* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2015), especially Chapter 5; Martin J. De Nys, *Hegel and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), especially Chapter Two; and Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 206-211.

and forgiveness enables us to posit an inherently "confessional" dimension to religious expression, according to which religious discourses are on their own terms predisposed to dialogical openness to their discursive "others." In this way, I argue, Hegel's text offers a model for interreligious dialogue premised on the communicative openness inherent in religion's implicit answerability to the norm of forgiveness as a form of mutual recognition. To recognize one's finitude in the presence of the "absolute object" of one's religious devotion is at the same time—although not always explicitly—to recognize one's finitude in the presence of one's human interlocutor, a parallel that exposes a normative source for interreligious engagement that is internal to the linguistic system of a religion. Challenging the assumption that religious idioms must be "translated" into the supposedly neutral language of "secular reason" in order to attain public relevance, I argue that public, interreligious dialogue is better conceived as the pursuit of common terms among diverse, mutually "confessing and forgiving" religious idioms.

My exploration of the intersection of religion and forgiveness is prompted by their appearance in Hegel's text as parallel forms of communicative action. Just as religion, for Hegel, is to be understood as a community's affirmation of what for it has "absolute" significance (an act that accomplishes also the community's most basic self-expression), so too does the act of forgiveness enact and express a kind of "absolute"—specifically, the "absolute spirit" whereby those involved in the act of forgiveness make reference to the most basic possibility of mutual recognition and understanding between them. This parallel raises a number of questions. First, concerning the organization of Hegel's text, why would a phenomenology of "spirit"—the sharing of meaning that, for Hegel, defines our sense of ourselves and of the world in which we live—culminate in the gesture of forgiveness? Why, second, would this identification of forgiveness with absolute spirit function as the starting point for a phenomenology of religion? Third, what does its phenomenological parallel with forgiveness mean for our understanding of the nature of the religious phenomenon? Is there something intrinsically religious about forgiveness? And does religious practice maintain an essential connection to the practice of forgiveness? Fourth, if indeed religion and forgiveness necessarily intersect, how do religions express this intersection? Are different religious traditions in contact with forgiveness equally, or do some lay claim to the reality of forgiveness more exclusively? And finally, how does this intersection inform the way in which different religious expressions encounter one another? What possibilities for "interreligious dialogue" are embedded in the phenomenological kinship that Hegel detects between religion and forgiveness?

Exploring these questions more or less in order, the chapters that follow trace the theme of forgiveness from its point of origin in the interpretive nature of human experience as such, to its significance as an implicit norm for communicative action in the context of the public sphere. Chapter One lays the phenomenological groundwork for understanding the intersection of forgiveness and religion, by addressing the basic tension within human experience to which forgiveness is the ultimate response. Drawing on Hegel's argument in "Sense-Certainty," the opening chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I show first that human experience is fundamentally interpretive, insofar as each of us inhabits a singular perspective within a world that is inherently shared with others. Although Hegel does not use the word "interpretation" in his analysis, his argument reveals that what we take to be simply "given" or immediate in our experience—namely, our being presented with some sensuous "this"—is in fact available to us precisely through our *perceiving* it, that is, our taking it *as* immediate.[3] Our experience, as fundamentally a matter of experiencing *as*, is thus fundamentally reflective of our interpretive agency as subjects for whom the world is irreducibly meaningful. Turning to Hegel's account of mutual recognition, I show second that our capacity to "take up" our singular agency presupposes the recognition and affirmation of others, and indeed that our experience in general has on its horizon the sharing of meaning with others—that is, communication. The world of our experience is irreducibly meaningful because it is irreducibly shared, and the interpretive stance each of us occupies predisposes us to the solicitation of others' perspectives as we live our own interpretive agencies. Tracing the themes of interpretation and communication through to Hegel's account of conscience, I show, third, that the act of forgiveness is on the horizon of communication as the form of the sharing of meaning—of recognition—that reconciles the absolute singularity of interpretive agency with the shared nature of the meaningfulness of the world of experience. One's singular agency, in other words, has on its horizon "universality"—that is, the intelligible integration of diverse human perspectives through the adoption and expression of common terms. As singular, though, human agency is irreducible to the terms of universality, and forgiveness is the form of communication in which this irreducibility is explicitly affirmed. Forgiveness is the standpoint that acknowledges that the "conflict of interpretations" is an absolute situation, that the meaning of the human world is nothing other than the meaningful integration of absolutely singular perspectives.

Although forgiveness offers the only adequate response to the absolute significance of singularity in human experience, the enactment of forgiveness only ever takes place in determinate situations. In Hegel's terms, the "reciprocal recognition that is absolute spirit" makes its concrete

[3] Here Hegel exploits the literal meaning of *Wahrnehmen*, which translates as "truth-taking."

appearance in the "objective word of reconciliation"—that is, in a finite *expression* of forgiveness that, as finite, cannot wholly encapsulate the meaning of the absolute perception that it utters. For Hegel, this discrepancy—between the absolute norm of forgiveness and its merely objective utterance—introduces a new phenomenological theme following the culmination of his study of "spirit" in Chapter VI—namely, religion. My second chapter offers a reading of Hegel's phenomenology of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, focusing on Hegel's analysis of the various determinate practices through which communities express their understanding of "absolute reality," and which speak for their implicit understanding of who they collectively are. Carrying forward the theme of interpretation explored in Chapter One, I argue here that to be an interpretive agent is fundamentally to be a member of a particular interpretive *community*, and it is through this community's religious practices—principally, though its ritual self-expressions—that it enacts and affirms its most basic essence as that which shapes and supports the interpretive agency of its members.

Bringing together the conclusions of the first two chapters, Chapter Three offers a discussion of religion and forgiveness as parallel forms of communication that, according to Hegel, put into practice the absolute—that is, most basic—communicative terms of a "We." I argue that this parallel invites the question of the interrelation or mutual implication of religion and forgiveness, addressing first the question of whether forgiveness is in some sense a religious act. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's claim that forgiveness involves an "act of faith," I show that forgiveness is religious in the sense that it invokes a reconciliatory source that exceeds anything that the individual parties involved can initiate. However, Hegel's phenomenology goes farther than Ricoeur's in demonstrating not simply this religious significance of forgiveness but also the intrinsically "forgiving" nature of religion. According to Hegel, then, religion and forgiveness are not simply parallel communicative possibilities but rather are intersecting or mutually implicating. Religion is answerable to the norm of forgiveness *according to its own logic*, a trait that not only informs the development of religion (as I show in Chapter Four) but also predisposes religious idioms toward dialogue with others in the context of politics (the theme of Chapter Five).

Following up the discussion of the previous chapter, my fourth chapter argues that the parallel between religion and forgiveness is, for Hegel, the governing principle of the self-transformation of religion. As Hegel makes clear at the end of Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, God appears "in the midst" of those who forgive one another; divine reality is thus to a decisive extent *not* distinct from the community of forgiving recognition. Although, as I discuss here, it is an essential function of religion to "represent" this "absolute spirit" in the form of an

absolute, but external, object (namely, "God"), because representation marks a merely *formal* discrepancy within the self-knowledge of absolute spirit, it is possible to regard the object-affirming and self-affirming functions of religion as expressive of a single source. Accordingly, Hegel's study of religion in Chapter VII traces the development of religion as this discrepancy of form gradually reveals an underlying identity of content. What we see, in other words, is the gradual exposure of the "absolute" affirmed by religious practice as beyond the community to be precisely the "absolute spirit" of the (forgiving) community that performs this affirmation. According to the logic of this development, the object of religious affirmation is in the final analysis not beyond the community of the devoted, but rather is present "here and now" among them in their "actual"—and, to a significant extent, political—world. Crucially, this convergence of divine reality with the actual human community is not an interpretation imposed on either side, but rather is the culmination of the *self*-transformation of religion, in which the representational media of religion (the particular narratives, symbols, images that define a particular religion) adapt themselves to the object—that is, the community itself—that they affirm. Religion, therefore, is a self-relativizing practice, since what matters in religion is one's ongoing answerability to the absolute source of one's devotion, rather than any of the finite practices and representations through which one expresses it.

According to Hegel's account, then, all religious expressions are "idiomatic," that is, finite and particular utterances that give voice to an infinite and absolute reality. Hegel thus enables an understanding of the "post-religious" or "secular" character of the modern world in terms, not of the absence of religion, but rather of religion's awareness of its own idiomaticity as an expression of "absolute reality." My final chapter explores the political consequences of the conception of religions as "absolute idioms." For many liberal political theorists, while modern democratic societies can and should be inclusive of the diversity of religious convictions and traditions, when it comes to matters of public concern, religious viewpoints must be translated into the publicly accessible and religiously neutral language of "public reason." I argue that this liberal conception of public reason too often pays insufficient attention to the "pre-public" roots of individuals' political values, and that the neutrality sought through this conception of public reason, consequently, too often implicitly favours one religious idiom to the detriment of others (that is, it is precisely *not* neutral), or is too superficial to be genuinely inviting to religious persons. My aim is to reinforce the integrity of public reason by supplementing the one-sided liberal model with a consideration of the pre-political significance of religion as a socio-cultural idiom of forgiveness. Extending the conclusions of the previous chapters, I argue that, as particular expressions of a culture's collective sense of what has absolute value, religious practices are themselves answerable to the demands of

confession and forgiveness they facilitate. Religions are "confessions," in the sense that their own most authentic expression is the recognition of the determinacy of their own idiom, an inherent "non-self-identity" that exposes religion to the demand to offer forgiveness to what is intolerable, "heretical," or otherwise religiously "other."

In view of this inherent instability, I argue, religions can locate within themselves the sources of their acceptance of "secular," democratic ideals, and can be expected to affirm such political goods as public reason *on their own terms*. I conclude the study with some reflections on how my project, while affirming the necessarily secular character of public, political dialogue in the context of religious pluralism, challenges the understanding of "public reason" as signifying a distinct and neutral language into which religious idioms are to be translated. Rather, public reason—just like rationality in general—signifies an orientation *within* one's more basic and idiomatic linguistic home toward making intelligible contact with one's linguistic other. In the same way that translation between languages in general does not draw on a neutral, pre-existing meta-language,[4] but instead works by "playing with the non-identity within itself of all language,"[5] translation—that is, communication—between religious languages rests, not on the arbitration of the supposedly neutral meta-language of secular reason, but rather on an orientation toward communication in public that diverse religious idioms can recognize within and endorse for themselves.

Many interpreters have emphasized the importance of conscience and forgiveness in Hegel's thinking, arguing that the "absolute standpoint" envisioned by Hegel should be understood as the conscientious recognition of the necessity of contingency and difference for moral and ontological truths.[6] Recent studies have further applied this focus on the experience of conscience to Hegel's philosophy of religion, exploring the ways in which the practices of mutual recognition represented by confession and forgiveness offer a helpful model for addressing the political conflicts and

[4] "What remains insurmountable [is that] there is no metalanguage, and that *a* language shall always be called upon to speak about *the* language—*because* the latter does not exist." Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 69.
[5] Ibid., 65.
[6] Major studies that emphasize the significance of conscience in Hegel's thinking include Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974); H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder, II: The Odyssey of Spirit* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), especially Chapter 9; Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); and Shannon Hoff, *The Laws of the Spirit: A Hegelian Theory of Justice* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2014). Shorter exemplary studies include J. M. Bernstein, "Conscience and Transgression: The Persistence of Misrecognition," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* Vol. 15, No. 1 (1994): 55-70; John E. Russon, "Selfhood, Conscience, and Dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1991): 533-550; and John Burbidge, "Hegel's Absolutes," *The Owl of Minerva*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (1997): 23-37.

tensions so often associated with interreligious dialogue.[7] While building on this existing literature, my study attends uniquely to the *intersection* of religion and forgiveness as socio-cultural phenomena as presented in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in order to demonstrate their mutual implication as self-expressive practices of a community. That is, my study does not simply look to the conscientious practice of confession and forgiveness as a model to be *applied* to cases of religious difference, but rather argues that a religious idiom, in its encounter with difference, is implicitly responsible to confess and forgive according to the very logic of its own religious claim. Thus, my argument looks beyond the familiar debates about whether, owing to its positive contributions, religion should be permitted to enter political spaces and dialogues. Rather, as an inherently conscientious practice (in the sense for which I have argued), religion is itself *already* "political," not simply because of the political relevance of many religious claims, but because of the exposure to the norm of political dialogue implicit in the self-critical logic of religion. Interreligious dialogue, which occurs in (and oftentimes engenders) what we typically regard as the "public" domain, ought to be conceived as a mutually "forgiving" interaction of diverse idioms whose participants acknowledge the idiomatic finitude of one another's conception and expression of ultimate reality.

[7] See especially Farneth's *Hegel's Social Ethics* and Disley's *Hegel, Love, and Forgiveness*. One of Farneth's central goals is to demonstrate that, "while the Hegelian standpoint is at odds with some religious views, it embraces a set of practices for engaging with one another across [religious] differences and disagreements" (Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 12). Disley's work, which similarly looks to Hegel's understanding of forgiveness as exemplifying a form of "positive recognition" with which to ground an ethical practice of mutual recognition, explores the specifically theological dimension of forgiveness itself as *metanoia*. Although it looks beyond the specific themes of conscience and forgiveness, the work of Thomas A. Lewis has perhaps gone the farthest in demonstrating the ongoing relevance of Hegel for questions about the relationship between religion and politics. See especially Lewis' *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* and "Finite Representation, Spontaneous Thought, and The Politics of an Open-Ended Consummation," which stress the political significance—and responsibility—of religion as providing the "background views" that cultivate and inform individuals' intuitions and attitudes towards the political arena, especially in the context of religious diversity. Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), and "Finite Representation, Spontaneous Thought, and The Politics of an Open-Ended Consummation," in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, eds. by Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 199-219.

CHAPTER ONE: INTERPRETATION, RECOGNITION, AND COMMUNICATION: THE UTTERANCE OF EXPERIENCE AND THE MEANING OF FORGIVENESS

In the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, entitled "Sense-certainty: or the 'This' and 'Meaning,'" Hegel concludes that our apparently immediate experience of particular sense-data is inherently mediated, and that the "truth" of any such sensuous presence is in fact a perceived *universal*. This conclusion marks a "point of no return," as Merold Westphal says, since reaching it "decisively cut[s us] off from a whole family of strategies for achieving the goal of philosophy," strategies that attempt to anchor the pursuit of philosophical knowledge precisely in the sort of immediacies that Hegel's opening study interrogates.[1] Hegel's own strategy, to be sure, is not to deny such presence, but rather to attend to and describe as precisely as possible its manner of appearing. Through such description we learn that, although experience most undeniably is, at its most basic level, an encounter with presence (the fact that *something is there*, happening before us), such presence is just as undeniably *not* self-sufficient. Immediate presence, Hegel demonstrates in this first chapter, is meaningful only in the context of what is not present; it appears *as* immediate by virtue of our having distinguished it from the mediating conditions of its appearance. Most fundamentally, therefore, experience is more than simply the passive awareness of "what simply is." Although phenomenological description can begin with nothing other than the "presenting" that is immediately offered in experience, there is, once we have interrogated this starting point, no returning to the assumption that we could ground our description in immediacy as a self-sufficient point of departure.

Because of its decisiveness, however, the self-refutation of sense-certainty is also a point to which Hegel's study continually returns, as later stages of the *Phenomenology* serve to deepen our understanding of lessons drawn from this initial critique of immediacy. One such lesson concerns the place of language in experience. As Hegel shows in his first chapter, the inherently mediated character of experience is nowhere more evident than in our attempt to *express* our experience of a particular, immediate sensation. After stating his conclusion that "it is in fact the universal that is the truth of sense-certainty," Hegel adds, "it is as a universal too that we *utter* [*sprechen*] what the sensuous is" (85, M97). But this initial reference to language is more suggestive than it is instructive or explanatory. What role, we are left asking, does utterance play in the discovery that the truth of sense experience is the universal? Is it that, upon reaching this

[1] Merold Westphal, *History and Truth in Hegel's* Phenomenology, *Third Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), ix.

discovery, we notice that language reenacts the implicit universality of sensation, and thus constitutes a privileged, though logically independent, illustration of Hegel's conclusion? Or is Hegel making a stronger claim—namely, that this reference to language is logically necessary to his exposition of the truth of sense-certainty, given that, as he says, "language expresses this truth *alone*" (85, M97, emphasis mine)?

The argument that I pursue in this chapter locates itself somewhere between these two alternatives. Whereas Hegel's critique of the self-sufficiency of immediacy does not invoke a pre-established understanding of language as one of its premises, his argument shows that our immediate experience does reflect a certain aspect of our shared reality of which language is a privileged enactment—what he calls, namely, the "universal." In other words, it is not *because* of our use of language that our experience has the traits of mediation and universality. Rather, it is because universality is constitutive of human experience itself that a reference to language necessarily appears in this initial account of experience. Thus, Hegel's point is *not* that experience is inherently linguistic, in the sense that language "structures" our experience in advance. When he writes towards the end of the chapter that "the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e., to that which is inherently universal" (91-92, M110), he is saying more than simply that we are unable to articulate our experience of a sensuous particularity except for in universal terms (e.g., "this," "here," "now"). His point, rather, is that the very form of our experience of immediate sensuous presence (an experience we undeniably *do* have) is reflective of the broader, but constitutively non-present, contexts of shared meaning within which we, as singular agents, take up a particular stance. Human experience, for Hegel, is thus inherently *communicative*, and our use of language is the privileged form of activity through which communication—understood broadly as "the sharing of meaning"—is enacted.

In the discussion below, I trace the development of Hegel's initial critique of the self-sufficiency of immediate experience, in order to register the fullest extent to which human experience on his view is characterized by the sharing of meaning. My discussion has three basic steps, which correspond to three dimensions of the non-self-sufficiency of immediacy that Hegel exposes in his text.

The first section explores the issues already raised in connection with Hegel's critique of "sense-certainty," and shows that human experience is fundamentally interpretive and, therefore, fundamentally communicative. Following Hegel's account, I show that we are not the passive recipients of a reality from which we are distinct and to which we are basically indifferent, but

rather are actively involved in a world "outside" within which we occupy a singular perspective. As Hegel shows, the particular and immediate sense-data of our experience are *meaningful*, insofar as their appearance is mediated in a context of universal terms that provides the background against which any such particular sensuous immediacy stands out. My goal here is to offer a sense of what this context of universality *is*, in which our attempts to grasp sensuous immediacies show us to be already embedded at the most basic level of experience. Our perception of things, our "taking them *as*" (or according to) the universal terms through which they appear, is, as Hegel's argument shows, an implicitly communicative activity. This is not, however, because as language-users we are destined to engage with reality through some linguistic superstructure, but because the very form of our experience is reflective of the universal character of consciousness whereby communication is possible. We cannot say what we mean, as Hegel says, not because language bars our access to sensuous immediacy, but because meaning as such—the meaning of immediacy included—is implicitly *saying*.

Extending this conclusion, the second section proposes that saying is *sharing*, that the world of our experience is meaningful because of the fact that we make and share it with others. I show here that the basic interpretive "take" on the world explored in the previous section is a reflection of the essentially communicative—that is, interpersonal, social, and cultural—processes through which we become perceiving individuals in the first place. These processes of identity-formation, which Hegel studies under the label "mutual recognition"—involve explicit acts of communication whereby self and other recognize and affirm each other's individuality. The apparent immediacy of self-conscious experience shows itself to be non-self-sufficient, insofar as the singular perspective that we inhabit and "take up" involves, for Hegel, an implicit reference to the acknowledgment of others. Hegel's references to language in his opening analysis of sense-certainty are thus suggestive of the fact that our engagement in the world is always "to-be-articulated," and that our most basic experience of the world propels us toward expression with others. More than just a tool that we *use* (though in some ways it is this), language corresponds to the mutually shared and enacted context in which we are habituated into our sense of being a "self." It is the "self"—the "universal self-consciousness"—that forms the broader context in which our individual acts of perception are made, the mutually trusted system of gestures and terms that we employ and affirm in any act of meaningful self-expression.

Whereas this initial account of recognition establishes the interdependence of self and other in principle, Hegel shows that the actual and effective expression of our dependence on others for our own identities occurs only in the mutual recognition of conscientious action, in

which we acknowledge the definitive role of others' affirmation of the meaning of what we say and do. As the first two sections of the chapter make clear, experience is fundamentally a matter of bringing my uniquely interpretive point of view in contact with that of other people, who thus constitute the condition of my stable inhabitance of my perspective. Although my dependence on others is affirmed in each of the forms of mutual recognition that determine my engagement in the world around me, Hegel shows that the recognition of conscience marks the consummate affirmation of both the inherently interpretive (that is, singular) and inherently shared (that is, universal) dimensions of human experience. Characterized by the acts of confession and forgiveness, conscientious mutual recognition reflects the acknowledgment that the very nature of meaning is not self-sufficient,[2] and that interpretive singularity—that is to say, transgression—does not cut oneself off from the (universal) structures of meaning that one shares with others, but rather is constitutive of those structures. In other words, for Hegel, systems of mutual recognition are answerable precisely to the interpretive agency they enable, and therefore must reckon with, without ever closing down, the inevitable transgression of the established norms and standards into which they settle. In this way, as I argue in this third section, mutual recognition is most properly realized as the practice of forgiveness, which acknowledges the constitutively interpretive—and thus inherently transgressive—nature of human action. Forgiveness is the act of "absolute spirit" wherein a community, as system of shared meaning, owns up to its responsibility to facilitate precisely that kind of interpretive agency—the saying of meaning—that could never be wholly shared. For Hegel, then, the ultimate act of meaning—that is, saying and sharing—is forgiving.

1. To experience is to interpret: The non-immediacy of presence

1.1. Phenomenology as the critical self-description of experience

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, like any properly phenomenological study, is a description of experience according to the way in which it is lived, rather than according to theories or explanations constructed *about* experience by observing it from an "outside" standpoint, or from that of a disengaged spectator. The methodological commitment of phenomenology is to describe—and thus not to interpret—the facts of experience as they show themselves, on the grounds that lived experience presents the ultimate context in which the objects of philosophical inquiry make their appearance and with respect to which the nature and reality of those objects must be understood. As phenomenologists, we must remain passive or

[2] Or rather, the very meaning of "meaning" is not immediate.

receptive to the self-showing of the phenomenon: as Hegel insists, "our approach to the object must… be *immediate* or *receptive*; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself" (82, M90). As dictated solely by the "self-showing" of experience, phenomenology can begin nowhere else than with *experience as it is happening here and now*, with the immediate and undeniable fact of (the) presenting or appearing (of an object). Hegel's study of experience thus begins with the following claim: "The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply *is*" (82, M90).

As Hegel's initial investigation unfolds, however, we discover that this apparently immediate experience of presence is constitutively mediated. More specifically, Hegel shows, our experience of any purportedly immediate sense-object is identifiable only *through* certain terms—e.g., "this," "here," "now"—that, as universally applicable, compromise the particularity and immediacy originally claimed. In this way, the true character of any immediate moment "now" is precisely the opposite of the simple and self-contained presence that the empiricist thesis of "sense-certainty" claims it to be. This exposure of the mediated and non-self-sufficient character of any seemingly immediate "given" is, moreover, typical of the kind of result that Hegel's phenomenological studies produce. According to Hegel, what "shows itself" in our experience does so on the basis or through the support of realities that *do not* so readily appear, and his descriptions of experience expose the typically unnoticed realities that are already at work "behind the scenes," defining that which in our experience seems immediately and unproblematically obvious.[3]

Before looking more closely at Hegel's analysis of sense-certainty and the observations it generates, I want to consider another detail of Hegel's starting point—namely, that Hegel's exposure of the work of mediation and non-presence presents a challenge to a certain *thesis*. Although Hegel's approach to the study of experience is descriptive, his descriptions are undertaken for the purpose of a critical project—namely, the assessment of our capacity to have knowledge of the nature of experience (and, more specifically, knowledge of reality as it appears within experience). For this reason, the first "object" of concern in Hegel's phenomenology is in

[3] Detecting a "kinship with deconstruction" in Hegel's argument against sense-certainty, Frederic Jameson argues that "the opening of the *Phenomenology* is much more than a mere gloss on 'shifters,' that is to say, on words such as 'here,' 'now,' and 'I,' which purport to render immediacy while being so empty of content as to house any momentary referent for which they are used: they cannot mean what they say. It is certainly a striking rehearsal of that phenomenon, but the reversal has a methodological afterlife at many other crucial points in the *Phenomenology*." Frederic Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the* Phenomenology of Spirit (London: Verso, 2010), 40.

fact our *knowledge* of immediate experience, that is, the form of knowing that coincides with our awareness of an immediate presence. Hegel's phenomenology grants privilege to the self-showing of experience not simply in resolving only to describe what appears, but also in acknowledging that description is never just a description, but rather is a particular construal of the "facts" to which it means to remain faithful. Interpretation is immediately an issue in experience, not in the sense that we cannot get at what is *really* there and so any interpretation will do (quite the opposite), but rather in the sense that our account of even the most immediate form of experience cannot escape the fact that it is *an account* (that is, a kind of thesis) that can more or less adequately reflect its object. Hegel's phenomenology thus performs an assessment of our descriptive acts (and thus makes knowledge the object of study) at the same time that we are engaged in the project of description (the act of knowing an object). Phenomenology, for Hegel, is thus a self-*critical* description of experience.

In his introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel begins by challenging the common assumption that a philosophical inquiry must first isolate the *means* of our knowing or accessing reality from the (would-be) product of that knowing, before it can be determined whether these means are adequate for the task. For Hegel, it is indeed an assumption to regard our involvement with reality as a kind of original obstacle to the project of philosophical knowing. To postpone such a project until we have performed a thorough examination of the "instrument" of our knowing[4] is in fact to perpetuate a prejudicial (and inaccurate) theory about what knowledge is,[5] and in fact cuts us off from the very reality that this preparatory activity is meant to make available to us. As Hegel insists in the first part[6] of his introduction, although it

[4] "If cognition is the instrument for getting hold of absolute being [that is, reality apart from our knowledge of it], it is obvious that the use of an instrument on a thing certainly does not let it be what it is for itself, but rather sets out to reshape and alter it" (68, M73). See the first half of M73.

[5] That is to say, a representational model of knowledge, which introduces a "boundary" between knowing (subject) and known (object) and thus portrays knowledge as the subjective "representation" of an objective reality that is by definition unknowable on its own terms (68, M73). See the second half of M73, where Hegel argues that out attempts to eliminate the effect of our "instrument" of knowledge on its object in no way brings us closer to that object on its own terms: "If by testing cognition, which we conceive of as a *medium*, we get to know the law of its refraction, it is… useless to subtract this from the end result. For it is not the refraction of the ray, but the ray itself whereby truth reaches us, that is, cognition; and if this [namely, cognition] were removed, all that would be indicated would be a pure direction or a blank space." The attempt to "subtract" our participation in the "truth" (or reality, absolute being) that we want to know thus eliminates that very truth at the same time, simply because there *is* no "ray" of truth apart from the "refraction" brought about by our contact with it—or, closer to Hegel's meaning, because what we presume to be a "refraction" brought about by our cognitive means is in fact nothing but the precise form of reality's self-exposure, abstracting from which produces only a "pure," theoretical idea of knowing that has access to nothing.

[6] I divide Hegel's introduction into four parts. Part One (68-72, M73-6) asserts that knowledge makes its appearance in human experience, while Part Two (72-75, M77-80) explains that this knowledge, as an *immediate* appearance, must develop if it is to be "scientific." Part Three (75-78, M81-85) describes the mutual ("dialectical") critique of

may seem that the care taken not to make claims about reality until we have secured our access to it is a way to avoid making errors, such an approach, since it presumes that we are originally out of touch with reality "for itself," leads us (erroneously) to "mistrust"[7] the most basic and original fact that any consideration of reality could yield—namely, that it is "with us, in and for itself, all along, and of its own volition" (69, M73). Hence, our typical philosophical "scruples"—our skepticism, that is, about 'how we *know* we know what is real' (and the metaphors of knowledge as an "instrument" that sustain these worries)—turn out, Hegel says, "to ward off science itself, and constitute merely an empty appearance of knowing, which vanishes immediately as soon as science comes on the scene" (71, M76). Hegel's point is that we simply need not entertain these worries: knowledge has come on the scene by virtue of the fact that experience is most basically a kind of contact or involvement between us and a "happening" of presence to which we are exposed and of which we are not the authors. To begin a philosophical study at any point other than this primary contact is, as Hegel insists, *already to have made an argument about* reality; it is precisely not to have let reality speak for itself, and hence to have begun already a step past the phenomenological task of simply describing experience.

What offers itself first of all to phenomenological description, therefore, is the fact that we are already in touch with—or "inside"—that which we are trying to know. Our very exposure to the world affords us a minimal amount of "knowledge" with which to begin our inquiry, and so we need not trouble ourselves with checking the "instrument" of knowledge for whether it offers us access to reality. Yet the "knowledge" that emerges on the scene by virtue of this primary exposure is hardly philosophically adequate. "Science," Hegel writes, "just because it has come on the scene, is itself an appearance [and] not yet science in its developed and unfolded truth"; it is a "semblance" from which knowledge, if it is to be true and genuine, must "liberate itself" (71, M76). While the appearance of knowledge in immediate experience, Hegel insists, is assuredly the appearance *of knowledge*, it is at the same time knowledge *as an appearance* (i.e., merely "apparent" knowledge), in which case there is work to be done in making our initial acknowledgment that "the absolute" is immediately "with us" answer to the demands of knowledge and of truth.[8]

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knowledge and object in which this development consists, and Part Four (78-81, M86-89) characterizes this mutual criticism as the education of consciousness in experience.

[7] "If the fear of falling into error sets up a mistrust of science, which in the absence of such scruples gets on with the work itself, and actually cognizes something… should we not be concerned as to whether this fear of error is not just the error itself?" (69, M74).

[8] "Now, because it has only phenomenal knowledge for its object, this exposition seems not to be science, free and self-moving in its own particular shape; yet from this standpoint it can be regarded as the path of the natural

In other words, the knowledge assessed in Hegel's phenomenology—our "object"—will not be a theoretical standpoint adopted in abstraction from our "natural consciousness," but rather will be one of the "facts" that show themselves in our immediate contact with the world. The "absolute is with us" in a way that is not neutral for us, but rather constitutes an implicit meaningful engagement, capable of being formalized as a claim to know. Most basically, experience simply *is* the coincidence of our apprehension of a given presence and our taking up of that presence as meaningful, and any distinction of that presence from one's own vantage point (object from subject) occurs "after the fact."

Consequently, to describe or articulate our experience—an act that cannot faithfully reflect its object without overstepping the stance of pure receptivity and *saying something* about it—is not to betray it, since, as fundamentally a matter of *engagement*, experience *itself* is likewise never purely and simply receptive. It is one of the hallmarks of Hegel's phenomenology that he treats the similar non-passivity of description and experience as an identity, and thus examines as accounts of experience nothing other than the forms of engagement that comprise experience itself. Phenomenology can describe experience according to the terms of experience itself precisely because it remains "inside" of experience at all times. It describes what shows itself *as it shows itself* precisely because it works from the only vantage point from which experience is properly reflected—namely, within it—mobilizing at the level of philosophical expression the forms of engagement or construal that mark our lived encounter with reality.

One of the basic aims in Hegel's introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to convince us not to allow the apparently un-philosophical character of our immediate, lived engagement with the world to tempt us to pursue truth from some other vantage point. To account for the nature of experience on its own terms requires that we remain dictated by the terms in which it presents itself, and to improve our account does not mean departing from these terms (however unreliable they appear at first), but rather interrogating them with respect to their capacity to supply truth.[9] Hence, the *a priori* skepticism against which Hegel argues must be

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consciousness which presses forward to true knowledge…" (72, M77). Here, Hegel combines the underlying assertions of Part One and Part Two of his introduction: our immediate contact with reality is not yet "scientific" knowing—that is, (absolute) knowing as such—but the path toward "true knowledge" can start from nowhere other than this initial, "apparent" knowing. As Hyppolite writes, although Hegel acknowledges that "we cannot begin abruptly with absolute knowledge," he "returns to phenomenal knowledge, that is, to the knowledge of common consciousness, and claims to show how it leads to absolute knowledge, or, even, how it is an absolute knowledge which does not yet know itself as such" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 6-7).

[9] Although his characterization anticipates my discussion somewhat, George Di Giovanni helpfully characterizes Hegel's project as an attempt to establish that standpoint *within* first-person experience to which the nature of experience *as such*—beyond the idiosyncrasies of "my" perspective—reveals itself. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he writes, "is from the start an attempt to establish an 'honest speaker,' as it were, someone who can say 'I'

replaced with a "thorough-going [*vollbringende*] skepticism" (72, M78) of various forms of experience, a skepticism performed through a "comparison of consciousness with itself" (76, M84), that is, the staging of an ongoing critical encounter between the two constitutive moments internal to experience—namely, the "object" that we take ourselves to be in contact with in experience, and the "knowledge" of that object that such contact afford us. To practice phenomenology is thus not *simply* to describe, to be satisfied with just any account of experience that uses whatever resources or terms happen to be immediately available. It is, rather, to assess the various accounts that experience—regarded as knowledge—yields with respect to their capacity to serve as descriptions of the terrain from which they are derived—that is, experience regarded as an object.[10] Phenomenology is thus a critical—and, moreover, a *self-critical*—enterprise: what we seek to make intelligible (experience) is described from terms drawn from its own sphere, and the success of such description can be determined only by scrutinizing these terms against the criterion of experience itself. Hegel's study is thus a progressively enriched description of the forms of human experience, one that is driven by an ongoing critique of those forms according to their capacity to qualify as knowledge.

1.2. Experience as interpretation: The self-refutation of "sense-certainty"

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is at once a descriptive account of what our experience is like and a critical assessment of that experience as the territory from which such an account must necessarily emerge. Hegel aims not to observe experience from a (theoretical) standpoint outside of it, but rather seeks to establish, from within human experience itself, which of its forms best represents its own nature. Accordingly, Hegel's treatment of immediacy in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology* is both an attempt to characterize what our experience of immediacy—or, immediate experience—is like, and an examination of this experience as a kind of knowledge claim or thesis, one that Hegel labels "sense-certainty."

The claim of sense-certainty, rather ironically, is that most basically we *do not* make

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without thereby placing this 'I' either in a world of pure universals, or, contrariwise, in a world of supposed things of nature—both of these 'worlds' being in fact products of his own reflection. In both cases, he would thus be displacing the 'I' at a distance from himself, since he—a historical individual who *in fact* operates in a world which is just as intelligible as it is visible—cannot legitimately identify with it in either place. Needed, in other words, is one who can honestly speak in first person, without in fact assuming a third-person standpoint that leaves his actual self unvoiced." Di Giovanni, "Faith Without Religion, Religion Without Faith: Kant and Hegel on Religion," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2003): 371.

[10] Hegel's method, Westphal explains, "is to observe the contradiction between the criterion by which a form of natural consciousness seeks to validate its knowledge and the actual knowledge it produces" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 66).

claims. It is the assertion that in our experience we are basically passive to what confronts us, and that to the immediate data of experience we ourselves contribute nothing: "It *is*; this is the essential point for sense-knowledge, and this pure *being*, or this simple immediacy, constitutes its truth" (83, M91). The position of sense-certainty combines the acknowledgement of that which is most irreducible and undeniable about experience—namely, the happening of presence, the fact that something is *there*, before us—with the claim that the "truth" of our experience is to be found in simply "looking on" and taking notice of this fact.[11] The strength of sense-certainty's claim derives from the vastness of its scope: what could be truer about our experience than the fact that, at every instance, something is *there* before us, affecting us immediately as a kind of sensation? Is not the first and most exhaustive thing to be said about our experience that "it is," such that all other statements mark a more specific determination of this more general fact of being or presence? And are we not immediately in possession of the surest form of knowledge in simply letting experience happen,[12] through our passive awareness of what is simply, immediately, and undeniably "there" in experience?

The claim of sense-certainty, then, is that the "absolute truth" of experience is to be found in "what simply is," what shows itself immediately, on its own terms, and apart from any intervention or interpretation on our part. Its claim, in Hegel's words, is that "the reality or being of external things taken as Thises or sense-objects has absolute truth for consciousness" (90, M109). But the first conclusive result of Hegel's assessment of this claim, however, is the insight that our experience is *immediately interpretive*, that our experience, despite sense-certainty's claim of simple passivity, is immediately and elementarily a matter of *taking a stance*.

Hegel's argument, moreover, is not that our experience of immediacy, our ability to focus on a particular sensory "instance," is somehow a fiction. His point, rather, is that the conditions of such an experience, one which we undeniably *can* have, render unworkable sense-certainty's equation of the "truth" of our experience with the particular sensations that we identify as immediate. In a key passage from the analysis of sense-certainty, in which he undertakes a thought experiment in order to put on display all that is involved in identifying an immediate "this," Hegel shows how the character of our experience of immediacy challenges the picture of

[11] See 82-83, M91 for Hegel's characterization of the position of sense-certainty. As Westphal points out, Hegel's argument can be applied to a variety of attempts to ground philosophy in immediate sense experience. Hegel's "argument against Sense Certainty… is not so much a critique of a single philosophical position as a recipe for undermining 'the myth of the given' in all its forms. Whether the appeal to immediacy occurs in the context of classical foundationalism, common sense realism, or any other appeal to intuition as ultimate, Hegel seeks to show how such appeals undermine themselves" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, ix).

[12] Cf. 82, M91: "[S]ense-certainty appears to be the *truest* knowledge, for it has not yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety."

experience as fundamentally a passive observation of pure, immediate being. Focusing on one of the two basic forms in which any immediate "this" can appear—namely, as a "now"[13]—Hegel writes:

> To the question: 'What is Now?', let us answer, e.g., 'Now is Night.' In order to test the truth of this sense-certainty a simple experiment will suffice. We write down this truth… If *now*, *this noon*, we look again at the written truth we shall have to say that it has become stale.

In view of the evident difference between the "now" written down at night and the "now" at which we, at noon, return to the first moment, Hegel says:

> The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e., it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. The Now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is *not* Night; equally, it preserves itself in the face of the Day that it now is, as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general. This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, [namely] Day and Night, is *not*. As so determined, it is just as simply Now as before, and in this simplicity is indifferent to what happens in it; just as little as Night and Day are its being, just as much also is it Day and Night; it is not in the least affected by this its other-being. (84-85, M95-6)

To try to follow along with Hegel's observations here, note that *this* now—right here, right now, this noon—is "now" just as much as the now that was night: the now that *was* is now the now that *is*. These are different instants of "now," of course; Hegel's point, though, is that, since they are alike in their nowness, the now that *was* (night) has evidently "preserved itself," and thereby still *is*, and that, moreover, this new now (day) *is* precisely in the form of "something that is *not* Night." Our experience is both *always* and *no longer* "now." More specifically, our experience of "now" endures, but in such a way that we notice this enduring only through our efforts to resist it, that is, through the way in which the absent now that was continues to attach itself to our attempts to fix upon "this" particular instance now and assert its immediacy. What Hegel wants to show here is that *both* of these aspects—namely, endurance and particularity—are irreducible aspects of "now," by virtue of the fact that "now" is, ultimately, "a *negative* in general." To parse this last phrase, notice that, since all nows (in general) are identical in their nowness, every experience of *this* now is immediately one of distinguishing it from *that* one—or, more to the point, of distinguishing this now precisely *as* "not that one" (negation), as at the same time "this-now-and-not-that-one."[14] Our experience of the now that immediately *is*, is thus immediately

[13] The other form is "here," which Hegel addresses at 85-86, M98-9.

[14] As John Russon explains, "the now is experienced *as* 'now' only to the extent that it is anticipating the new now that will surpass it (the future) and fulfilling the past now in which it had itself been anticipated. The now can thus

mediated, in that it preserves itself, as Hegel says, "*through* the fact that something else [namely, the now that was] is *not*": any particular "this" is meaningful *as* "this" only in relation to a "not that" that is the condition of its manifest particularity.

Consequently, the character of "now" (that is, an experienced immediacy) is in fact the opposite of what sense-certainty claims that it is. All particular "nows" are made possible by a negation that is not particular to any of them, as shown by the fact that the very term through which we fix ourselves at a particular instance of our experience—namely, "now," but also "this" or "here"—is precisely the *opposite* of a particular. Such a term, Hegel writes, "which *is* through negation, which is neither This nor That, a *not-This*, and is with equal indifference This as well as That—such a thing we call a *universal*" (85, M96). "Now" thus names an enduring, universal dimension of our experience, one that is indifferent to the particular, determinate instances of "now" that occur "within" it (but is, to be sure, in no way different *from* those instances). Our immediate experience, therefore, bears within itself—as its condition—the work of mediation: this immediacy is present only on the basis of what endures as an absence, and it endures only in the form of so many particular instances. Neither presence nor absence independently, the basic form of our experience is "the reciprocal contextualizing of present and non-present."[15] Hence, whereas it is always possible for us to point out a particular present moment as affecting us immediately, this presence can be identified as such only through this act of "pointing-out," within and against—that is, mediated by—a background of non-presence that is the condition of its appearance.[16]

Hegel concludes his observations about immediate experience in the passage cited above with the statement that "it is in fact the universal that is the truth of sense-certainty" (85, M96). Sense-certainty identifies our experience of immediate presence to be the first truth in the project of knowing, but discovers instead that such immediacy owes its appearance to the mediating work of negativity and universality through which it is singled out. Sense-certainty claims, moreover, that its immediate truth is accessible simply by passively yielding to what appears, but learns instead that this act of "singling out" is likewise essential to its own claim to passivity. In

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be present only in the context of the not-now." Russon, *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 17.

[15] John Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology: The Lessons of Hegel's Science of Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 28.

[16] In other words, the isolation of a sensuous immediacy, through the very act of isolation (that is, pointing), undermines any claim to the self-sufficiency of this immediacy. As Russon writes, "to notice is to notice *as* 'now,' *as* 'this.' Whether to another or to myself, I must, in other words, *point*. I cannot simply be immersed in the other or I will fail to notice it, and I must thus identify it as "it," as "that one," or in some other way point it out, name it" (Russon, *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, 20).

identifying that which, from the point of view of sense-certainty, is immediate in my experience, *I introduce the difference* between this and the mediation that is its condition.[17] Ultimately, the "truths" that sense-certainty claims to uncover by simply "standing back and letting experience happen" turn out to be truths only insofar as they are *taken* as such, insofar, that is, as they are fixations, isolations, or identifications (all of these being active as opposed to simply passive) of an immediate particularity that take place within, and thus depend on, a more basic engagement with universals—a form of experience that Hegel labels "perception" (*wahrnehmen*, 'to take as true').[18]

Hegel's opening argument against the self-sufficiency of immediate presence thus confronts us with the fact that human experience is fundamentally interpretive. Although Hegel himself does not use the word *interpretation* in this context, he shows here that our experience is fundamentally *not* a matter of a passive receptivity to immediate bits of sense-data, but rather that we live our experience according to a kind of active synthesizing of that which affects us. We are, at the most basic level, *not indifferent* to the world of our experience. Our experience of objects, for example, is not a composite of the various immediate sensory qualities that our analysis reveals them to possess; rather, our world is populated, at the most basic level, by discrete and manipulable "things" that solicit our engagement in the broad context of our practical agency. Hegel does not want to deny, of course, that it is possible to isolate certain immediate "thises," "heres," and "nows" in examining the elements of our experience; his point, rather, is that such isolation presupposes the inherence of these instances within the synthetic "wholes" that constitute our reality according to how we live it. What Hegel wants us to notice here is that our experience happens or is given to us *as meaningful*: we do not receive an unprocessed stock of sensory data and *then* decipher its meaning; rather, we are confronted with a reality that is meaningful *already*, by virtue of the original contact between our exposure to the givens of experience and the synthetic (i.e., interpretive) stance that we embody.

Yet Hegel does not mean to imply that the meaning of my experience is defined simply by how *I* interpret it, idiosyncratically; rather, as his remarks about language in his discussion of sense-experience suggest, the very *I* that would be responsible for this idiosyncratic interpretation is itself dependent on a broader intersubjective context in which its interpretive

[17] "It seems that it is all there in the now," writes Russon, and "whatever I say about my experience now—'there is a man sitting at that table'—will thus be a selective extraction from and decisive ordering of this all" (Ibid., 14).
[18] Hegel concludes the chapter on sense-certainty by saying that "experience teaches me what the truth of sense-certainty in fact is: I point it out as a 'Here,' which is a Here of other Heres, or is in its own self a 'simple togetherness of many Heres'; i.e., it is a universal. I take it up then as it is in truth, and instead of knowing something immediate I take the truth of it, or *perceive* it [*nehme ich wahr*]" (92, M110).

agency is in the first place developed. That is to say, our basic non-indifference to the world is a function of the fact that the singular perspective that we embody is "taken up" precisely with respect to the perspectives of others with whom we make and share the world.[19] As Hegel's account of mutual recognition shows, to be a self-conscious individual is to be a social being, which is, moreover, to inhabit a particular system of communication that serves as the site in and through which "my" interpretations are meaningfully developed and expressed. Hence, "my" articulated take on things—my act of saying "I"—depends on, and is thus no less, albeit implicitly, an expression of the common interpretive framework of which I am a part—and thus is also an act of saying "we."

1.3. Language and the universality of "sense-certainty"

Before turning to Hegel's account of recognition, though, let us look again at Hegel's critique of immediacy in order to see how he locates the roots of communication in the very nature of experience as such. This critique culminates, as we know, in the conclusion that it is "in fact the universal"—and not any particular sensuous content—"that is the [truth] of sense-certainty." Hegel's argument, to reiterate, is not that reference to particularity is impossible. I can say to a friend, "I'm leaving *now*," and successfully indicate to her the precise moment at which I make my departure. The point, as we have seen, is that such reference cannot occur independently of a universal term. But is it merely the act of *referring* to a particular that causes trouble for sense-certainty?[20] That is, is sense-certainty's claim to truth stable so long as I do not introduce the element of reference or utterance into the situation, so long as I do not attempt to put a particular datum of sense-experience into words?

After expressing his conclusion that the truth of a sensuous experience is in fact a universal, Hegel adds immediately that "it is as a universal too that we *utter* what the sensuous is." He continues:

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[19] In this sense, the reality of the shared world is in fact nothing other than the totality of the various differing perspectives taken up within and on it by those who communicate about "the world." Arendt expresses this point nicely in commenting on Socrates: "To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, 'of what appears to me,'" the "comprehension of the world 'as it opens itself to me.' It was not, therefore, subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but was also not something absolute and valid for all. The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it; and that the 'sameness' of the world, its commonness (*koinon*, as the Greeks would say, 'common to all') or 'objectivity' (as we would say from the subjective viewpoint of modern philosophy), resides in the fact that the same world opens itself up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world—and consequently their *doxai* (opinions)—'both you and I are human.'" Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 14.

[20] For a discussion that explores Hegel's analysis of sense-certainty in terms of this question of reference, see Katharina Dulckeit "Can Hegel Refer to Particulars?", in *The* Phenomenology of Spirit *Reader: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Jon Stewart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 105-121.

> What we say is: 'This', i.e. the *universal* This; or, 'it is', i.e. *Being in general*. Of course, we do not *represent* the universal This or Being in general but we *utter* the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we *mean* to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the truth of sense-certainty and language alone expresses this truth, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*. (85, M97)

We might be tempted to read Hegel as highlighting the discrepancy between meaning and saying in order to show that what is possible at the level of *meaning*—namely, addressing or encountering a particular in its particularity—is not possible at the level of *saying*, and hence that it is in saying or uttering our sensuous experience that a universal is brought into play. Is it our use of language, as this reading implies, that prevents our access to any self-sufficient experience of immediacy? Was it necessary for Hegel to introduce this act of utterance in order for his critique of immediacy to work? On this view, in saying "now" I of course mean to single out "this" now, but the term that I invoke in isolating this particular instant turns out, as a universal "ensemble [*Zusammen*]" of nows, to be wholly indifferent to that instant. The inherent universality of language places it by definition at a remove from the particularity that a given universal term is meant to point out: I no doubt *mean* something particular, but what I *say* is inescapably the very opposite of this particularity.

Yet, language, Hegel insists, is "the more truthful," in that it reflects what we as readers have *already* learned to be the truth of sense experience itself, prior to and independently of this explicit reference to language (Hegel's *auch* in the first sentence of the paragraph—"it is as a universal too that we *utter* what the sensuous is"—also supports this reading). It is no doubt the case, Hegel says, that in saying "this moment now" we *represent* to ourselves a particular sense-datum; his point, though, is that it is only through such an act of representation (i.e., reflection) that this dimension of experience can be made available to us. Thus, it is not that language compromises what might otherwise have been an unambiguous, though unarticulated, isolation of a particular;[21] it is not *because* of language, in other words, that there is this discrepancy

[21] To hold this view would be to attribute too strong a role for language in Hegel's argument against the self-sufficiency of immediacy. Language does not constitute a necessary premise in Hegel's argument. As Westphal confirms, the reference to language in M97 is not logically necessary to Hegel's specific argument against the self-sufficiency of sense-certainty, as if it is only through our use of language that the claim of sense-certainty is "refuted"; by the time the reference to language occurs, sense-certainty has *already* refuted itself, by virtue of its inconsistent equation of truth with immediacy. Defending Hegel against Feuerbach's critique, Westphal offers two assurances regarding Hegel's critique of sense-certainty that challenge the view that language is the reason for sense-certainty's failure. First, he argues, Hegel never portrays sense-certainty as claiming that it *can* say what it means, as if its failure to do so follows from the fact that, as Feuerbach argues, "*verbal expression* never adequately captures the unique particularity of the sensible particular" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 74, my emphasis); rather, sense-certainty is judged solely on its claim to immediacy, not on whether it is able to express immediacy. Second,

between meaning and saying (or expressing). If, as Hegel has shown, immediate experience itself maintains a structural interdependence with mediation, then it is seriously doubtful whether there could ever be a situation in which we could have access to an immediate particularity that would reveal itself prior to and independent of the moment of its mediation through the universal, which we would only subsequently put into words.

Yet the evident congruence between language and the universal ("…the universal is the truth of sense-certainty and language alone expresses this truth alone…") seems to suggest that, even if they do not logically depend on each other, language would be more than simply a privileged example of how sense-certainty's original claim is disrupted by the work of the universal.[22] Imagine, for example, that we concluded: just as the sense of "now" through which I fix myself at "this particular moment now" is universally applicable to all moments (and thus "preserves itself" as the "now" of *no* moment in particular), so also, but much more obviously, is the "now" that I *say* a universal term that thereby fails to capture the *now* that I specifically mean. Would this parallel universality suffice to account for the structural similarity between language and the truth that it expresses? Are the *recognition* of the universal as the true content of sensuous awareness and the *expression* of this universal simply parallel, but ultimately distinct, kinds of activity, in which case the second serves only to illustrate or confirm the first? What would be the status of this recognition apart from its expression? Would we be dealing with two forms of "taking as," the first being the basic form of our perceptual experience, and the second being its secondary expression?

In fact, though, this second reading seems to separate meaning from saying just as the first one did. Whereas the treatment of language as a necessary premise in Hegel's argument presents the utterance of the universal as an act that compromises what was otherwise an untroubled act of meaning a particular, here, in treating language as simply an illustration of Hegel's argument, the act of utterance seems wholly incidental to the meaning that it utters. But there is textual evidence—though, admittedly, no explicit argument—in Hegel's chapter on sense-certainty to suggest that there is a basic feature of our experience common to both meaning and saying, that, notwithstanding the obvious difference between simply witnessing and

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Hegel is in no way suggesting that the word as universal displaces particular beings, as if language (or perception) would be set *against* sense experience, rendering it impossible. Hegel is not out to refute forms of experience, but rather to expose their non-self-sufficiency. Hegel's is not a "we are stuck in language" argument; "rather than denying our capacity to refer to individuals," writes Westphal, "Hegel is asking how it is possible for us to do so" (Ibid., 76).

[22] This view would attribute too weak a role for language in Hegel's argument. According to the reading that I am pursuing here, language is not a mere illustration of Hegel's point about sense-certainty.

expressing an immediate datum of experience, both of these are alike in being a function of the "taking as…" (the synthetic activity of interpretation) at work in our experience most basically.[23] As he writes at the end of the chapter, "the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e., to that which is inherently universal" (91-92, M110). Here, the universal that reveals itself to be the truth of sense-experience is said to be "inherent" to consciousness (that is, experience). The universal is thus not imposed onto our experience by language, but rather appears as a basic structural feature of experience itself, of which—to anticipate my argument—language, as "belonging" to consciousness, is the enactment.

At least it is this suggestion—that experience and language partake of the same universality, that meaning is (therefore) intrinsically related to saying, and (therefore) that, as interpretive, our experience is inherently communicative—that Hegel's analysis of sense-certainty leads us to consider.[24] Though we may be assured that immediacy and particularity bear

[23] Whereas it may seem quite obvious that, in the case of speech, we never explicitly *say* the particular object that we *mean* (since we only ever utter universal terms), the idea that we cannot even *perceive* what we mean may seem more dubious. Yet, on the basis of the structural correspondence—Westphal's term is "isomorphism"—of language and perception that we have been exploring, it would seem that the inability to (unequivocally) reach the particular would characterize both. Here, Westphal is again helpful: "To say that we cannot perceive what we mean is only to say that this intention is never completely fulfilled, that this reference is never completely unambiguous. The object we mean is a fully determinate particular, but in and for perception it is never more than partly determined, partly determinable. In this respect the perceived object and the spoken object are alike" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 77). To fill out Westphal's idea of an "isomorphism" between language and perception, we might say that The universality that characterizes language (the universality, that is, that language expresses) would be no different from the universality that characterizes consciousness itself, in which case we are led to think of language, not as the translation of meaning (as if meaning and saying, and their respective "universalities," were wholly distinct), but rather as its *enactment*.

[24] As this suggestion implies, my reading of Hegel's argument challenges that of John McCumber, according to whom "the important discussion of language in the opening pages of 'Sense-Certainty' cannot ultimately concern language as communicative. It is restricted to dealing with it as the way a person makes sense of the world to himself." McCumber, *Poetic Interaction: Language, Freedom, Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 33. McCumber qualifies this reading somewhat in a footnote: "Hegel, to be sure, does not ultimately separate these two sides of language [;] making sense of the world is essentially a communal affair. But in 'Sense-Certainty' the situation is so abstract that no discussion of language as functioning in an interpersonal relation is possible." Against this reading, I want to suggest that the significance of Hegel's discussion of sense-certainty is found precisely in discerning in it the roots (obscure though they are) of our activity of making sense of the world with others, an aspect of Hegel's argument that is missed by reading it as dealing only with abstractions. Again, Westphal offers helpful insights. As he explains, the mediation that Hegel exposes in immediate experience concerns not just the "thing" as the (synthetic) object of our perception, but also the "language game" that determines the way "things" appear for us. "Hegel's claim," Westphal writes, is "that in seeing how the thing is intended we get beyond the formal universality of the transcendental ego to Spirit as the true, self-mediating universality which contains the particular within itself" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 82). More concretely put: "Our certainty of the existence of external objects is mediated through our dialogue with other persons, and the way in which we perceive them is a function of the expectations and hopes we bring with us, which in turn are a function of our degree of culture and of our historical context" (Ibid., 76). That the terms of Hegel's critique of sense-certainty are abstract is no reason to treat the experience he describes there as a mere abstraction. There is, further, no reason to think that the reference to language in this discussion is any different from the concrete reality of language that Hegel studies elsewhere. As I discuss below, it is one of the most powerful lessons of Hegel's initial study of sense-certainty that even our most

essential relations to mediation and universality, we are not yet equipped to understand how these essential relations (to universality, especially) are a consequence of the "inherently" universal nature of consciousness itself, nor precisely how language "belongs" to this universality. But we do know enough, though, to be suspicious of the view that language is merely an accidental feature of our experience, given that, while the universal that it utters is operative independently of any such utterance, language in no way simply reiterates this universal, but rather *fulfills* it. This suspicion, though, only urges us to ask all the more urgently and directly: in what way is consciousness a universal phenomenon, and how does its universality relate to that of language?

My approach to answering this question will be to determine more precisely what this "universal" in fact *is* in which our attempts to get a hold of sensuous immediacy show us already to be embedded. We will have to turn, in fact, to a second apparent immediacy, in this case to the experience of *self*-consciousness, the broader context in which the specific instances of our conscious life (our receptivity to sense-data, our perception of synthetic "wholes") are lived. In the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage," Hegel studies the experience of self-consciousness—that is, self-awareness, our capacity to say "I"—in order to show that, despite the way in which the possession of a distinct sense of our own perspective seems to be an effortless and immediately available matter of our own initiative, our self-experience is a fundamentally collaborative achievement, mediated by our experience of other people, and hence the result, it turns out, of a great deal of effort expended in negotiation and interaction with these others. I am "self-conscious," for Hegel, only insofar as I am (or have been) *recognized* as a "self" by other, equally self-conscious agents; "self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction," he says, "only in *another* self-consciousness" (144, M175, emphasis added). For Hegel, the experience of self-consciousness is *shared* reality; indeed, it is precisely that reality of sharing—universality—with which our perceptual experience reveals itself to be always implicitly engaged.

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immediate sense-experience (including that of space and time) is implicitly reflective of our communication with others.

2. To interpret is to communicate: Recognition and the non-immediacy of self-consciousness

2.1. The life-and-death struggle and the emergence of language

In studying the reality of self-consciousness, Hegel explores the fact that our experience is always one of an implicit engagement with our own selfhood, that the world of our experience is in the first place always *our* world—that is, the domain of our activities and concerns—even though we seldom explicitly recognize this self-involvement. Any standpoint that treats the world as a purely "objective" reality—standpoints of consciousness such as "sense-certainty"—thus fails to provide an adequate account of the nature of reality. All consciousness is implicitly self-consciousness; or rather, we are always pre-reflectively involved in a world that *matters* to us, a world that is the platform for the realization of our own self-identities.

It is by virtue of this self-consciousness, moreover, that we are able to say "I," that is, to adopt a reflective stance on our own independence as a point of view from which everything is given meaning. From this standpoint of reflection the experience of self-consciousness appears to be absolute and self-defining. "Self-consciousness," Hegel writes, "is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else. For it, its essence and absolute object is 'I'; and in this immediacy, or in this being, of its being-for-self, it is an *individual*" (147-148, M186).[25] As undeniable as this experience of being the absolute centre of things may be, though, it is, when taken as an *immediate* experience, not a self-sufficient or self-defining experience, and to this extent conceals its own conditions. As we learn, "self-consciousness is… certain of itself only by superseding [the] other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life" (143, M174).[26] In other words, although our experience of our own selves as the singular meaning-giving perspective on the world is the experience that is

[25] Cf. 146, M182: It is, further, "independent and self-contained, and there is nothing in it of which it is not itself the origin."

[26] Hegel characterizes this initial standpoint of self-consciousness as "desire." Desire, for Hegel, is the affirmation the centrality of my point of view through the appropriation of that which is other to me. In eliminating the otherness of an object, I make it reflect *my* agency, showing that it possesses no significance other than that which I give to it. This negative power of desire is supposed to allow me to witness my own agency in the world of objects; "certain of the nothingness of this other," Hegel explains, desire "explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*" (143, M174). The standpoint of desire is ambiguous, however, since it must appropriate or negate the very object on which it depends, as *other* to it, in order to see its own selfhood reflected back to it (See M175). Desire is only satisfied, Hegel explains, when it encounters an object that, "effect[ing] the negation within itself," affirms its self-certainty in an expression of its own independence. In this case, though, it is clear that this object is in fact no "object" at all, but rather another desiring being that, self-conscious in the same way that I am, is able to *recognize* my independence. In this way, it is revealed that the essence of self-consciousness in fact does not reside in the self-assertion of desire but in the experience of being *recognized.*

most intimately and properly ours, this experience is available to us only through that which is "other" to us—that is, only insofar as the world *on which we have a perspective* reflects back to us the meaning that we bestow upon it. Hence, the absolute "self-equality" that self-consciousness posits about itself is a misrepresentation of its actual situation. In fact, it is always some manner of external object that supplies the occasion for our sense of our own agency, and although this fact remains implicit to the extent that the objects of the world submit themselves to our meaning-giving powers and support our action, there remains a species of worldly phenomenon that is able to explicitly challenge, but also thereby explicitly confirm, our agency—namely, other people. "A self-consciousness exists," Hegel says, only "*for a self-consciousness*. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it" (144-145, M177). The sense of independence we derive from being *the* perspective from which worldly objects matter cannot be fulfilled except in being confronted by an "object" that, due to its own independence as a perspective, is capable of acknowledging it. An independent perspective can be recognized and affirmed, *as a perspective*, only by another perspective.

According to Hegel's analysis, I become aware of myself as an independent agent in the experience of being recognized as such by another agent who is similarly self-aware and independent. As he writes, "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (145, M178). Since both agents must participate in this acknowledgement, it is necessarily a shared experience; hence, as Hegel says, this moment of self-reflection is ultimately a "double reflection, the duplication of self-consciousness" (144, M176). Further, the distinct selves that participate in this "duplication" arrive at an explicit self-awareness through their discovery that such self-awareness is common to both of them: the "I-hood" that I derive in becoming self-aware is the same "I-hood" that I recognize in the other who is external to me. I cannot discover myself as an "I," on Hegel's analysis, without discovering also that this "I" is a "We."

Our experience of other people (other perspectives), however, is ambiguous. Other people alone possess the capacity to affirm explicitly our sense of independent selfhood. This capacity is simply the other side of their freedom, of the fact that they do not simply subordinate themselves to our agency the way that "things" do, but rather embody a perspective on us that cannot be coerced or manipulated, and to which we remain as potentially vulnerable as potentially affirmed. Hence, our self-consciousness is revealed to be more than its immediate self-assurance in the experience of being exposed to and of negotiating with others' perspectives

on us, an experience for which there are, logically speaking, no pre-established guidelines. Indeed, *logically speaking*, Hegel shows, an encounter between two distinct centres of significance can in the first instance only be one of opposition; self-consciousness thus requires a *process* of recognition through which both independent agencies develop the means through which to reconcile their own claim to absolute centrality to that of the other. What Hegel's account of mutual recognition (and in particular the "life-and-death struggle" depicted therein) offers us, I want to suggest, is an account of the essential role played by language—or communication in general—in the establishment of an enduring situation of distinct but mutually affirming self-consciousnesses. Only through the acceptance of shared terms of communication can the independent perspective of each party be expressed and acknowledged as independent, rather than be asserted antagonistically against one another.

As Hegel describes it, the process of recognition involves three distinct moments.[27] There is, first, an initial awareness of another self-consciousness. Here, Hegel says, self-consciousness "has come *out of itself*"; it has seen self-consciousness instantiated in the other self, and has hence discovered that it *itself* is but a mere instance of a *universal* self-consciousness (146, M179). This original similarity can occur only as a loss of independence for each self-consciousness, in which case the response of each is to assert its particularity against the other ("*I* am the centre of things, not you!") in order to reject the threatening similarity. Self-consciousness must, in a second moment, "supersede this otherness of itself" (146, M180), proving the centrality of its perspective over the other's. But since both self-consciousnesses act in precisely the same way (lacking the means to do otherwise), they become involved in a struggle for self-assertion that works against their purposes, since it suppresses the very (other) perspective that alone is able to acknowledge its own. Hence, a third moment is required, one in which the movement from recognition of universality (or similarity) to the assertion of particularity will conclude in the emergence of *individuality*. In this experience, both parties recognize that the assertion of their own particularity could only be successful if the original similarity is ultimately affirmed,[28] and come to understand themselves as similar *and* distinct—

[27] The universality-particularity-individuality schema that I employ below is borrowed from John Burbidge, "Language and Recognition," in *Method and Speculation in Hegel's* Phenomenology, ed. Merold Westphal (Humanities Press, 1982), 89-90.

[28] As Burbidge explains, my act of denying my similarity to the other is meaningful *as a denial* only insofar as this similarity persists. As he writes, "the moment of universality simply recognized the similarity of self and other; the moment of particularity simply denied that similarity. But the denial presupposes that which is denied, and is effective only if the similarity remains implicitly present. When this relation between the implicit affirmation of similarity and its explicit denial is brought to consciousness, the individual becomes aware of himself as an individual" (89).

that is, as "combining a universal nature and a particularizing difference."[29]

That this struggle, carried its logical extreme, could result in a "trial by death" indicates just how radical a transformation is required in order for the opposition to be overcome. At the outset of this process, the two self-consciousnesses are, Hegel says, "*for each other*, shapes of consciousness which have not yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction, of rooting-out all immediate being, and of being merely the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness" (148, M186). Although Hegel does not explicitly refer to the body in this context, it is clear that the "immediate" appearance of each self-consciousness to the other referred to here can be nothing other than their bodily presence. The two separate self-consciousnesses, Hegel writes, "are for one another like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes, individuals submerged in the being [or immediacy] of *Life*" (148, M186; Miller's addition). The struggle for self-assertion in which these two self-consciousnesses engage thus takes the form of my attempt to reduce the other to her immediate objectivity, to say "no" to her attempt to prove her self-conscious "abstraction" from this immediacy. Confined to the terms of an antagonism played out at the level of immediate physical existence (a "struggle to the death"), the struggle for recognition ends up going too far in the wrong direction. The struggle arises from our attempts to prove our transcendence of the immediacy of our physical existence, and fails[30] precisely because the terms in which we insist on this transcendence are themselves borne of this very immediacy (as violence directed against the body). In this struggle, when carried to its logical extremity (i.e., death), I (as the aggressor) end up destroying the very self-consciousness that would supply the affirmation that I am looking for.

The only way out of the struggle is to devise a manner of "negating" this immediacy that is at the same time an affirmation of the fact that this transcendence is a trait that both of us share equally—that we are both not *just* bodies.[31] We must adapt our self-assertion to our shared

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[29] Ibid., 89.

[30] Such aggression fails, since (from the side of me as the aggressor) the other shows that she is willing to and capable of transcending the immediacy to which I would reduce her, that she is "not attached to any specific *existence*," and hence that the physicality in which she appears to me can be negated without ever touching who she really is (148, M187). As Hegel writes further, only through the willingness to stake one's life "is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*" (149, M187; Miller's addition). Moreover, the other's death reveals to me that the object of my attempt to win recognition was precisely this abstraction that I just eliminated: the acknowledgment of my independence is neither meaningful nor even possible in the presence of a lifeless body, but only where there is an independently self-conscious other who grants this acknowledgement of her own accord.

[31] Hegel describes this as "the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession." This form of negation *by* consciousness is to be distinguished from "the natural negation *of* consciousness, negation without independence, which thus remains without the required significance of recognition" (149, M188).

transcendence of immediate existence, and negotiate our independences in the common terms of self-conscious life. Here, the terms of our interaction change drastically; having recognized and accepted each other's irreducibility to physical existence, we agree to negotiate our particular claims to independence in the common terms of self-conscious—what Hegel has been calling "abstract"—life. The coexistence of distinct self-conscious identities thus requires that the original, instinctual impulse towards self-assertion be transformed, on the basis of the linguistic medium that emerges between them, into self-*expression*. We will no longer assert ourselves *against* each other, therefore, but rather will express ourselves *to* each other, *through* the universal self-consciousness in which we both participate.

But to understand this transformation we must recognize that, as there is nowhere else to turn, it can concern nothing other than that through which we are embedded in the world of immediate presence—namely, our bodies. No longer compelled to reduce each other to our physical immediacy, the other and I are compelled to conform that physicality to the demands of communication, using our bodies to express ourselves in gesturing and speaking (rather than as weapons). The body, which was once the site of a mute antagonism fueled by desire, becomes, in the process of arriving at self-consciousness, the facilitator of a precisely not simply bodily meaning. The body is now no longer a tool through which the self satisfies her desire, but has become, in the process of recognition, the explicit site of self-expression. In this process, as John Russon writes, the self "must change her body from an unconscious-means-for-satisfaction-of-the-will to a self-conscious-means-for-expression-of-the-will." "The self," he continues, "must now turn the essence of its body into gesture."[32] The gesture, as the adaptation of one's embodiment to suit certain meaningful terms, is thus the founding act through which recognition, as the reciprocal expression and affirmation of one another's identity, is accomplished.

[32] Russon, *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, 73. In *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, Russon argues that an essential, though implicit, feature of Hegel's account of mutual recognition is the transformation of the nature of the body in the initial institution of social existence between the master and the slave. As Russon explains, the emergence of the master-slave relation from out of the life-and-death combat is a transformation of the nature of the body, from "life-support" to "self-expression." Despite the obvious inequality of this relation, the fact that it reflects an exchange of wills (and not violence or death) between "fixed identities" implies the acceptance of common—that is, communicative—terms between master and slave. Hence, Russon writes, "language is essential to the formation of the institutional situation that is the foundation for the development of self-consciousness," insofar as b*oth* have to accept this arrangement; each party must be *aware* that each has chosen it (each "I" must choose "We"), and this mutual choice must be expressed and understood (Ibid., 73). And while Hegel does not explicitly point to this transformation of the body here, it is clear that there are no other resources to which to turn in answering to the communicative demands of the situation of recognition. For the slave to communicate her choice to submit to the master, Russon writes, "the only means at her disposal are, of course, those over which her will has control, and this means her immediate living body and whatever implements this body can utilize" (Ibid., 73). Hence the body, originally the site of desire, becomes the site of *expression*, the gestural enactment of shared meaning, and the site of *interpretation*, wherein it is treated precisely *as gesture* rather than simply "life-support."

Self-consciousness thus depends on the development and enactment of shared communicative possibilities; our nature as self-conscious beings is realized most primarily in processes of recognition, processes that demand the adaptation of the "natural habitat" that is our body to the performance of meaningful gesture.[33] Language, consequently, could never simply be a tool that we as individuals reach for and *use* to facilitate our expression or to translate our intentions into meaning for others. Rather, as the mutually established and enacted reality in and through which we are habituated into our very sense of being a "self," language, in a fundamental sense, *is* our self-consciousness. As Hegel says in his account of conscience (to which we will turn shortly), "language *is* self-consciousness existing *for others*, self-consciousness [that] is immediately *present*, and as *this* self-consciousness is universal" (478, M652). For Hegel, communication is possible not simply because I use the same words and gestures as others. Or rather, such an account, though true as far as it goes, does not go far enough to explain what is really at work in communication. What we need instead is to understand how the "sameness" of words makes possible the meaningful contact between irreducibly different points of view. And Hegel's account of universality—specifically, of the reference to universality in perceptual experience, and the formative role of universality in self-conscious experience—allows us to understand this. As his definition of language implies, in gesturing and speaking, *I am there in my words*, inhabiting and enacting the "universal" self-consciousness that exists, in language, as the communicative system of recognition that I share with others and that avails itself to be taken up in service of the self-expression of individuality.[34] The fact that our experience is fundamentally one of *perceiving*, the fact that we "*take* the truth of things" and do not simply passively *receive* sensory immediacies—this fact is related fundamentally to the act of communication, not because we, language-users, are bound to impose some linguistic or symbolic superstructure onto reality, but rather for something like the opposite

[33] For a phenomenological account of the adaptation of one's embodiment to the norms of communication and expression, see "The Body as Expression, and Speech," in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 179-205.

[34] As Burbidge confirms, language is the medium of mutual recognition presupposed in any social situation that does not devolve into the kind of violent struggle that Hegel depicts: "The medium of recognition that is lacking in the state of nature... is language. For it is because speech does not enable the primitive to render his self-conscious insistence for unrestrained freedom in an enduring form, that his only recourse is to overt action; and this results in physical combat. We are here presented, then, with a significant relation between the process of recognition and language. On the one hand recognition mediates between the individual consciousness and the social context—between sign-making fantasy and the reproductive memory (which uses a common tongue). On the other hand, within a given society a common language provides the means of recognition. Other than in a state of nature, language and recognition presuppose each other" (Burbidge, "Language and Recognition," 88).

reason—namely, that our very perspective on the world is shaped in collaboration with those others who acknowledge our perspective and with whom we share the world.[35]

2.2. Language and community

Although Hegel does not discuss language explicitly in his analysis of the experience of self-consciousness, language—or, more broadly, communication—is essential to this experience, insofar as the process of recognition on which this experience depends necessarily involves the performance of certain acts of communication. We saw how the self-discovery of an individual "I" rests on her recognition of another who is similar to her, and of her affirmation of this similarity as that on which her own and the other's self-consciousness depends: each becomes an "I," in other words, only as she affirms "We."[36] We saw further that this affirmation is necessarily communicative, since the self-assertions performed by each 'I' prevent themselves from being self-defeating only where they appeal to the other as a self-conscious individual, taking the form of a meaningfully recognizable expression. The emergence of language, in the first place as a bodily gesture, is thus essential to the appearance of self-consciousness in its "spiritual unity" with others.

Of course, human experience does not typically pass through this situation of a pre-linguistic struggle that results in the "emergence" of language. Hegel's argument about the nature of self-consciousness here is a *logical* one; that is, his argument reveals the logically necessary place of language in the formation of individual, self-conscious identities, by showing how the experience of self-consciousness remains unfulfilled outside of acts of recognition performed in common with others, and how such acts are inherently and necessarily communicative. In terms of our own personal histories, though, we develop into and enact our identities by participating in linguistic systems and structures of recognition that are already there for us, without our having to establish them in adapting our body toward communication

[35] Hegel's more explicit statements about language in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* thus offer an extension of recognition as a situation in which the opposed selves accept that self-consciousness as their shared essence, that they are, in a sense, the same self. Commenting on Hegel's explicit discussion of language in the "Culture" section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Jameson writes, "the paradox is that my individuality, expressed through the first person of language, does not really come into existence until it exists 'for others'; we here discover a linguistic version of the dialectic of recognition that was hitherto visible only in the one-on-one hand-to-hand combat of the future master and the future slave" (*The Hegel Variations*, 38). According to the reading I am proposing here, though, we should read Hegel's account of the life-and-death struggle as no less a "linguistic" account of the dialectic of recognition, indeed that there could be no non-linguistic account of recognition, despite the fact of any explicit reference to language in the "Lordship and Bondage" sections.

[36] "Hegel's claim," Russon writes, "is that the demand of self-consciousness to have its self recognized by others is met in communal acts of mutual recognition in which precisely what is achieved is the instituting of *one and the same real self*, for all the members: I really achieve my 'I'-hood only in the situation in which I recognize myself and others as really the same self, as a 'we'" (Russon, *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, 174).

with others.[37]

Although hypothetical, the "life-and-death struggle" that Hegel depicts provides us with insight into the essential connection between language and self-consciousness, a connection that he makes explicit in his later discussion of conscience, which we will explore in the next section. One of the implications of the essential relation between conscientious conviction and communication that Hegel explores is the idea that language could never be simply a tool or external means that facilitates self-expression, but that language and self-consciousness are in fact identical. Conscientious conviction, we will see, is a communicative reality; it is made real in being acknowledged. Moreover, as the most concrete enactment of our self-identity, the experience of conviction offers the most decisive occasion on which to observe the essential connection between selfhood and language, a characteristic that prompts Hegel to offer the following definition(s) of language as such:

> Language is self-consciousness existing for others, self-consciousness which as such is immediately present, and as this self-consciousness is universal. It is the self that separates itself from itself [and] becomes objective to itself, which in this objectivity equally preserves itself as this self, just as it coalesces directly with other selves and is their self-consciousness. (478-479, M652)

As this quotation indicates, I express my individuality as a self precisely by enacting *universal* terms: the self-expression of single individuals is possible precisely because language is a shared phenomenon, and because in their use of language human beings exercise the dimension of ("objective") self-consciousness that they have in common with one another. Hence, whereas we may imagine the act of speech as making actual meanings that are solely "mine" insofar as they are unexpressed (i.e., translating an unspoken thought into a spoken word), such self-expression is possible, Hegel says, because of the set of linguistic possibilities that I share with others in being a particular enactment of a "universal" self-consciousness. As the quotation above indicates, language is (1) self-consciousness that exists "for others," which (2) "as *this* [particular] self-consciousness is universal," and which (3) "coalesces directly with other selves and is *their* self-consciousness."

Having established, then, that the experience of "I" depends on the expression of "I—an act that, as communicative, involves the implicit affirmation that "I is We"—we are in a position to make three general observations about the kinds of implicit affirmation involved in the use of

[37] To be sure, it is the original *establishment* of terms for communication that Hegel discusses for logical reasons, and which we ourselves need not undergo in our own personal experience; arguably, though, our habituation into existing systems of communication in learning to gesture and speak constitutes precisely a transformation of the body not unlike the kind implied in Hegel's analysis.

language. These observations correspond to the three parts of Hegel's definition of language that I have listed above—affirmations, namely, of who I am as speaker, of the commonly accepted system of communication that I share with others, and of our shared identity within a linguistic community.[38]

The first observation pertains to the fact that language is self-consciousness "for others." Notice that Hegel presents self-identity as the result of a struggle, a struggle to attain assurance of my own independence while offering similar assurance to others. The fact that this struggle is resolved only through mutual acts of communication demonstrates that language is essential to the formation of any stable identity. Thus, although the expressive acts that I perform on a day-to-day basis are typically not part of an explicit struggle for recognition, such acts nevertheless activate the linguistic "substance"—the 'We'—that makes me the 'I' that I am. Any expressed meaning or intention of mine is therefore also an implicit expression of who *I* am, which, in presenting my identity as an outwardly sensible reality "for others," leaves me subject to their recognition and hence implicit affirmation. Even in situations in which who "I" am is not explicitly at stake, I am *out there* in my words, exposed to the perspectives of others, in relation to whom my identity is originally and continuously constituted. Language is not the *translation* of self-consciousness into a "being-for-others"; in language, rather, our basic "for-otherness," our constitutive exposure to others' acknowledgement, is revealed, enacted, and affirmed.

Communication, of course, implies understanding; communication is successful, that is, where my expression-of-self is undertaken in terms shared by its recipients, who thereby "get the message." Following the second part of the quotation above, then, language facilitates the expression of "this" particular self only where it is at the same time "universal," that is, common to those for whom communication is a possibility. Language refers, therefore, not only to the capacity for expression that I possess in having a body, but also to the shared and accepted medium of communicative possibilities that I share with those others who are similarly self-conscious and embodied (by virtue of which, moreover, I have the expressive capacities that I have). In the process of recognition, my acceptance of the other's gesture as an expression of a self-conscious identity is implicitly an acceptance the character of her gesture *as meaningful* for both of us. As an affirmation of the identity of "I" and "We," mutual recognition affirms also the commonly accepted system of communication that facilitates our mutually understood expression as members of this "We." Here is the place to recall that the struggle for recognition

[38] We might think of these three "affirmations" of language representing increasingly broader and more basic contexts in which "I" depends on "We."

reaches its conclusion when the participants learn to see each other as individuals, that is, as distinct identities partaking in a common—or, rather, universal—self-conscious nature. To be an individual is thus to be a member of a linguistic community, that is, to share with others a "universal" set of linguistic possibilities through which each one's particular identity is expressed and secured.

Finally, though, we should not allow this language of a universal linguistic "medium" to tempt us to think of language (solely) as an external tool, set apart from the self-conscious identity of those who use it to communicate. Rather, given that the founding act of any such self-conscious identity is expression, the existence of a shared or universal system of expression indicates nothing short of a universal *self-consciousness*, a communal identity whose individual members "coalesce" with one another insofar as there is between them the possibility for mutually understood expression. Here, the "spiritual" identification of "I" and "We" shows its full significance: I cannot say "I" without also saying "We," in which case every meaningful utterance of mine, so far as it is recognized and understood, is an affirmation of the very shape our communal identity takes on the basis of our linguistic practices—and affirmation, in short, of *who we are* as a linguistic community. We must emphasize, of course, that this communal self-affirmation is for the most part implicit; in the course of my normal communication, I typically attend to what my speech is *about* and therefore am not mindful of the fact that successful communication with others rests on our sharing a common identity. Yet even when I disagree profoundly with someone on a certain issue, for instance, our ability to carry on the conversation bears witness to the fact that my opponent and I are members of the same linguistic "home."[39] In this way, the affirmation of "We" does not require that we refer explicitly to our communal identity or the linguistic conventions through which we are its members. It is rather through the generally unnoticed familiarity of our shared linguistic habits, rather than through any explicit agreement or statement, that our communal self-affirmation takes place.

Yet, as we will see in the final section of this chapter, there is one form of communal self-affirmation that stands out as that in which our communal identity is more explicitly invoked. Turning to Hegel's account of conscience we will see that forgiveness, as the recognition of another person's finite action as the necessary, though determinate, site of her

[39] I borrow this idea of a linguistic "home" from Russon, who writes, summarizing the implications of Hegel's understanding of language, that "the ease with which our systems of linguistic reference and communication function is precisely a reflection of how far the members the linguistic community really share the same home: we mutually confirm each other—we are the self-consciousness for the other—by showing each other in and through our communication that we live in the self-same world, the very world that reflects back to us our comfort" (Russon, *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, 173).

self-expression, is the affirmation that her action *has meaning*—that she has a recognizable place in the shared structures that make meaning possible—despite the inevitable failure of any single action to wholly represent who she is. This forgiveness, moreover, is inherently mutual: in forgiveness (and in its correlate act of confession), I speak for myself and for the other, affirming our shared irreducibility to the determinate self-expressions that we nevertheless must perform. If language—being with and for others—constitutes a necessary element of singular self-identity, forgiveness is the ("absolute") form of mutual recognition in which this fact is acknowledged. In this way, forgiveness constitutes a privileged instance of communication between persons: if, for Hegel, acts of successful communication between speakers affirm the linguistic "whole" of the community to which they belong, then the particular gesture of forgiveness affirms the capacity of this "whole" to incorporate all particular determinacies—a capacity that marks the community's infinite reconciliatory power.

3. To communicate is to forgive: Conscience and the non-immediacy of meaning

What Hegel demonstrates in principle in his account of recognition—namely, that self-conscious individuality is a communal achievement—he explores in further detail in subsequent parts of the *Phenomenology*, according to the various ways in which the individual negotiates her place in concrete systems of recognition.[40] This development culminates in Hegel's analysis of "conscience," and in particular in the actions of confession and forgiveness. In these actions an individual performs the consummate expression of her interpretive agency by acknowledging explicitly—that is, by expressing—her absolute dependence on those others among whom her interpretive agency is made manifest. In this way, these actions are not simply enactments of the structures of recognition that contextualize individual agency, but are the acknowledgment of communication *as* this context—indeed, as the ultimate context for the significance of human action.[41]

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[40] According to Bernstein, Hegel explicitly demonstrates the establishment of spirit in mutual recognition at three points in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, first in "Self-Consciousness" (M175-177), again in the transition from "Reason" to "Spirit" (M435-437), and finally in the discussion of conscience (M670-671). As Bernstein argues, "the notion of conscience is integral to… the achievement of self-recognition in otherness," since, without its full concretization in the experience of conscience, the master-slave episode remains a thought experiment, an unfulfilled "explanatory device" (Bernstein, "Conscience and Transgression," 55-6).

[41] Thus Bernstein interprets Hegel's account of conscience as a challenge to the idea that "the absolute" refers to a standpoint outside of human experience. As the recognition of the absolute significance of one's concrete situation of action, conscience confirms the immanent nature of the absolute. Bernstein, "Confession and Forgiveness: Hegel's Poetics of Action," in *Beyond Representation: Philosophy and Poetic Imagination*, ed. Richard Thomas Eldridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 34-65.

Following the pattern of the previous two sections, my goal in this final section is to read Hegel's account of conscience as a third exposition of the non-self-sufficiency of immediacy, one that concretely integrates the two forms of non-immediacy studied above. We saw first that what appears immediately in our experience is, as immediately *meaningful*, mediated according to our particular perceptual perspective, and hence that our experience is most basically a matter of interpretive agency rather than simple passivity. We saw second that the meaningfulness of our experience is not idiosyncratic but rather is implicitly oriented towards the sharing of meaning with others, such that our reflective sense of our own perspective—our *self*-presence, as it were—is inherently mediated by those others who recognize our perspective as a source of worldly significance. Conscience, for Hegel, is the form of experience in which these realities of interpretive agency (particularity) and mutual recognition (universality) explicitly answer to one another, in the form of a *singular* agency that expresses its constitutive dependence on the agency of others.[42]

Initially, the conscientious agent occupies the stance of a kind of "sense-certainty," assuming the significance of her action to be immediately apparent. As its location in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* indicates,[43] conscience is a particular dimension of moral experience, one that reflects a singular agent's awareness of her "absolute" responsibility and capacity to do what is right in particular moral situations. The source of the conscientious agent's self-assurance is her acknowledgment that morality demands is that she *acts*, and that, although her specific action is liable to be misinterpreted, the morally relevant factor is not the quality of her particular action but her self-assured conviction in doing what is right, which she expects that others will affirm. As Hegel says, conscience is both the assurance that "action is immediately something *concretely* moral" (466, M634) and "the common element of [distinct] self-consciousnesses… the substance in which the deed has an *enduring reality*, the moment of being *recognized* and *acknowledged* by others" (470, M640).

As Hegel shows, however, this expectation of recognition is not immediately answered in the way that the conscientious agent initially supposes. Required, rather, is a process of mutual recognition in which the non-self-sufficiency of the agent's specific act becomes the occasion for an acknowledgment of the essential significance of communication—not simply for the meaning

[42] This notion of singularity that I am using to explicate Hegel corresponds roughly to Arendt's notion of "uniqueness," the particular form of distinctiveness characteristic of human beings correlative to their appearance among others in the public realm. "In man," Arendt writes, "otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176).

[43] That is, in Part "C" of Chapter VI, entitled "Spirit that is Certain of Itself. Morality."

of the act itself but for the agent whose self-expression it is. In this way, the situation of conscience reenacts the logic of mutual recognition that Hegel studies in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*,[44] although here communication is no longer simply an implicit feature of the established system of mutual recognition, but rather is explicitly affirmed as the reality in which enacted human selfhood is most fully—"absolutely"—realized. The definitive feature of conscientious mutual recognition, then, is its dependence on expressive acts—confession and forgiveness—that are not simply forms of communication but that expressly *affirm* the reality of communication as constitutive of the significance of action and (hence) the reality of individual self-identity. Maintaining the comparison with Hegel's initial account of recognition, in confession and forgiveness we, as singular agents, explicitly *say* "'I' is 'We' and 'We' is 'I,'" or rather that "I, in my absolute independence as a singular perspective, am absolutely dependent." Conscientious mutual recognition is, in Hegel's terminology, "absolute spirit": it is the form of the sharing of meaning among diverse interpretive standpoints whose singularity could never—that is, neither immediately nor finally—be shared.

3.1. Conscience as "absolute" selfhood in action

Although my concerns reach beyond the specifically moral issues with respect to which Hegel introduces the experience of conscience, it is crucial nonetheless to understand the significance of conscience as a moral phenomenon. Conscience, for Hegel, is the recognition of what is actually involved in the performance of moral duty. It is the acknowledgment, more specifically, of the necessary determinacy and contingency of moral action, which enables the moral subject to overcome the paralyzing contradictions of what Hegel calls the "moral view of the world." Committed to the absolute purity of moral action, this moral stance is self-undermining. As Hegel explains, in this moral stance "I act morally when I am *conscious* of performing only pure duty and nothing else but that; this means, in fact, when I do *not* act" (468, M637). That is, since all moral actions are necessarily particular, and in this way "impure,"[45] the

[44] Or, as Hyppolite writes, "the struggle for recognition on the part of self-consciousness, a struggle without which self-consciousness would not exist, since it needs the mediation of others in order to exist, prefigures this demand for the recognition of conviction which now is presented at a higher level and in a more concrete form" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 507).

[45] The threat to the purity of moral action is basically twofold. In the actual situation of moral agency, not only must subject choose, from her own specific vantage point, the particular duty that she will enact, but her enactment of this duty will be a determinate application of an abstract moral principle in the empirical, for which she herself must supply the particular content. As Hegel writes, the moral subject "knows its morality to be imperfect because it is affected by the sense-nature and nature opposed to it, which in part adulterate morality itself as such, and in part give rise to a host of duties by which in concrete cases of real action it is embarrassed. For each case is the

commitment to the purity of moral agency is therefore a commitment to moral *inaction*—which is to say, to immorality. Hence, the actual fulfillment of moral agency requires the subject's adoption of the standpoint of conscience, which, having "renounce[d] that consciousness which thinks of duty and reality as contradictory," acknowledges that "pure duty consists in the empty abstraction of pure thought, and has its reality and its content only in a specific reality" (468, M637). Conscience, thus, is the recognition that any moral action will necessarily be a "specific reality," and hence that the impure specificities of *real* action by a *real* subject constitute a necessary moment in the fulfillment of moral duty.

In this way, Hegel's exploration of conscience does not simply denounce the idea of pure duty as an "empty abstraction," but offers, as Allen Wood says, "a positive meaning to the emptiness charge."[46] As Wood summarizes, Hegel's turn to conscience reflects the recognition that, "because morality cannot provide completely determinate duties, there are certain points in the moral life where the subject's arbitrariness must step in."[47] More generally, conscience is the recognition of the determinacy of subjectivity as a necessary moment in the fulfillment of moral duty. It is the awareness that, although the "call of duty" is itself "pure"—that is, abstracted from all subjective inclinations and empirical conditions—this call is nevertheless a call to *act*, and the fulfillment of duty resides in my responsibility and ability to discern the right course of action in a given situation.[48] Conscience "is simple action in accordance with duty," Hegel writes, "which fulfills not this or that duty, but knows and does what is concretely right. It is, therefore, first of all moral *action qua* action into which the previous moral consciousness that did not act has passed" (467, 635).[49] As moral answerability *in action*, the experience of conscience is the coincidence of the standard of duty with the "subjective arbitrariness" of the actual situation that

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concrescence of many moral relations… and since the *specific* duty is a purpose, it has a content, and its *content* is part of the purpose, and morality is not pure" (462, M630).

[46] Although the standpoint of conscience is often cited in connection with Hegel's criticism of the "emptiness" of the moral standpoint, the view that conscience is *beyond* morality altogether reflects more directly Hegel's purposes in the *Philosophy of Right* rather than the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which very clearly situates conscience within the section of the "Spirit" chapter titled "Morality." As Wood affirms, "in the *Philosophy of Right*, the emptiness of morality leads to ethical life and its system of substantive obligations. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* suggests an answer to emptiness *within* the moral standpoint. This is *conscience*, where the subjective will gives itself content through the immediate conviction that a particular act fulfills its duty." Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 174.

[47] Ibid., 174.

[48] As Hoff writes, "Hegel argues that moral action will always be one-sided—it will always be an *interpretation* of moral principles—and hence inherently subject to critical judgment; the honest assessment of such action therefore cannot proceed without an appreciation of its determinate condition." Hoff, "The Right and the Righteous: Hegel on Confession, Forgiveness, and the Necessary Imperfection of Political Action," in *Phenomenology and Forgiveness*, ed. Marguerite La Caze (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 4.

[49] Thus, as Williams writes, "conscience cancels and suspends the opposing [moral] principles, not at the conceptual level but at the level of action" (Williams, *Recognition*, 207).

I inhabit. Conscience, then, is the realization of moral duty, not because I as an individual arbitrarily decide what is right, but because I recognize that what is right cannot in fact *be* right unless I, "arbitrary" subject that I am, enact it.[50]

Hence we must distinguish Hegel's understanding of conscience from the "tragic"[51] view that the otherwise self-sufficient purity of moral duty is thwarted by the empirically determinate and subjectively impure conditions of action in the real world. For Hegel, human action cannot be other than partial and determinate, and the standpoint conscience is not the reluctant acceptance of the inevitable falling short of moral principles in action, but rather the recognition that the "call" of moral duty—which indeed appears the form of a principle—is a call to *me*, as a determinately situated subject and the necessary agent of its realization.[52] Conscience, in other words, is the recognition of the necessary impurity of moral action, insofar as moral principles demand precisely that they be enacted by me, their necessary interpreter, in real situations whose specificity renders impossible any application of a moral principle without the work of interpretation.

Hegel's challenge to the "moral view of the world," then, is not that, whereas we can intuit the moral law as a self-sufficient principle, we are nevertheless constrained to act determinately in the empirical world. Hegel's point, rather, is that the moral demand *is felt by us in the empirical world* and, as a call to action, has no significance other than in this world. As Russon writes, "reason does not exist independently of naturally existing, self-conscious agents… Moral worth, thus, enters *into* the world of experience only if it is a phenomenon *of* the world of experience, and thus experience must be the soil and seed of moral value, rather than an

[50] Hence we should not be misled by the language of "subjectivity." My usage here is meant to capture the necessarily subjective discernment or interpretation of one's concrete moral situation, and not the moral validation of subjective preferences. Harris goes as far as to dissociate conscience from the language of subjectivity, explaining that conscience "is a self-actualizing Reason that is not 'subjective,' but confidently and firmly 'situated' in its actual social world" (Harris, *Hegel's Ladder, II*, 460).

[51] Although, as Bernstein says, the experience of conscience is at one level the "tragic recognition" of the transgressive nature of one's action with respect to "one's indebtedness to the ethical life of the community," the overall development of Hegel's account of conscience moves toward the recognition of the necessity of the "creative transgression" of the singular individual beyond any ethical immediacy. As he writes, "what I want to call Hegel's 'continuum hypothesis' entails that one cannot possess an adequate conception of individuality, and hence freedom, without at the same time acknowledging the necessity and thus goodness of transgressive action, which Hegel denominates both in the section on conscience and at the end of the Religion chapter as 'evil.' Hence his peculiar claim that 'Evil is the same as goodness'" (Bernstein, "Conscience and Transgression," 60).

[52] As Fackenheim points out, this recognition of the necessity of contingency is one of the distinctive characteristics of Hegel's philosophy in general. As he writes, "Hegel not only *admits* contingency *in addition* to a necessity free of it but rather—[and] of incomparably greater significance—insists that contingency *enters into* the necessity which in turn consists of nothing but its conquest. Hegel is so far from denying the reality of contingency as actually to be the only speculative philosopher in history to attempt a demonstration of its necessity" (Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension*, 19).

alien matter upon which it is overlain."[53] Whereas the moral philosopher might try to extricate the moral demand from worldly reality in order establish its rational foundation, to insist on the purity of moral agency is in fact to disavow the phenomenal nature of its appearance to us as moral agents. Consequently, the subjective "impurities" that the moral purist would attempt to eliminate from the situation of moral action have, for conscience, precisely moral worth. If, as Russon observes, "it must be *me* who feels the moral obligation,"[54] then all of the natural and empirical aspects of my particular subjectivity—my inclinations, desires, and feelings—are not obstacles to my fulfillment of moral duty, but rather the very instruments of that fulfillment.[55] According to Wood, "Hegel thinks that in order to do one's duty as this particular duty, even if one derives the empirical features of that duty from some moral principle, one must act from those empirical features, and that to act from the empirical features of the act in this way is also to act from something that has the stamp of 'particularity' on it; it is to act from empirical inclinations, interests, drives, passions."[56] This is no mere vindication of subjective preference, however. It is rather the recognition that in order actually to do my duty, it must be an inclination of mine to do what is right,[57] or, conversely, that what is right must be done by me, a singular subject whose particular inclinations and perspective play an essential role in determining how to act in *this* particular situation.[58]

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[53] Russon, *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, 151.
[54] Ibid., 153, emphasis mine.
[55] Whereas, as Hegel shows, the moral purist might insist on the elimination of natural impulses and inclinations from the performance of duty, the actual enactment of duty undermines any such elimination. He writes: "Moral self-consciousness asserts that its purpose is pure, is independent of inclinations and impulses, which implies that it has eliminated within itself sensuous purposes. But this alleged elimination of the element of sense it dissembles again. It acts, brings its purpose into actual existence, and the self-conscious sense-nature which is supposed to be eliminated is precisely this middle term or mediating element between pure consciousness and actual existence—it is the instrument or organ of the former for its realization, and what is called impulse, inclination. Moral self-consciousness is not, therefore, in earnest with the elimination of inclinations and impulses, for it is just these that are the *self-realizing self-consciousness*" (457, M622).
[56] Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 169.
[57] As Hyppolite observes, to be immediately convinced of what duty requires in "this" concrete situation is to experience the call of duty as a feeling. "To act according to its conviction," he writes, "to determine itself by itself, finally to be concretely free in *Dasein* and not in some abstract and nonactual essentiality (as pure duty was): that is what characterizes the self of *Gewissen*. The self knows itself as absolute; it immediately experiences duty in its feeling of what for it is duty. It decides by itself and by itself alone" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 501). As Wood likewise affirms, "Hegel concludes that the ethical worth of an action is not in the least diminished by the fact that it is performed from inclination or passion, since it is an inevitable fact about agency that this should be so" (Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 170).
[58] Wood offers a helpful example: "Suppose, for instance, that I try to think of a certain kind of action, such as keeping a promise or helping another in need, as my duty. To do this specific duty, Hegel seems to be saying, would be to act not from duty alone, but also from a more particular motive, that of keeping *this* promise or helping *this* person. But this more particular motive would cancel what Kant regards as the purity of my will. Hegel's contention is that to apply any determinate criterion of duty is to think of one's action as one's duty because it has certain determinate empirical features; and to perform it because it is a fulfillment of *that* duty is to perform it because it has *those* features" (Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 169).

For conscience, then, there is no distinction between what *I* am compelled to do and what is required by duty. However, conscience is not a fortunate, but accidental, coincidence of my preferences with the fulfillment of a moral principle, but rather the recognition that the fulfillment of a moral principle requires the immediate and determinate self-expression of "my" subjectivity. For this reason, Hegel identifies the "specific reality" in which duty is fulfilled as the "reality of consciousness," and says that "the content of the moral action is the doer's own immediate *individuality*" (468, 637). Thus, if morality is the experience of an absolute demand to perform the good, and if conscience is further the recognition that it is *I* who necessarily puts the good into practice, then my conscientious enactment of duty is the enactment of my very selfhood as the individual whose self-assurance is the true domain of moral validity. "Duty is no longer the universal that stands over and against the self," writes Hegel; "on the contrary, [duty] is known to have no validity when thus separated." The self that acts, rather, "is the *absolute* [*schlechthin*] *universal*, so that just this knowing, as [the self's] *own* knowing, as conviction, is *duty*" (469, M639). Thus, if the content of conscientious action is the very individuality of the agent, then, as Hegel says, "the *form* of that content is just this self as a pure movement, [that is,] as knowing or his *own conviction*" (468, M637). It is conviction—that is, self-assured selfhood—that gives conscientious action its particular significance; as Hegel says elsewhere, the action of conscience is "the self-expression of an individuality" (478, M650).

Not only, though, does my conscientious moral action speak more immediately and primarily of *me* as its agent than of the principle I intend to enact, but it is a particular expression of my individual selfhood that conscientious action achieves. As Hegel writes, whereas the morally pure self remains paralyzed by the "undecidability" of the various moral principles to which it could possibly respond in a given situation, "conscience is rather the negative One, or absolute self, which does away with these various moral substances" and simply acts out of conviction (467, M635).[59] Hegel brings this "absolute" enactment of selfhood to the fore in the following phenomenological description of acting from conviction:

[59] Derrida's account of the "undecidable" nature of enacting justice resonates well with Hegel's account of conscientious moral action. As Derrida indicates, the situation of doing what justice demands is *not* one of deciding on and applying a principle that, though unapparent to any observer of my action, can nevertheless be identified as the original motivational source of my action. Moral action, rather, is the very *realization* of this principle in the act of responding to my situation. The "undecidable," Derrida writes, "is not merely the oscillation between two significations or two contradictory and very determinate rules, each equally imperative," but rather "is the experience of that which, though foreign and heterogeneous to the order of the calculable and the rule, must nonetheless—it is of *duty* that one must speak—deliver itself over to the impossible decision while taking account of law and rules." Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 252.

> Pure conviction is, as such, as empty as pure *duty*, is pure in the sense that there is nothing in it, no specific content that is a duty. But action is called for, something must be *determined* by the individual, and the self-certain spirit in which the in-itself has attained the significance of the self-conscious 'I', knows that it has this determination and content in the immediate *certainty* of itself. This, as a determination and content, is the natural consciousness, i.e., impulses and inclinations. Conscience does not recognize the absoluteness of any content, for it is the absolute negativity of everything determinate. It determines from its own self; but the sphere of the self into which falls the determinateness as such is the so-called sense-nature; to have a content taken from the immediate certainty of itself means that it has nothing to draw on but sense-nature. (472-473, M643)

Conscience, as we have noted, is the awareness that duty will not tolerate being left to its purity, that morality demands that something be *done*, and that *what* is to be done must be determined by oneself. In this way, conscience is the recognition of oneself as "the absolute negativity of everything determinate," that is, the interpretive subject responsible for discerning how the moral principle is to be enacted in this situation. Moreover, the "content" of this action is drawn, not from this moral principle (which, as a principle, remains contentless), but from the determinate resources of one's own "sense-nature." This determination, again, is not the tragic sacrifice of moral purity to the inevitably impure conditions of action, but the recognition that the "impurity" of my existential situation is both the origin and destiny of any action that would be *really* moral. Conscience, as action based on the absolute *conviction* of one's moral validity, combines the recognition of the absolute significance of one's interpretive standpoint with the recognition of the absolute significance of one's "natural"—that is, particular, concrete, and contingent—standpoint as that from which one "determines" what ought to be done.[60]

The action of conscience thus involves the "absolute self" in two distinct, but related, senses. In the first place, conscience is the absolute enactment of one's interpretive involvement in the world of experience, on the recognition that even the purest and most authoritative demands—for example, the moral law—cannot be answered without the essential contribution of one's interpretation of the situation. In his initial account of recognition in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel began with the self's initial sense of the absoluteness of its own status as "I"—that the world is irreducibly "mine," that there is nothing that appears within this world that is not in some way related to my perspective. Conscience, then, is the most comprehensive and concrete avowal of this absolute "mineness," or rather, the recognition of the impossibility of *disavowing* one's interpretive contribution to the meaning of things. In such an avowal, one

[60] Hyppolite writes that in conscientious action "nature and duty are gathered into the organic unity of the self; and it is this free self, which no longer knows anything beyond itself, whose truth is the certainty it has of the truth, that constitutes the end point of the dialectic of spirit" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 492).

"owns up," as it were, to one's status as that perspective *to whom* everything appears and *for whom* the significance of reality is never not an issue.

In the experience of conscience, Hegel therefore explains, the human standpoint is

> for the first time a *subject* which has made explicit all the moments of consciousness within it, and for which all these moments, substantiality in general, external existence, and the essential nature of thought, are contained in the certainty of itself… Conscience is this power because it knows the moments of consciousness as *moments*, dominating them as their negative essence. (471, M641)

In the action of conscience, then, the subject knowingly puts into play the irreducibly interpretive standpoint that we discovered above in our reading of "Sense-Certainty" to be a formal dimension of human experience as such. "Negation," we saw there, is that aspect of our experience in which presence undermines its apparently self-sufficient immediacy, revealing that experience could never simply be a matter of our passive receptivity to things. To know oneself as the "negative essence" of things is thus to be aware of oneself as the synthesizing—that is, interpretive—centre of the world, and to *act* on the acknowledgement that no principle or standard of behavior could ever override our interpretive responsibility.

In the second place, this avowal of the irreducibility of interpretation is at the same time an avowal of the essential significance of the determinate aspects of the perspective from which we interpret things. In responding to the existential demand to act, the conscientious self, as Hegel says above, "has nothing to draw on but sense-nature," that is, the "impulses and inclinations" of its "natural consciousness." We have noted above the way in which the immediacy of the conscientious response to moral duty grants moral validity to the "natural" aspects of one's powers of moral discernment. Here, I want to add the further observation that, in incorporating the determinacies of "sense-nature" within the "absolute negativity" of one's interpretive standpoint, conscientious action is action that puts into play one's "whole" self. That is, the determinacies of my particular standpoint are not simply the necessary vehicle of my response to the moral demand; rather, these determinacies are precisely the content of my moral action, insofar as conscience is the form of experience in which *who I am as such*—my "whole" self—is at stake in my action.[61] As Hegel will eventually say, in the action of conscience "the self enters into existence *as self*; the self-assured spirit exists as such for others… What is

[61] Reading Hegel alongside Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, Kelly Oliver argues that Hegel's account of confession and forgiveness makes implicit reference both to the unconscious and to the body as determinate aspects of human individuality whose necessity conscientious action reveals. In this way, Kristeva assists our understanding of the "wholly incorporated" self at issue in Hegel's account of conscience, as "only a notion of the unconscious can give us an ethics with responsibility radical enough such that we hold ourselves responsible not only for our actions and beliefs but also for our unconscious desires and fears." Oliver, "Forgiveness and Community," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 42 (2004): 1.

acknowledged is not the *determinate* aspect of the action, not its *intrinsic* being, but solely the self-knowing *self* as such" (478, M651). I will address the significance of "acknowledgment"—that is, recognition—for conscientious action in the next subsection; for now, note simply that Hegel understands conscience as the enactment, the "entering into existence," of the self *as such*. My action on conviction can "convert"[62] the particular "determination of being" that is my situation into "the self-expression of an individuality" only if it is, at the same time, my response to the immediate, existential demand of what it means to be the self that I am.

Here the existential significance of conscientious action is especially evident. Conscience is indeed action in response to something like a moral law; however, as the recognition that the enactment of this law is solely mine, conscientious action concerns the fulfillment not just of a specific law but rather the "law," so to speak, of who I am. Thus H. S. Harris writes: "conscience dissolves all the displacements—and particularly the final reliance upon the 'purity' of the moral disposition—in the recognition that I am my duty, *and* my duty is to be *me*."[63] When one says "I must do as my conscience dictates," one insists that not to perform the action in question—which may very well be "illegal"—would be to sacrifice the integrity of one's very sense of self-identity, insofar as the situation in question places at stake the very terms through which one understands oneself. Notice, though, that the voice of conscience that speaks within us declares what *must* be done, that is, presents itself as *absolute* in a way that transcends anything my self-interest might dictate. Conscience, then, combines the moral concern to "do the right thing" with the recognition that I alone am responsible for doing this right thing, and in this way is an experience in which one's very self-consistency—my sense of who I am—depends on my answering to the "call of God" or "the voice of the good." In matters of conscience, therefore, the detour of external justification does indeed entail an *injustice*, insofar as the call of conscience "within" one answers to transcends any and all such external points of reference. And yet conscience is at the same time the conviction that one is doing what is *right*.[64] Although *I* am at stake in my conscientious action, I am not simply answering to myself, but rather am responding

[62] Cf. 466-467, M635: "Action *qua* actualization is thus… the simple conversion of a reality that merely *is* into a reality that results from *action*, the conversion of the bare mode of *objective* knowing into one of knowing *reality* as something produced by consciousness."
[63] Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 463.
[64] As Wood writes (making these points in reverse order), "if I am truly conscientious, I follow my convictions not because they are *mine*, but because (so I think) they are *correct*. I devote myself to a cause because I believe that this particular cause is right, and that indifference or opposition to it would be wrong. Further, I am usually moved to such devotion not only because I approve the cause in the abstract, but also because my self-worth is bound up with it. I esteem myself for serving it and would feel ashamed of myself if I let it down" (Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 185).

to a sense of what ought to be done that, as we will see in the next subsection, implicitly reflects a concern for others.

3.2. Conscience and the need to be recognized

If, as I have been describing it, conscience is an extension of moral experience—revealing, that is, what it means to *act* on principle—then we should expect to be able to account for the universal nature of morality—that is, action on *principle*—in terms of what conscience reveals about the nature of moral action. In fact, this recovery of universality is central to Hegel's account of conscientious action, which begins precisely with the immediate experience of conscientious self-certainty, and develops toward the conclusion that even my absolute conviction of being able to enact the good is a matter of recognition by—or rather, communication with—others. However, the responsibility to communicate is not apparent in the immediate experience of conscience, since, initially, conscience recognizes only the vindication of its own subjectivity as the agent of morality. That is, conscience is in the first place committed to the absolute status of its capacity to enact the good, and hence does not recognize communication with others as having any essential significance for the fulfillment of moral duty. As Hegel shows, however, this "self-certainty" is as non-self-sufficient as any commitment to the simple immediacy of things, and must come to terms with its implicit dependence on the recognition and confirmation of other conscientious perspectives. Rather paradoxically, though, it is conscience's commitment to the absolute status of its own singularity that exposes its need to be recognized. The problem is that conscience is not immediately prepared to affirm singularity *absolutely*; the self-assured spirit that "exists as such" in its action does not immediately acknowledge that it exists as such "for others," that is, for other interpretive standpoints that are, so it must seem at first, absolutely opposed to its own. Hence, the affirmation of particularity necessarily involves conscience in a certain process whereby its absolute self-assurance is radically challenged, and in which it comes to acknowledge the dependence of its self-assured conviction on those others who recognize it so.

As we noted above, conscience is the experience of a situation in which action is necessary, here and now; it is a necessity felt in such a way that my sense of who I am requires that I act *this* way in *this* situation (if, that is, I am not going to betray myself). For this reason, Hegel describes conscience as a form of sense-certainty. Just as the version of sense-certainty that Hegel studied in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology* involved the "taking" of a certain presence to be immediate and self-sufficient, so too is the action of conscience an immediate

certainty of oneself—an immediate certainty, that is, that one's action has the significance that one bestows upon it.[65] Whereas, Hegel explains, "knowing is contingent in so far as it is something other than the object," the conscientious agent "is no longer such a contingent knower." "On the contrary," Hegel continues, a case of moral action is, in the sense-*certainty* of knowing, directly as it is *in itself*, and it is *in itself* only in the way that it is in this knowing" (466, M635).

But this conscientious knowledge of my action is, in the first place, non-contingent only for me; for others, my act is simply an "object," an event in the determinate world that does not speak directly for my intentions and commitments in the way that it does for me. My action—more precisely, my *self*-actualization—is always and necessarily a "being-for-another," that is, the object of someone else's scrutiny. Accordingly, writes Hegel, "a disparity attaches to conscience":

> The duty that [conscience] fulfills is a *specific* content; it is true that this content is the *self* of consciousness, and so consciousness's *knowledge* of itself, its *identity* with itself. But once fulfilled, set in the medium of *being*, this identity is no longer knowing, no longer [a] process of differentiation in which its differences are at the same time immediately superseded; on the contrary, in *being*, the difference is established as an *enduring* difference, and the action is a *specific* action, not identical with the element of everyone's self-consciousness, and therefore not necessarily acknowledged. (477, M648)

Action, Hegel explains here, is always a determinate and objective (worldly) expression of its author's indeterminate, individual self-consciousness, and, as such, is a kind of betrayal[66] of that author and her intentions ("betrayal" here meaning an unauthorized presentation that fails to represent properly its source). Action, on its own, is simply a specific "determination of being" that distinguishes itself from both the self-certainty of the one who expresses herself in acting and the acknowledgment of that self-certainty by others; "both sides," Hegel writes, "the conscience that acts and the universal consciousness that acknowledges this action as duty, are equally free from the specificity of this action" (477, M648). Once "set in the medium of being," action no longer has the significance "knowing;" that is, it no longer speaks for the self who acts, but rather becomes the site of a "conflict of interpretations" in which the actor tries to reinvest the specificity of her action with the significance of self by appealing to those who witness her

[65] The point here is not that I *think* that others will immediately interpret my action in the same way that I do; indeed, we have not yet here introduced the element of others' views. Rather, the point is that my action necessarily and immediately speaks of *me* because I am, in this case, necessarily and immediately, *in my action*.

[66] I borrow the term "betrayal" for this purpose from John Russon, "Reading: Derrida in Hegel's Understanding," *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 36 (2006): 191.

action (e.g., "No, *this* is what I meant…"), while these witnesses insist on committing the actor to the (transgressive) specificity of her action.[67]

As H. S. Harris explains, the "disparity" intrinsic to action reveals the essential significance of language in preserving the universality—that is, recognizability—of conscientious conviction:

> I may be quite convinced that what I do is my duty. But what I do (my *Handlung*) exists as a public "fact" (*Tat*); it is a "being," and everyone knows that I was the one who did it. Everyone else can evaluate it by the formal standard of pure duty. This variable evaluation is only an abstract moment compared with the concreteness of duty in action; but it is a necessary moment, because conscience produces actions, not an inward disposition. It makes the self exist visibly for others as well as for itself. For this reason… conscience must speak its conviction; the "deed" cannot speak for itself.[68]

Hence, language—that is, communication *about* action—is the solution to the "problem" of conscience—the problem, as Harris further writes, of how "the blind and dark immediacy of moral feeling (which is supposed to be unerring) [is] to be conciliated with the intellectual intuition of 'moral law.'"[69] As Hegel himself writes, since is it through "conviction alone that [one's] action is a duty," the act "is valid as a duty solely through the conviction being *declared*. For universal self-consciousness is free from the *specific* action that merely *is*; what is valid for that self-consciousness is not the *action* as an *existence*, but the *conviction* that it is a duty; and this is made actual in language" (479, M653).

However, this necessary declaration of one's conscientious conviction is neither a recovery of one's immediate "certainty" of the moral rightness of one's action, nor a recovery of the moral purity of the principle that inspired one's action. Rather, this necessity of declaration, and the conflict of interpretations about one's action that prompts it, reveals something new about the nature of action. As Hegel explains, whereas the act of declaring one's conviction might seem to be a supplementary discursive act that recovers one or more of the aspects just mentioned, the action of conscience, as "the self-expression of an individuality," is never simply a matter of immediacy or moral purity, but rather is essentially a matter of communication.

> Whoever says he acts in such and such a way from conscience, speaks the truth, for his conscience is the self that knows and wills. But it is essential that he should *say* so, for this self must be at the same time the *universal* self. It is not universal in the *content* of the act, for this, on account of its specificity, is intrinsically an indifferent affair: it is in the form of the act that the universality lies. It is this form which is to be established as actual: it is the

[67] Cf. also 477, M648: Conscience "acts, it gives being to a specific content; others hold to this *being* as this spirit's truth, and are therein certain of this spirit; it has declared therein *what* it holds to be duty."
[68] Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 464-5.
[69] Ibid., 462.

> *self* which as such is actual in language, which declares itself to be the truth, and just by so doing acknowledges all other selves and is acknowledged by them. (480-481, M654)

Conscience can invariably "speak the truth," as Hegel says here, because the essential significance of conscientious action resides, not in the specific deed done, but in the "universal self" that is made "actual" in this deed.[70] "The action of conscience," Hegel writes, "is not only this *determination* of being which is forsaken by the pure self. What is to be valid, and to be recognized as duty, is so only through the knowledge and conviction that it *is* duty, through the knowledge of oneself in the deed" (478, M650). Recall that one acts conscientiously out of one's absolute self-assurance that one must act in *this* way. To attempt to recover my absolute grasp on the significance of my (self-betraying) action—whether by supplementing it with commentary or by recasting it as a mistake—is necessarily to solicit the acknowledgment of others for whom my action is indeed an expression of who I am. That such attempts are meaningful, Hegel argues, reveals the extent to which the reality of acknowledgment is not simply supplementary but rather *definitive* of the significance of human action. Human action is "doubly disclosive," as Bernstein puts it, in the sense that they express not only a particular intention of mine but also my relation to my action, my "apperceptive" take on what I have done, which, when expressed, becomes the object of conscientious communication and recognition. As he writes, "saying something is my duty is not [simply] descriptive of it but expressive of my relation to it, and expression which provides me with a moral standing distinct from the moral quality of the act I perform."[71] The inevitable specificity of action—its "being-for-another"—is thus not a challenge to action's having the significance of "the self-expression of an individuality"; or rather, the challenge that such specificity presents (in generating a conflict of interpretations) is a confirmation of the fact that action, as conscience, *never simply* has the significance of "mere being."

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[70] In other words, what matters in conscience is not my act but the integrity of my self-knowing. As Hyppolite says, "this truth is simultaneously its own and absolute. It is absolute by the *sincerity* of its conviction, and this sincerity of conviction has become the very essence of consciousness" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 504). This self-knowing is "universal," moreover, insofar as the self expressed here is the self-knowledge of conviction, which, as a formal characteristic of all conscientious selfhood, can be actualized in language and acknowledged by other (conscientious) selves. In pointing to the self-knowledge of conviction as "the form of the act [in which] the universality lies," Hegel's attention to the communicability of conscience marks the point at which his account affirms the formally universal dimension of moral agency in a sense akin to the Kantian account. As Williams notes, "whether or not Hegel successfully replies to Kant, he introduces the intersubjective structure of conscience as a form of recognition… conscience is the intersubjective completion of morality in reciprocal recognition" (Williams, *Recognition*, 207). Of course, Hegel's location of the "universality" of moral conviction squarely in the domain of intersubjectivity puts his account decisively beyond any recovery of abstract moral principles. As Bernstein notes, in Hegel's account of conscience "the generality of mutual recognition of one another as conscientious individuals displaces the universality of principle, choice, and acts" (Bernstein, "Conscience and Transgression," 64).

[71] Bernstein, "Conscience and Transgression," 63.

The conscientious agent's acknowledgment of her dependence on the recognition of others is rooted, therefore, in the fact that conscience is itself, implicitly, a kind of appeal for recognition. As the immediate existence of *conviction*, conscience is never just a determinate action; that is to say, conscience is not reducible to the immediacy of its enactment, but is always a summons to recognize a particular self-knowing, one in which the objective determination produced by the conscience who acts "directly" possesses the significance of the "spiritual element" that traverses between *subjects*—namely, recognition:

> The *existent reality* of conscience… is one which is a *self*, an existence which is conscious of itself, the spiritual element of being recognized and acknowledged. The action is thus only the translation of its *individual* content into the *objective* element, in which it is universal and recognized, and it is just the fact that it is recognized that makes the deed a reality. The deed is recognized and thereby made real because the existent reality is directly linked with conviction or knowledge; or, on other words, knowing one's purpose is directly the element of existence, is universal recognition. For the essence of the action, duty, consists in conscience's *conviction* about it; it is just this conviction that is the *in-itself*; it is the *implicitly universal* self-*consciousness*, or the state of being recognized, and hence a reality. (470, M640)

Conviction is implicitly "universal self-consciousness." The singularity of conviction in conscientious action is shared by all agents, and hence is that which is acknowledged as essential in dutiful action. The fact that there are conflicting interpretations about action—the fact, in other words, that the particularity of action presents itself as the sign of a potentially recognizable conviction—confirms the universality of conviction as that *about which* interpretations of action conflict. Conviction is immediate self-certainty in action; however, the meaning of conviction, as essentially a matter of communication, is *not* immediate (be it the implicit appeal for recognition in conscientious action or an explicit appeal made in the form of words).[72] Indeed, communication is the only reality that conviction can have. The process of recognition whereby, as Hegel indicates, conviction is made into a reality does not return absolute significance to the immediacy of conscientious action itself; rather, in this process action reveals itself to have the significance of recognition (of a self), of communication. Action, therefore—the conscientious action that I take to speak immediately, absolutely, and independently for who I am—shows itself to be ontologically dependent on others, to have its significance in being acknowledged by others, and to have its substance in communication.[73]

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[72] "When I act, my action expresses my own conviction in the milieu of self-consciousness. This action has meaning only in this milieu; its being is a spiritual being, its truth depends on recognition by others. To know what my action is worth, its signification, we must wait for it to be transferred from particular consciousness to the *milieu of universal consciousness*" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 507).

[73] To the extent, as Hannah Arendt well expresses, that the significance of "who" I am is more immediately available to those others to whom my action is self-expressive (a fact that, for Arendt as for Hegel, makes necessary

3.3. Conscience as forgiveness

Hegel's account of conscience reveals a uniquely "expressive" dimension of human action with respect to its agent, one that transcends the significance of action as the instantiation of a moral principle. "That actions have a distinct expressive content," writes Bernstein, "explains why acting conscientiously can be regarded as admirable even when we disagree about the worth of the act itself."[74] The significance of conscientious action is not reducible to the particular deed performed, but rather resides ultimately in the self-relation of conviction that this deed expresses, which, as expressive, is simultaneously an immediate self-assurance and an appeal for recognition.

As Hegel points out, however, the appeal for recognition implicit in conscientious action will not be adequately answered if what is recognized is only the self-knowing conviction as *distinct* from its particular enactment. "Duty itself," he writes, "is the form which lacks all content but is capable of any," and so to recognize only the *formal* conscientiousness of my conviction is to overlook the necessity of the specific action through which I realize it (488, M665). This purely formal recognition of conviction, hence, remains limited to what Wood calls an "ethics of conviction," a mutual affirmation of the sincerity of one another's conscientious conviction irrespective of the actual content of one another's actions.[75] In such a situation, "the validity of the act is acknowledged by others," says Hegel, "on account of [the] utterance in which the self is expressed and acknowledged as essential being." However, here "the spirit and substance of [this] association are thus the mutual assurance of their conscientiousness, good intentions, the rejoicing over this mutual purity"—that is, affirmations of the purity of conviction that fail to appreciate the necessary impurity of action just as the "moral view of the world" did (481, M656). Although it registers the communicative significance of conscientious action to an extent (one's conviction must be "uttered"), this form of mutual assurance is nevertheless limited and, therefore, unsatisfactory. If the particular content of my conviction—that is, my *particular* self-enactment—is inessential, then it would be difficult for me to understand this assurance as a recognition of *me*, uniquely, and thus difficult to receive confirmation in the sense of integrity or

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the acts of confession and forgiveness whereby one acknowledges the constitutive influence of others' views on one's own self-understanding). She writes: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world… This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is… is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful [*sic*] purpose… On the contrary, it is more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179).

[74] Bernstein, "Conscience and Transgression," 64.

[75] See Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, 185-187.

self-worth I invest in my action.[76] Insofar as the sincerity of my conviction is acknowledged apart from my particular action, an essential aspect of my "whole" self is left un-recognized.

What the appeal for recognition in conscientious action requires, therefore, is a response that acknowledges both the form *and* content of conviction as essential—a response, that is, that recognizes in the act not simply the universality of moral self-assurance (conviction), but also the immediate particularity that makes each agent the singular individual that she is. On Hegel's account, this response is possible only through an appreciation of the communicative nature of conscientious action that overcomes the limits of the "ethics of conviction" just described. Whereas the members of this "mutual assurance" do acknowledge the need to communicate their convictions, this acknowledgment is not necessarily an *affirmation* of the essential significance of communication for conscientious action, insofar as this essentiality can still be denied. That is, even if I recognize that my action possesses the significance that it does only in being worked out in dialogue with others, I can nevertheless attempt to salvage my independence from this dialogue—that is, the authority of *my* standpoint with respect to my action—by discrediting the interpretive contribution of others. As Hegel says, the acknowledgment that action must be spoken about can simply provide further territory on which to assert the immediate self-sufficiency of one's own interpretation of one's action. In such cases, he writes, "the knowledge that knows itself is, *qua this* particular self, distinct from other selves," and "the language in which all reciprocally acknowledge each other as acting conscientiously, the universal identity, falls apart into the non-identity of individual being-for-self" (484, M659).

In describing this version of self-assertion, Hegel presents a conflict between two opposing attitudes toward the relation between action and communication. The concern in this conflict is no longer the recovery of the meaning of particular actions; rather, this conflict is explicitly a conflict *of interpretations*, that is, an attempt to work out the terms of interpretive authority for action in general.[77] The participants of this conflict are the "conscience that acts" and the representative of the "universal consciousness" referred to above in the initial discussion of action as "being-for-another." The problem here is not simply that action is inevitably "set in

[76] Ibid., 185. Consider here that "matters of conscience" are often afforded legal protection regardless of the particular content of the conviction in question.

[77] In fact, as Hegel explains, the "disparity" afflicting conscientious action was never ultimately the result of a determinate action "betraying" my subjective intention, but rather was a function of that action's appearance in a public world populated by diverse subjects who interpret my action in ways that I cannot control. As Hegel writes, "while… the antithesis, into which conscience enters when it *acts*, expresses itself in its inner being, the antithesis is at the same time a disparity on its outer side in the element of existence, the disparity of its particular individuality in relation to another individual" (485, M660). The interpretive disparity of action is a result, ultimately, of the essentially intersubjective context in which action happens, and disputes about the meaning of action—in speech—are always implicitly *about* speech as the medium through which we make action meaningful.

the medium of being," but, as we have seen, that action is essentially being-*for-another*; what was initially a discrepancy between the objective appearance and the subjective intention of an action, therefore, is now recognized to be a discrepancy *between subjects* within the dialogical context in which the meaning of action is ultimately determined. Each asserts—self-contradictorily, as we will see—its own interpretive authority over the meaning of action, thus acknowledging, on the one hand, that action is a matter of *meaning*—that is, communication—while disavowing, on the other hand, the significance of those other perspectives—other individuals—with whom the meaning of action is established. More specifically, each individual commits to one side of the essential interrelation of action and communication. On one side there is the self-assured conscientious actor, who treats "the certainty of itself [as] the essential being in the face of the in-itself or the universal," committing herself entirely to the inevitable specificity of her action, and disavowing her answerability to those others who witness her action and contribute to its significance (485, M660). On the other side there is the one who observes this action—what Hegel calls the "judging consciousness"—for whom "the essential being is rather universality, duty," and who points out that all action is by definition a transgression of this universal standard (485, M660).

Hegel's account of the resolution—or rather, proper appreciation—of this conflict focuses on the self-contradictory nature of the judge's accusation of the actor's transgression of the universality of duty. This accusation, we should note, is not simply that whereas duty represents a universal standard the actor's act is particular: both recognize that conviction is the essential factor in conscience, and hence that the specificity of action is but an occasion to communicate about the self-assurance of conviction—that is, intention—behind the action.[78] Rather, the judge's accusation is a wholesale condemnation of action *as such*, on the view that, although the agent may appeal to her sense of conviction, there is no guarantee that it is not a self-interested motive that lurks behind this appeal to duty. What the judge (rightly) notices here is that, insofar as interpretation is essential to the meaning of action, any action can be

[78] For this reason, Hegel explains, the resolution of this conflict does not come about simply by the actor's admission of her wrong-doing, since in such an admission demonstrates simply a respect for law and thus not an actual instance of conscientious conviction. Conscientious action is not action that opposes itself to universal standards, but rather action that, by virtue of its urgency, demands that these standards become matter of explicit dialogue. As Hegel writes, "when anyone says that he is acting according to his *own* law and conscience against others, he is saying, in fact, that he is wronging them. But *actual* conscience is not this persistence in a knowing and willing that opposes itself to the universal; on the contrary, the universal is the element of its existence, and its language declares its action to be an *acknowledged* duty" (486, M662).

interpreted either as dutiful and good or as selfish and evil,[79] in which case respect for duty is best preserved where one does not act (that is, does not enter the domain of interpretive plurality). Telling here is the fact that the judge does not accuse the actor of immoral action but rather of *hypocrisy*.[80] Both know, that is, that the significance of action resides in *words*; however, in detecting the discrepancy between her particular action and her claim to conviction, the judge treats the actor's uttered expression of conviction as "only a matter of words," that is, a hypocritical appeal to universal standards that conceals the particularity of self-interest (484, M659).

This judgment, Hegel claims, is itself hypocritical. The judge accuses the actor of an abuse of language—that is, of using their shared communicative medium to support her own enacted specificity, and thus of putting the universal in service of the particular. However, the judge's own self-assurance in representing the universal is premised on his recognition of the inevitability of interpretive specificity, a recognition he disavows in choosing to interpret the actor's action solely as evil. Moreover, the judge also disavows the interpretive specificity of *his own* judgment of the actor, and thus fails to acknowledge that *he too acts*. The crucial passage, which outlines "the way to a resolution of the antithesis," is the following:

> The [judging] consciousness of the *universal*, in its relation to the first [acting] consciousness, does not behave as one that is *actual* and *acts*… but in its antithesis to [action], is a consciousness that is not entangled in the antithesis of individuality and universality, which occurs when action is entered upon. It remains in the universality of *thought*, behaves as a consciousness that *apprehends*, and its first action is merely one of judgment. Now, through this judgment, it places itself… *alongside* the first consciousness, and the latter, *through this likeness*, comes to see its own self in this other consciousness. For the consciousness of duty maintains an attitude of *passive* apprehension; but it is thereby in contradiction with itself as the absolute will of duty, as a consciousness whose determining comes solely from itself. It does well to preserve itself in its purity, for it *does not act*; it is the hypocrisy what wants its judgment to be taken for an *actual* deed, and instead of proving its rectitude by actions, does so by uttering fine sentiments. Its nature, then, is altogether the same as that which is reproached with making duty a mere matter of words. In both alike, the side of reality is distinct from the words uttered: in the one, through the selfish purpose of the action, in the other, through the failure to act at all,

[79] See M665: "Just as every action is capable of being looked at from the point of view of conformity to duty, so too can it be considered from the point of view of the particularity; for *qua* action, it is the actuality of the individual. This judging of the action thus takes it out of its outer existence and reflects it into its inner aspect, or into the form of its own particularity." Hence, the judge "explains [the action] as resulting from an *intention* different from the action itself, and for selfish *motives*." As Hegel continues, "no action can escape such a judgment, for duty for duty's sake, this pure purpose, is an unreality; it becomes a reality in the deed of an individuality, and the action is thereby charged with the aspect of particularity."

[80] See M661. The accusation of hypocrisy confirms the expressive and interpretive significance of action, since the dispute here concerns not the moral status of the act itself but rather what this act, which may or may not in itself be moral, *says* about the agent or intention behind it. See the remarks of Hegel quoted in the previous footnote.

> although the necessity to act is involved in the very talk of duty, for duty without deeds is utterly meaningless. (487-488, M664)

As mentioned, the judge's accusation—an *act* of judgment—provides the basis for a new process of recognition between these individuals, as it is through this act that the actor perceives the "likeness" between her and the judge and is thus moved to "confess" her particularity on the expectation that the judge will acknowledge and confess his. Before turning to this moment of confession, though, I want to highlight a specific detail of the inconsistency of the judge's stance. Notice that the hypocrisy of the judge is not simply his unwillingness to act on the standard of duty for which he claims to speak (wanting, as Hegel says, his judgmental words to count as actions). Beneath this specifically moral inconsistency, rather, lies the broader ontological inconsistency of the judge's failure to notice that he is already acting—that is, taking a singular interpretive stance—in offering his judgment of the actor.[81] Whereas this judge would like his inaction to be regarded as morally worthy, he fails to appreciate that such a stance of inaction is ultimately impossible, since, as the interpretive significance of his judgment confirms, the partiality of human action is unavoidable. In this way, the judge occupies the very "attitude of passive apprehension" whose non-self-sufficiency we have been exploring in this chapter: although his appeal to the standard of universality captures an essential dimension of action,[82] his affirmation remains one-sided so long as he refuses to acknowledge that the "determining" of duty "comes solely from [himself]."

Hence, it is her perception of the universality of particularity—that both she and the judge act in partial ways—that prompts the actor to confess her partiality to the judge in expectation that the judge will reciprocate. What this confession expresses—accelerating, somewhat, the drama of Hegel's account[83]—is the actor's acknowledgment that the discursive

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[81] See M666, where Hegel explains that the judge's standpoint is just as particular—that is, "base" [*niederträchtig*]—as the actor, insofar as the judge "produces and holds fast" to the disparity of the actor's action, fixing it to its particular significance as transgressive. Moreover, the judge is thereby just as hypocritical as the actor, since he here attempts to pass off his particular interpretation of the actor's deed as "the correct consciousness of the action."

[82] The "positive content" of the judge's standpoint, Hegel notes in M665, is its demonstration that the immediate particularity of an action is never the final word on its significance, since, as the reality of words reveals, the significance of action is never final.

[83] Initially, in Hegel's account, the gesture of confession is rejected by the judge, who claims that the "likeness" perceived by the actor in witnessing the judge's act of judgment is not what the judge "meant," and denies the mutuality of finitude between them. This denial of spirit, as Hegel identifies it, undermines its own efficacy, as the judge "does not recognize the contradiction it falls into in not letting the rejection which has taken place in *words*, be validated as a genuine rejection" (491, M667). In other words, in his rejection the judge makes use of the very medium—language—whose significance he attempts to downplay in asserting his interpretive authority against the actor. The judge's eventual acceptance of the actor's confession, in the act of forgiveness, is his act of self-renunciation wherein he acknowledges that the significance of action, and of both individuals as self-expressive agents, depends on the sharing of meaning in which both take part.

medium she shares with the judge is not a barrier to their particularities as individuals, but indeed the only context for their realization. "Having seen [her] identity with the other," the actor "gives expression to their common identity in [her] confession, and gives utterance to it for the reason that language is the *existence* of spirit as an immediate self" (490, M666). Likewise forgiveness, the reciprocating response to confession, is the expressed affirmation that both participants in this conflict, as well as the distinct "sides" that they represent (the partiality of action and the universality of communication), are each essential "moments" of the broader, shared reality of human meaning. What confession and forgiveness acknowledge, Hegel writes, is that

> the *self* that carries out the action, the form of its act, is only a *moment* of the whole, and so likewise is the knowledge, that by its judgment determines and establishes the distinction between the individual and universal aspects of the action… Just as the former has to surrender its one-sided, unacknowledged existence of its particular being-for-self, so too must this other set aside its one-sided, unacknowledged judgment. (492, M669)

In other words, neither one of these stances is on its own "absolute." That is, "the absolute" resides neither in action's specificity nor its universality alone, but rather in the affirmation that action is irreducibly *both* specific *and* universal—that is, both objectively determinate and expressive of the indeterminacy of a subject. The standpoint of forgiveness, on Hegel's understanding, is the affirmation of the *universality of particularity*, of the fact that the "conflict of interpretations" that human action inevitably generates is definitive of the "spirit" in which human experience is contextualized. Forgiveness, for Hegel, is the form of mutual recognition that reckons most adequately to the "frailty" (to borrow Arendt's term)[84] of the interpretive nature of human action, precisely by not trying to erase or resolve it. It is the communicative—that is, shared—affirmation of particularity and determinacy as definitive of human action,[85] and as that which gives shape and meaning to any "universal" that could come to be shared among human agents.[86]

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[84] See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188-192.

[85] As we saw above in discussing conscience as the enactment of the "whole" self, the particularity and determinacy of action derive not only from the inherently transgressive nature of subjective interpretation, but also from the "natural"—that is, embodied, emotional, and unconscious—dimensions of human subjectivity that the fixation on moral purity tends to exclude. In Hegel's account of forgiveness, Williams writes, "*Geist* learns that defect, error, sin, contradiction are constitutive of experience. The rational self cannot be expressed without irrationality, the pure self cannot be expressed without impurity. Self recognition in other can only be realized through a continual conflict and constant overcoming of failures" (Williams, *Recognition*, 211). Similarly, as Oliver argues, the confession of the acting consciousness can be read as an assertion that both she and the judge "are individuals with particular desires, specifically that they both have bodies with needs and wants that cannot be ignored or excluded from moral reasoning" (Oliver, "Forgiveness and Community," 3).

[86] As De Nys explains, the community established among those who forgive "is a 'universal' ground in which finite individuals attempt to participate because it interrelates particular individuals, which is what a universal in any sense of the word does" (De Nys, *Hegel and Theology*, 41).

To forgive, therefore, is to express one's acknowledgment of the inevitability of transgression, to recognize that the partiality of another person's action is the result of the unavoidable discrepancy between her singularity in acting—in enacting the good—and the universality of the shared standards of meaning into which she, in acting, inserts herself. To forgive is to acknowledge that this partiality is not ultimately opposed to the universal it means to enact, but that such partial action is the only possible realization that the universal (the good, duty) can be given. Yet the significance of the acknowledgment of forgiveness extends beyond the moral dilemma with respect to which Hegel introduces it. As a form of expression, forgiveness is the assertion that the other agent's singular action is *meaningful*, that it has a place within the shared habits of communication that define who "we" are (and that it is, as singular, potentially transformative of established patterns of shared meaning[87]). What I express when I forgive, for Hegel, is my recognition that the other, in her singularity, is not cut off from the possibility of sharing meaning with others.[88]

Moreover, as a form of expression, forgiveness does not arise from beyond the domain of human action, but rather is a species of action itself. In this way, forgiveness achieves a coincidence of form and content at the level of mutual recognition: it is the *expression* of one's acknowledgement that the other, in her partial and transgressive action, is nonetheless capable of expression, an enactment of the very sharing of meaning (communication) to which I, in forgiving, recognize the other as belonging. Forgiveness is thus an expression of the very possibility of expression itself, an expression that the terms of communication shared by the

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[87] Properly to recognize the nature of subjectivity, therefore, is to recognize the potential transgression and transformation of such established systems of meaning. In this vein, Bernstein highlights "the negativity of self-consciousness in relation to all contents that is revealed through the discovery that conscientious action cannot have its objective worth prospectively secured." As "negative," subjectivity is "always a re-creation, a reconfiguration of existing norms and practices, and hence [is] always negating those contents, and thus the community that is bound and constituted by them, in the very acts that are meant to be their realization and concretion" (Bernstein, "Confession and Forgiveness," 40-41).

[88] In this way, forgiveness is the recognition of a person's inherent humanity as an irremovable and irreplaceable participant in human communication. Williams argues that forgiveness "presupposes that [a] person has intrinsic worth," and connects the discussion of forgiveness to Hegel's remarks about love as the valuing of a person's "infinite worth" (Williams, *Recognition*, 210). Citing the inherently transgressive nature of human subjectivity, Oliver notes that "forgiveness and confession are necessary for the constitution of the subject as an individual connected to the community," in which case forgiveness is coextensive with humanness, insofar as the absence of forgiveness "undermines humanity, subjectivity, and agency" (Oliver, "Forgiveness and Community," 2). Arguing along similar lines, Catharine Malabou highlights the supra-moral significance of the request for forgiveness, which resides in its reconciliation of an individual to the community of shared meaning rather than in the redemption of particular acts. "A confession has worth," she writes, "not so much in virtue of its content—the facts that are recounted or owned up to—as in its political task, which is to let the individual accede to its own idiom, and by this to reintroduce her into the political community that had become alien to her." Catharine Malabou, "Is Confession the Accomplishment of Recognition?" Rousseau and the Unthought of Religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, eds. Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 24.

other and me are able to accommodate each of our particularities. A kind of meta-expression, forgiveness affirms that the communicative terms shared by us are able to answer to the singular and transgressive action they make possible, and that, as self-restorative in this way, these terms possess "absolute" significance. Forgiveness thus enables, as Hegel says, "a reciprocal recognition which is absolute spirit" (493, M670).

In Section 2 above, we examined Hegel's argument that self-experience is an inherently shared experience; self-consciousness is "universal," in Hegel's sense, insofar as it is achieved and enacted in communication—"in common"—with other self-consciousnesses. Yet the self "achieved" in this process of communication is, as I argued in Section 1, a singular and interpretive perspective on the world, which, in seeking the confirmation of other perspectives, generates a universality of irreducible particularity. While there are various ways for the particular selves of a community to enact that which is shared among them, the interdependence of universality and particularity on which they and their community are based—the fact, that is, that in their absolute independence interpretive agents are absolutely dependent on other's recognition—grants privilege to a certain type of communication, one whose function, as I argued in the third section, is to offer explicit acknowledgment of this interdependence as constitutive of the sharing of meaning among unique selves. Forgiveness, as the enactment of "conscientious mutual recognition," is for Hegel the form of communication that speaks "absolutely" for the nature of shared meaning, attesting both the inevitability of transgression (insofar as one's singular perspective is never immediately reconciled with existing universals) as well as to is universality (insofar as this "non-immediacy" is the case on all sides), and, hence, for the ultimate redeemability of transgression as constitutive of human agency.

CHAPTER TWO: THE APPEARANCE OF THE ABSOLUTE AND RITUAL COMMUNITY: HEGEL'S PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

In the previous chapter we considered Hegel's location of the practice of forgiveness on the horizon of human experience. We saw that our experience is irreducibly a matter of being meaningfully involved in the world, and that the basic form of our experience is one of a perceptual "take" on things. We saw further that there is no perception of what is meaningful that is not in some way related to our sharing meaning with others, and that the domain of human experience, therefore, is equivalent to the domain of meaningful communication. Forgiveness marks the horizon of this domain as the action through which we explicitly *affirm* that human experience is ultimately the sharing of meaning among irreducibly singular perspectives. In this way, while forgiveness is typically understood in moral terms as the pardoning of transgressive actions, Hegel understands forgiveness according to its broader socio-linguistic function as the affirmation of the essential significance of singular agency for the ongoing project of human meaning. In forgiving, we acknowledge that our practices and institutions of shared meaning work to support precisely that which could never be wholly shared—namely, the singularity of conscientious agency.

My aim in this chapter is to explore religion as similarly on the horizon of experience, not *in addition* to forgiveness, but as a kind of parallel dimension of the communicative situation of forgiveness. If forgiveness affirms the essential significance of interpretation in human experience, religion, I intend to show here, can be understood as an individual's most basic interpretive *community*, the fundamental context of shared meaning that shapes *her* identity and capacities as a particular interpretive agent. This approach to forgiveness and religion as parallel phenomena is supported by the way in which the practice of forgiveness and religion centre on a related tension between determinate action and absolute norm. Forgiveness, on Hegel's view, is the acknowledgment that human action—our self-expression as singular agents—is always partial and one-sided, that there is no final point of resolution whereby our particularity as agents is reconciled to the universal structures of shared meaning. As expressive of our *singularity*, our action inevitably transcends and undermines—that is, transgresses—the norms of shared meaning that provide the context for our agency. To forgive is not to overlook or excuse this transgression, but to recognize its necessity, both as the self-expression of an individual and as a contribution to the sharing of meaning that makes individuality possible. Forgiveness thus

occupies an irresolvable tension between "particular" and "absolute," as the affirmation of the absolute nature of the particularity of human action.

This tension is repeated at a second, level, though, since the expression of forgiveness, as the "absolute affirmation" of particularity, is *itself* a particular act. The "absolute" affirmed in the act of forgiving is always articulated in the terms of a specific idiom, producing a kind of second-order tension between absolute value and determinate practice, of which religious language is the principal instantiation. In a word, if Hegel presents forgiveness as the stance that acknowledges *in principle* the necessarily particular realization of the absolute standard, religion is the concrete practice through which particular communities speak "idiomatically"—that is, partially and specifically—for their sense of "absolute reality."

Whereas the next chapter addresses this parallel tension in terms of forgiveness and religion together, this chapter focuses solely on the communicative significance of religion as a kind of "absolute idiom." Religion, on Hegel's account, is the fundamental "We;" it is the "absolute" dimension of "spirit" through which a community comes to terms with its own limits and conditions. Hegel expresses this self-expressive dimension of religion by identifying religion as "the self-consciousness of spirit," the activity through which a community takes its own basic essence—"absolute spirit"—and an object in declaring most fundamentally "this is who we are." Religion, accordingly, has two basic functions: it is on the one hand the collective affirmation of an "absolute reality" *beyond* the human collective, and, on the other hand, what Hegel calls "the utterance of the community concerning *its own* spirit" (482, M656). Focusing especially on this second function, I explore the unique communicative phenomenon—the unique "utterance"—that religion is on Hegel's account. Although religion typically takes the explicit form of an expression of what we as a collective take to have absolute value, in religion we *implicitly* affirm as absolute or unconditional our own most basic essence as a community. More precisely, in religion we affirm *that aspect of who we are* as a community that is unconditional for us, that aspect of the sharing of meaning with others that we could never disavow. Characterizing religion as a form of ritual communication, I argue that religious discourse, in enacting and affirming who *we* are as a particular community, affirms also the absolute conditions of communicability as such (that is, communicability not only within "our" community but among diverse communities). Religions are the always finite and specific—that is, idiomatic, or, in

Hegel's terms, "ethical"—ways in which a community expresses the "elementary act of faith,"[1] as Derrida calls it, that all other acts of communication presuppose and depend on.

1. Phenomenology of religion and the question of religious experience

"Religion," for Hegel, names a real and distinct dimension of human experience, and thus constitutes a legitimate—and, moreover, unavoidable—object for phenomenological description. This view reflects Hegel's commitment to allow experience to set the terms for his inquiry, that is, to describe experience according to how it presents itself in our lived engagement with the world, rather than according to theories constructed about experience by observing it from the "outside." But phenomenology of religion should also avoid accepting immediately whatever claim to "religious experience" comes its way and setting out simply to describe "what it is like." Although there is some truth to the characterization of phenomenology as offering answers to the "What is it *like*…?" question, this approach too often bases itself on an already established sense of what counts as religion, thereby compromising from the beginning the phenomenological mandate not to begin with external theories or presuppositions. Rather than interrogate human experience on the basis of religious premises, asking experience to affirm one's sense of what religion is, our aim as phenomenologists must be to interrogate the category of religion on the basis of the nature of experience. We must ask whether, in view of the nature and character of our lived engagement with the world, there is a particular dimension of experience that demands (and thus justifies) an appeal to the kind of explanatory work done by the category of "religion." Thus, instead of asking, "What is it like to have a religious experience?" we should instead ask, as Hegel implicitly does, "What is it about human experience that makes a study of religion—whatever its nature—necessary?"

Given this characterization, phenomenology of religion must be careful to avoid two basic temptations. The first is the temptation to accept uncritically the *religious* description of religious phenomena—that is, what a religious point of view (that of the believer or practitioner, for example) might say in offering a self-interpretation. Although authoritative in an ethnographic sense, such self-interpretations function like theories, imposing their own pre-established terms onto the self-presentation of the data of experience. To be sure, such testimonial accounts ought not to be discounted; still, they are more appropriately studied as

[1] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80.

dimensions of the *living* of religion described by phenomenology, rather than as efforts in phenomenological description themselves.

For this reason, phenomenology of religion ought actually to avoid the approach of the "classical" phenomenologists—most notably Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Gerardus van der Leeuw—with which the label "phenomenology of religion" is most commonly associated in the study of religion. The primary motivation of these thinkers was to assert the autonomy of religious experience against the attempt to reduce religious phenomena to other (e.g., psychological or sociological) factors. For these thinkers, to understand religion is to avoid the attempt to explain—that is, explain *away*—religious phenomena, and is instead to attend to the way in which religion is actually lived and practiced. However, this early phenomenology of religion," which, as Jeffrey L. Kosky writes, "assumes the position of the believer so as to describe the meaning of the religious acts in which he participates and the religious experience that he undergoes,"[2] attracted the criticism that it primarily served the self-interpretations of certain religious communities. Being "unable to justify its naïve acceptance of the believer's own account of religious phenomena,"[3] therefore, this movement failed to be methodologically self-critical; that is, it could not *phenomenologically* justify its granting interpretive priority to the believer's own account of her acts and experiences over and above the appearance of religious phenomena within a descriptive account of experience *as such*. To describe religion as it is lived and practiced, therefore, is not to accept naïvely a religious self-interpretation, but rather is to be methodologically self-conscious in one's description of religious experience, continually subjecting one's use of the category "religion" to criticism based on what experience itself reveals.[4]

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[2] Kosky, "Translator's Preface," to Janicaud, et al. *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak, Jeffrey L. Kosky, and Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 111.

[3] Ibid., 111-112.

[4] I take Hegel's to be an example of a *critical* phenomenology of religion, one whose aim is not to make the "data" fit into a pre-established definition of religion, but rather to allow the data of experience to determine, ongoingly, whether and how the category "religion" serves as a meaningful description of some dimension of human experience. Much of the controversy surrounding phenomenology within the study of religion points to its apparently "*sui generis*" interpretation of religion as inattentive both to the history of the category "religion" itself and to the wide—indeed, irreducible—variety of human practices and experiences that have been made to fit within this category. Without discounting these concerns, Hegel's phenomenology offers an example of the valuable contribution that phenomenology can make to the critical study of religion. First, phenomenology approaches religion (indeed, any object) "non-reductively"—describing it on its own terms, rather than "reducing" it to the terms of something else—not in order to insulate religious phenomena from criticism, but rather in order to ensure that we have a hold on what religion *is*—that is, what kinds of things are "religious"—before we go on to make critical claims about it. Nor, second, does phenomenology ignore the historicity of religion in favour of some a-historical, "universal" idea of religion. Whereas some have argued that the social, historical, and linguistic diversity

On the other side of things, the risk of confusion between the phenomenological description of religious data and the religious interpretation of religious data can lead to an *overly* critical approach to the question of religious experience. What if all phenomenological engagements with religion are simply the self-assertion of the position of a certain "believer"? Such a question raises doubts as to whether it is even legitimate to single out a certain class of appearances as uniquely "religious," or whether this designation is simply the result of the "way of seeing" particular to certain invested parties. Although there is certainly no shortage of claims by individuals and communities to having had "religious experience," such testimony does not on its own confirm that there is a uniquely "religious" phenomenon that appears in human experience pervasively and recognizably enough to warrant philosophical attention. Such skepticism, moreover, affects both parts of the term "religious experience." Regarding the designation "religion," some have argued that subsumption of the vast diversity of so-called "religious" practices under a single term can only be a reflection of the interpretive preferences of the observer. As Jonathan Z. Smith writes, for example, religion "is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as 'language' plays in linguistics or 'culture' plays in anthropology."[5] For others, it is the category of "experience" that raises suspicion. For Webb Keane, any approach to religion that "begins with subjective experience encounters certain difficulties," primarily "because the observer can only have access to other people's experiences and beliefs through objective manifestations," in which our only recourse is the fact that "the peculiarity of certain speech situations can support religious interpretation."[6]

In view of these uncertainties, the phenomenological description of religion is faced with the task of justifying its object as much as defining it: we want to know *what* religion is because we want to know *that* it is. Is there such a thing as a definitively "religious" form of experience?

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of what appears as "religion" requires the phenomenological description of religion "in the universal" to give way to the hermeneutical interpretation of religion, Hegel's phenomenology of religion shows that the variety of practices and social forms that constitute the history of religion *is intrinsic to the phenomenon of religion that must be described*. Indeed, for Hegel, this hermeneutical dimension is at the forefront of the religious phenomenon, insofar as what appears as "religion" is always relative to the self-interpretation of a particular historical community.

[5] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 194.

[6] Webb Keane, "Religious Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 27 (1997): 47-8. As I hope to show below, however, Hegel accepts something of both Smith and Keane's functional reservations, without being wholly skeptical of the category "religion." Religion will indeed contribute to the definition of a horizon (just not a disciplinary one) and will show itself to have essentially practical and linguistic dimensions (a discovery that in fact renders questionable any account of experience, such as Keane's, as solely "subjective").

Is there a class of phenomena to which the label "religion" uniquely applies? Posing the question in Hegel's direction, if the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to be considered a phenomenology—that is, a description of experience—from beginning to end, what specific form of experience is under description in the book's seventh chapter, titled "Religion"? What justifies the inclusion of this topic within a phenomenological study? Is Chapter VII a continuation of Hegel's phenomenological project, or does it mark a—perhaps unwarranted—methodological shift? In talking about religion, are we in fact still talking about experience?[7]

2. Religion, language, and hermeneutics

2.1. Religion in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: The appearance of "the absolute"

As Hegel explains in his introduction, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a study of the various forms of human experience as forms of *knowledge*, as forms of the apprehension of a particular phenomenal "object." The study as a whole develops according to the way in which this object—what there is, "in itself"—challenges or eludes the truths proposed through this apprehension as it "tests" itself as *knowledge*, that is, as an adequate grasp of the nature of reality. Over the course of this "dialogue" (Hegel's word is *dialectic*) between knowledge (or "subject") and object, Hegel writes, "it comes to pass for consciousness that what it previously took to be the *in-itself* is not an *in-itself*, or that it was only an in-itself *for consciousness*." He continues:

> Since consciousness thus finds that its knowledge does not correspond to its object, the object itself does not stand the test; in other words, the criterion for testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test; and the testing is not only a testing of what [object] we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is. (78, M85)

[7] I should emphasize that the skepticism about the legitimacy of religious experience that I invoke here is a specifically *phenomenological* one. That is, I am not claiming that the various uses of the term "religious experience" by individuals and communities are meaningless or self-deceived; in an important sense, it is quite obvious that there *are* religious experiences, insofar as what is identified with the term is something lived, felt, or encountered. As Wayne Proudfoot argues, "religion has always been an experiential matter. It is not just a set of creedal statements or a collection of rites. A religious life is one in which beliefs and practices cohere in a pattern that expresses a character or way of life that seems more deeply entrenched in the life of that person or community than any of the beliefs or practices." Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xi. Regardless of whether or not we adopt this particular definition of "a religious life," it remains incontestable that there are religious experiences, insofar as what is identified as religion by those who practice it is "an experiential matter." The phenomenological question of religious experience, however, targets the legitimacy of this act of identification: regardless of how the term is used by religious practitioners, does "religion" name a constitutive dimension of experience, according to how experience reveals itself to philosophical consideration? And are we certain that our insistence on the reality and specificity of religion as a concept does not come at the cost of overstepping the boundaries of what can legitimately be considered "experience"—that is, by departing from the territory of phenomenology and entering that of theology?

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as we saw in the previous chapter, thus presents a self-critical description of experience, in which experience is judged according to the implicit claims to know (that is, to "take" an object) that it yields. It is a description of what appears, in the mode of an ongoing assessment of that description, insofar as "what appears" does so in the terms of a particular interpretive vantage point from which that appearance is inevitably "taken" as a particular kind of object. As we saw, the synthetic activity at work in our immediate experience entails that our experience is immediately interpretive; to perceive is to "take as *true*," to engage with the world in the mode of making (implicit) claims about what it is and what is there for us. We are fundamentally *not indifferent* to the world of our experience; we are situated "in" the world as *agents* for whom objects are already and irreducibly meaningful. Hegel's project is thus the self-critical description of experience as interpretation, as the active taking-to-be-true of an object that gives itself in experience.

For most of Hegel's book, this self-critical description is carried out within the terms of the dialectic just described. As his aim is to offer an account of *experience*, Hegel attends to the various possibilities for mutual "testing" that emerge within the context of the correlation of subject and object that experience in fact is.[8] Understanding the phenomenology of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology* requires that we notice the ways in which Hegel's turn to religion is both continuous and discontinuous with this overall project. Hegel introduces his phenomenology of religion in this way:

> In the structured forms hitherto considered which are distinguished in general as consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit, religion, too, as consciousness of *absolute essence* [*Wesen*] as such, has indeed made its appearance, although only from the *standpoint of the consciousness* that is conscious of absolute essence; but absolute essence in and for itself, the self-consciousness of spirit, has not appeared in those 'shapes.' (495, M672)

At this point in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel says, we both have and have not witnessed the appearance of religion. We have seen religion in the form of the "consciousness of absolute essence," he says, but there is something—indeed, something *essential*, making necessary a further step in his phenomenological study—of the phenomenon of religion that has not yet properly appeared, but which he will now address—namely, "absolute essence in and for itself,

[8] "*Inasmuch as the new true object issues from it*," Hegel writes, continuing from the passage at M85 cited above, "this *dialectical* movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object, is precisely what is called *experience*" (78, M86).

the self-consciousness of spirit." What is this new, unexplored dimension of the phenomenon of religion, and how is it related to the side of religion that we have already seen?

Let us first consider religion as it has already appeared in Hegel's study, as "the consciousness of absolute essence." Although Hegel has not yet addressed the phenomenon of religion directly, certain forms of experience studied prior to this point have been the site of the appearance of a uniquely "religious" phenomenon, he explains, to the extent that from the "standpoint of consciousness" (that is, the taking of an object by a subject) there has appeared an "absolute" object, one that exceeds the dimensions of the subjectivity or knowing that corresponds to it. As examples of this phenomenon Hegel refers to the "supersensible," which was the absolute object for consciousness in the form of understanding, as well as the unchangeable "beyond," with which the unhappy consciousness was unable to unify itself in its efforts to achieve self-consciousness.[9] Insofar as the consciousness of an absolute object does indeed constitute a definitive aspect of the religious phenomenon, the distinctive project of Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology* is simply to confront directly this form of experience in its phenomenological specificity. In this way, Hegel's study of religion is continuous with the previous stages of his phenomenology in taking up a distinct kind of phenomenal object: it is the description of the form of human experience that is the exposure to an "absolute" object—a phenomenon that, by virtue of its "absolute" quality, is in fact *irreducible* to the conditions through which appearance is rendered cognizable (namely, as an object).

Already, though, a challenge emerges, since it is difficult to imagine how a phenomenological description of experience, performed as a mutually critical dialogue between subject and object, is to continue as the description of a phenomenon that *exceeds* the terms of objectivity—that is, that exceeds the very descriptive terms available to the consciousness that confronts it. At the very least, then, we can expect that the dialectical mutuality of subject and object, on which all previous stages of Hegel's phenomenology had relied (or at least which all previous stages had been able to establish), will no longer be operative in the same way here in Chapter VII, since the very defining trait of the religious "object" is its irreducibility to this dialectic. In this way, Hegel's phenomenology of religion marks a considerable (but not total) discontinuity from the study as it has been pursued up until this point. To describe the structural excess of the religious phenomenon according to its own terms—that is, to press on with the task of phenomenological description in reckoning with "absolute essence in and for itself"—will

[9] See M673 for Hegel's review of these forms of religious consciousness.

thus require that we depart from the terms of the taking of an object by a subject (that is, the standpoint of consciousness), in now reckoning with a form of appearance to which the terms of "objectivity" (the dialectical correlate of a knowing subjectivity) do not properly apply.

But then what new terms are we to adopt? Do such terms exist? Are we not, in performing a phenomenology, meant to restrict ourselves to the descriptive terms made available *within* the dialectic of subject and object that defines experience in its self-critical and self-descriptive capacities? Does not the religious phenomenon's irreducibility to the terms of objectivity (as the dialectical correlate of a knowing subjectivity) imply that its description would take us beyond all meaningful senses of experience, and thus beyond phenomenology?[10] What does it mean to claim that "the absolute in and for itself" appears?

In order to understand the answer that Hegel's text offers to these questions, we should recall another essential feature of his project—namely, that as an exercise in philosophical knowing, it is from its very beginning about "the absolute." "The absolute," however, is not a being or entity that Hegel defines in advance and then sets out to locate or derive. Rather, Hegel uses the term "absolute"[11] to represent *that which is to be known* as a result of his philosophical inquiry, without, however, attributing any specific content to this as-yet indeterminate "object" of knowledge. There is, hence, no thesis hidden behind Hegel's use of the term "absolute" to characterize the aims of philosophy; rather, in quite the opposite manner, the term is used to *prevent* our offering any preliminary qualifications of the object of knowledge, and thus to keep our inquiry wholly dictated by the way this object presents itself. Moreover, in representing the unqualified goal of philosophy, "absolute" represents also the kind of knowledge that would come about in reaching this goal. There is thus no hubris involved in locating "absolute knowing" on the horizon of a philosophical inquiry: Hegel's philosophical inquiry does not begin on the presumption of having seized the terms of "absolute knowing," but rather in response to the acknowledgment that knowledge implies its own absoluteness (that is to say, unconditionedness). Knowledge is not truly *knowledge* if it is not absolute: one may legitimately claim to know *x*, but here one's knowledge remains relative to or qualified by that *x*, in which

[10] As Hyppolite characterizes the problem, "even before absolute knowledge, religion is already the moment in which phenomenology is transformed in noumenology, in which absolute spirit reveals itself as such" (*Genesis and Structure*, 542).

[11] Cf. M73, where Hegel offers several workable substitutes for this term, such as "what truly is", "the light of truth." Hegel does not *argue* that philosophy is or must be about "the absolute"; rather, his opening polemic against categorical skepticism simply takes it for granted that the goal of philosophy is the unqualified knowledge of what is true.

case one's claim—though perhaps legitimate in its relativity—does not touch on the question of what it would mean to know *as such*, unqualifiedly, non-relatively—that is, absolutely. Hence, Hegel's guiding question: what are the proper terms for knowing "the absolute," that is, for knowing absolutely, for achieving the goal of philosophy?

Most of the answers to this question offered in Hegel's text are negative (i.e., "these are *not* the terms of absolute knowing"), since most of the forms of experience Hegel studies turn out to produce terms that are merely relative in some way, or that show themselves to be conditioned by more basic dimensions of experience for which they themselves cannot account. We learn first of all that the terms of absolute knowing will not be found (solely) among the terms of consciousness—that is, the apprehension of an object by a subject.[12] The understanding of experience as the (more or less "theoretical") stance of a subject in its distinctness from an external world shows itself to be an abstraction, one drawn from out of the more basic—and ambiguous—entanglement of subject and object that is our engagement with the world as the site of our meaningful action. The pen, for example, offers itself most immediately to me as a tool that supports my desire to write than as a discrete "object" whose properties I examine. As Hegel's critique of sense-certainty already implies, we are not disengaged spectators of an "outside" reality; we are, as Heidegger shows, fundamentally "beings-in-the-world," according to the fact that it more immediately offers itself to our existential concerns and practical agency.[13] The world of our experience is originally and immediately the site of *our* activity; consciousness, in Hegel's terms, is always already implicitly *self*-consciousness.[14]

Self-consciousness, however, shows itself also to be a kind of abstraction, an experience relative to a broader and more fundamental whole. Consider that the practical agency that my pen supports does not belong solely to me; it is of course "my" action, but as action my being-in-the-world shows itself to be defined by and dependent on broader (though largely implicit) communal achievements of which I am not the sole author (I produced neither the pen with which I write nor the words in which I express myself, for example). To bear witness to my own

[12] This is the general form of experience studied in Chapters I-III of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which comprise the section entitled "A. Consciousness."

[13] Indeed, this practical agency provides the more basic context for the act of perception that was revealed to be the "truth" of sense-certainty. Whereas Hegel shows that the basic form of "consciousness" is our engagement with "things" as perceptual wholes (with respect to which our dissection of things into distinct sensory givens is necessarily a secondary act), his account of "self-consciousness" shows that we deal with things more truly as matters of use or value. We are desiring beings more fundamentally than we are perceptual beings, according to Hegel.

[14] This is the general form of experience studied in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which coincides with the section "B. Self-Consciousness."

agency, therefore, is necessarily to bear witness also to the agency of others; in this way, the terms of self-conscious experience are not absolute, but rather are dependent on the structures of mutual recognition that give substance to any experience of "self." Our perspective on the world—or, more accurately, our being-*in*-the-world—is a matter not only of practical engagement but also, and more fundamentally, of *sharing* the world (of practical agency) with others. Self-consciousness, in Hegel's terms, is contextualized by the more basic reality of "spirit," which Hegel defines as "the *absolute* substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'" (145, M177; emphasis mine). The "I" that is conscious (of the world, of itself) is necessarily also a "We," and the terms of my perspective are the terms that "we" share in making the world together.

Hegel's study is a phenomenology of "spirit," therefore, in acknowledgment of the fact that spirit is the broad, concrete context for human experience and being-in-the-world. Spirit is, moreover, the concrete reality in which the dialectical self-description of experience—the attempt to determine from within the forms of experience which form (as "subject," knowledge) is best situated to provide an account of experience (as "object," reality)—is performed.

> Spirit is thus self-supporting, absolute, real being. All previous shapes of consciousness are abstract forms of it. They result from spirit analysing itself, distinguishing its moments, and dwelling for a while with each. This isolating of those moments *presupposes* spirit itself and subsists therein; in other words, the isolation exists only in spirit which is a concrete existence. (325, M440)

As we saw in the previous chapter, the reality of spirit is essentially the activity of mutual recognition, the enactment of the shared terms through which I and others acknowledge one another's identities as inhabitants of a singular and meaningful perspective on the world. Indeed, spirit is the world we share together, insofar as the individual stance that each of us takes on the world involves an implicit appeal for—and thus is, to borrow Hegel's language, an "abstract form" of—the confirmation offered by the stance of another individual (as the only worldly reality properly able to recognize *me* as an interpretive agent). Locating the terms adequate for reckoning with "the absolute," therefore, means locating the particular form of recognition within which such terms appear. Which form of "We"—of 'I' that is 'We,' 'We' that is 'I'—provides the appropriate context for the appearance of "absolute," for the appearance of terms through which fully and adequately to account for the nature of human experience? Which, in short, is the "absolute 'we'"? Hegel's answer: that form of spirit that makes possible the explicit

acknowledgment and affirmation of precisely what we have just said about the nature of human experience—namely, that its "absolute substance" is spirit, the sharing of meaning among irreducibly free and independent self-conscious agents. For Hegel, this absolute form—or, more precisely, *enactment*—of spirit is conscience, the form of recognition that affirms most comprehensively the "concrete existence" of human action—namely, as conscientious singularity. It is this form of conscientious recognition, then, that reveals itself to be the ultimate context in which human experience is lived.

One of the distinctive features of Hegel's account of religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, therefore, is this intersection of the religious phenomenon with the "absolute spirit" achieved in the conscientious acts of confession and forgiveness, and, consequently, the implicit claim that *conscience* represents the form of spirit through which religion is most properly understood. In later chapters I will explore more directly this intersection of religion with the practices of confession and forgiveness. My goal in the remainder of this chapter, however, is to explore in more detail Hegel's characterization of religion as "the self-consciousness of spirit," and why *this* characterization captures most adequately the appearance of the "absolute essence in and for itself" that the forms of religious consciousness studied previously in Hegel's text could apprehend only one-sidedly. Comparing Hegel's phenomenological approach to religion with a more recent debate in phenomenology of religion, I will here try to substantiate the following preliminary characterization of the religious phenomenon. As we saw above, the "absolute" nature of the religious phenomenon led to a difficulty of thinking of religion as simply another step in the self-critical dialectic of subject and object that is the phenomenological description of experience. To understand religion as the self-consciousness of spirit—that is, spirit's taking itself as an object—is to understand it as the experience *of this very dialectic*, of the very terms of experience as such made manifest as a phenomenon. In other words, the form of experience under scrutiny in religion is not just another stage of the mutual "testing" of subject and object that had previously defined Hegel's self-critical description of experience. Rather, religious experience is one in which this very dialectical mutuality itself—that is, the very terrain of human experience—takes shape as the absolute "object" for religious consciousness.[15] Hegel's phenomenology of religion is no longer practiced "within" the subject-

[15] As Raymond Keith Williamson writes, "religious consciousness is not merely a new stage of the dialectic that emerges only at the completion of these other stages, but rather, the dialectic of religion [is] a progressive revelation of spirit to itself." Williamson, *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 120.

object correlation that characterizes the standpoint of consciousness, but offers as it were a phenomenology of this correlation itself, to the extent that it appears within—though without being reducible to—human experience and in this way offers itself to descriptive scrutiny. The terms of religion are thus the terms of that dimension of spirit—of mutual recognition—that define most fundamentally the possibilities of our having and being a perspective in and on the world: they are the basic terms in and through which we live our experience, and to which we appeal in making sense of our experience most basically. As I ultimately want to show, "religion" signifies for Hegel the most basic enactment of mutual recognition, one that, as a basic form of ritual practice, contextualizes all other partial forms of recognition, and which is invoked in any attempt to articulate "what truly is."

2.2. Hegel and the "theological turn"

Let us return to our original question about the appearance of "absolute essence in and for itself." Most basically, to claim that there is a kind of phenomenon in which "the absolute" appears on *its own* terms is to claim that the range of what can be experienced is not limited to that which can be rendered as an object of knowledge—that is, as an object correlated with a knowing subject. It is to claim that there is a form of experience that constitutively exceeds my ability to contain it within the terms of my knowing grasp, and which reveals instead my inability to supply terms adequate to account for and describe it. Yet to claim that the absolute *appears* is to claim that this excess is nevertheless a part of experience, that something of "the absolute" shows up, despite my inability to cognize it. As we noted above, it is not obvious that such a claim is legitimate. If, as Hegel says, experience is defined by the dialectical correlation of subject and object, is it not therefore contradictory to speak of experience without an object of experience? What do I, as knowing subject, "take" to present itself to me, if not strictly speaking an object?

Hegel is not at all troubled by the question of the legitimacy of religion as a part of human experience (and thus as an object for phenomenology). However, in raising the question of this kind of phenomenon, Hegel's text anticipates a more recent discussion of the legitimacy of religious experience, initiated by Dominique Janicaud's 1991 indictment of what he perceived to be a "theological turn" in French phenomenology since the publication of Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*. As Janicaud argued, this "turn" marked an illegitimate methodological shift away from the agnostic "minimalism" characteristic of the "patient interrogation of the visible"

that phenomenology ought to be, and toward an "affirmation of [an *in*visible] Transcendence" characteristic of theology.[16] In the following year, three of the authors whom Janicaud criticized (Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien), along with two other philosophers (Paul Ricoeur and Jean-François Courtine), published an indirect response to Janicaud, the general aim of which was to reflect on the disciplinary border between phenomenology and theology, and to defend the integrity of the phenomenology of religion in its distinction from theology.

The resonance of this more recent phenomenology of religion with Hegel's resides, not so much in the particular conclusions of either study, but rather in their use of the category of religion to frame a certain phenomenological question.[17] Indeed, it was not Janicaud's objection to the phenomenological legitimacy of religion as such that troubled these phenomenologists (nor, as Janicaud himself claimed, did he object to "the theological" as such[18]), but rather it was Janicaud's apparent effort to determine and demarcate the field of phenomenological data in advance of the actual practice of phenomenological description. For Marion et. al., to rule out in advance any form of appearance as irrelevant or impossible would be to have abandoned phenomenology. True phenomenological rigor, they claimed, demands that appearance be granted the right to define itself solely and unconditionally, and thus not to be restricted to what can be rendered objective and intelligible according to the "conditions of possible experience"[19]—even where this means opening phenomenology up to the description of appearances typically regarded as religious or theological. More specifically, these thinkers treat

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[16] Dominique Janicaud, et al. *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak, Jeffrey L. Kosky, and Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 26. This publication includes English translations of both Janicaud's text, entitled "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," and the response by Courtine, et al., entitled "Phenomenology and Theology," which were originally published separately in French.

[17] As Marion writes, "according to whether it is accepted or rejected, the religious phenomenon would become a privileged index of the possibility of phenomenology." Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," in *Phenomenology and Theology*, 177.

[18] See Janicaud, et al. *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn,"* 34, 51.

[19] This is one of many appeals to Kantian terminology in Marion's "Saturated Phenomenon." Indeed, Marion "relies" precisely on Kant in framing his initial hypothesis for a "saturated" phenomenon, claiming that such a hypothesis poses a challenge to "the intimate tie that Kant establishes between possibility and phenomenality," according to which "possibility results explicitly from the conditions of experience," conditions that are "directly joined… with the power of knowing" (Ibid., 177-8). Further, in his delineation of a ("saturated") phenomenon that would exceed such conditions of possible experience, Marion follows "the guiding thread of the categories of the understanding established by Kant" (197-8): "in order to introduce the concept of the saturated phenomenon in phenomenology, we have… described it as *invisable* (unforeseeable) according to quantity, *unbearable* according to quantity, but also *unconditioned* (absolved from any horizon) according to relation, and *irreducible* to the *I* (incapable of being looked at) according to modality. These four characteristics imply the term-for-term reversal of all the rubrics under which Kant classifies the principles and thus the phenomena that these determine" (Ibid., 211-212).

familiar phenomenological formulae—such as the "reduction" of what is given in experience to the constituting gaze of the "I," and the inscription of that given within an anterior "horizon"[20]—not as conditions that appearance must satisfy in order to be phenomenologically justifiable, but rather as points at which to witness the immeasurability of phenomena that remain unconditioned by our cognitive apparatuses.[21] As Marion asks in his essay "The Saturated Phenomenon,"

> What would occur, as concerns phenomenality, if an intuitive *donation* were accomplished that was absolutely unconditioned (without the limits of a horizon) and absolutely irreducible (to a constituting *I*)? Can we not envisage a type of phenomenon that would reverse the condition of a horizon (by surpassing it, instead of being inscribed within it) and that would reverse the reduction (by leading the *I* back to itself, instead of being reduced to the *I*)? To declare this hypothesis impossible straightaway, without resorting to intuition, would immediately betray a phenomenological contradiction.[22]

As Marion argues, such a phenomenon, which "saturates," and thereby exceeds, the conditions of what is precisely knowable, most assuredly *can* be envisaged. Guided solely by the self-showing of phenomena, rather than by any pre-established criteria for what does and does not count as experience, phenomenology is indeed capable of "render[ing] visible what nevertheless [can]not be objectivized."[23]

In what way, though, is this question of an unconditioned visibility a question of religion? For Marion's part, the topic of religion hardly comes up at all in the course of his account of the saturated phenomenon,[24] and only really appears at the beginning of his discussion, serving to frame the basic question of phenomenological possibility. As he writes, "the religious phenomenon… amounts to an impossible phenomenon, or at least it marks the limit starting from which the phenomenon is in general no longer possible. Thus, the religious phenomenon poses the question of the general possibility of the phenomenon, *more than* the question of the

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[20] These themes derive from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Cf. *Ideas I*, §82: "Every *Now* of a mental process has a horizon of mental processes which also have precisely the originary form of 'Now' and, as 'Now,' make up *an originary horizon of the pure Ego*, its total originary *Now* of consciousness." Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 196. According to Marion, this "originary horizon" of the pure "I" betrays the "classic ambiguity" of Husserl's text—namely, that "the *donation* of the phenomenon on the basis of itself to an *I* can at every instant veer toward a constitution of the phenomenon through and on the basis of the *I*," and that "the originary primacy of the *I* maintains an essential relation with the placement of any phenomenon within the limits of a horizon." Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," 183.

[21] See Jeffrey L. Kosky, "Translator's Preface," in *Phenomenology and Theology*, 109.

[22] Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," 184.

[23] Ibid., 176.

[24] Although he does reserve a special place for a uniquely religious type of saturated phenomenon. Along with historical events, the work of art, and the human face, Marion lists "theophany," an experience in which a "surfeit of intuition" reverses the constituting gaze of my intentionality and produces an experience of being gazed at by an invisibility that, paradoxically, constitutes me (Ibid., 215).

possibility of religion."[25] Here, despite its brief and somewhat functional appearance in Marion's argument, the question of religion reveals its particular significance, not as a question about any specifically "religious" phenomenon, but rather as a platform for the broader phenomenological question of the limits of phenomenality as such, and of whether it is legitimate to speak of an "absolutely unconditioned" phenomenon beyond the limits of what would be constituted as possible experience according to the "horizon" and the "constituting *I*."

However, simply to pose this question is not to offer any particular interpretation of this unconditioned phenomenon, or to ascribe to it any particular content. No defense of any pre-established understanding of religion or religious experience is offered. Rather, the question of "religious experience" signifies simply the question of a form of experience that, in exceeding the conditions of possible human experience, exposes us to the finite or relative nature of our powers of description and representation, and confronts us with the question of the basic character and boundaries of human experience itself. The definitive feature of this "impossible" phenomenon is thus not whatever specifically religious character we end up attributing to it, but rather is this "finitizing" effect in general. To return to Hegel's account of this "absolutely unconditioned" phenomenon, the terms dictated by the religious "object," whose appearance constitutively exceeds that which can be taken as an object by a knowing subject, are thus the terms of this subject's own finitude. What presents itself in (or as) religion is one's inability to produce terms adequate to describe the nature of "absolute reality in and for itself."

Sticking with Hegel's account for a moment, we should notice that it is not just *any* form of finitude to which we are exposed in religion. By the time she has reached the chapter on religion, the reader of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* has in a sense encountered *nothing but* finitude, insofar as each form of experience hitherto studied has, in being assessed according to its capacity to grasp the absolute (i.e., to be knowledge), proven itself inadequate to the task. The appearance, here in religion, of the absolute *in itself* thus marks the appearance for the first time of terms adequate for reckoning with "the absolute." These are no less the terms of the subject's *in*adequacy with respect to the absolute phenomenon, but in this case they are the terms of her absolute inadequacy, her "absolute finitude," as it were. As the first few paragraphs of Hegel's discussion of religion insist, religion is not simply another form of finite experience within which

[25] Ibid., 176. Emphasis mine.

the absolute appears as object.[26] As the exposure to an "object" that constitutively exceeds the terms of objectivity altogether, religion is more properly speaking the exposure to my finitude as such, to the totality of my interpretive agency in its total relativity.

For Hegel and Marion alike, then, the category of "religion" serves phenomenology principally as a heuristic, marking the limit beyond which experience can no longer be reduced to or rendered within the terms of objectivity. By keeping phenomenological description open to forms of experience that are irreducible in this way, religion elicits the question of the nature and limitations of experience itself. Defined in this strictly formal way, there is nothing controversial about affirming the phenomenological legitimacy of such appearances of "the absolute." As Paul Ricoeur insists in his own contribution to the 1992 reply to Janicaud, "feelings and dispositions that can be called 'religious' do indeed exist, and they can transgress the sway of representation and, in this sense, mark the subject's being overthrown from its ascendancy in the realm of meaning."[27] The challenge posed to the subject's authority by such experience, Ricoeur argues, is no reason to disqualify it from phenomenological description; though the "intuitive excess" of such an experience overwhelms our capacity for knowledge, there should be "no doubt [that] a phenomenology can propose to describe this structure [of disproportion] in terms of its most universally widespread characteristics."[28]

But here, Ricoeur observes, phenomenological description encounters a challenge, owing to the fact that we "cannot locate anywhere the universality of the religious phenomenon." As he explains, "the fundamental feelings and dispositions [of religion] are nowhere visible in their naked immediacy," but rather appear as mediated by various linguistic, cultural, and historical concretizations.[29] The religious object, Ricoeur observes, appears invariably according to "determinate discursive acts," and, as he argues further, "just as one cannot deny that in the absence of [these] fundamental feelings, there is no occasion to speak of religion, so too one must hasten to concede that one cannot advance very far in the description of these feelings and dispositions without taking into account the verbal expressions that have given them form."[30] How, then, is phenomenology to bring into focus a specifically "religious" phenomenon, if such

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[26] See 495-496, M672-676, in which Hegel reviews the forms of the appearance of the absolute that are not yet the full appearance of the phenomenon of religion.
[27] Paul Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," in *Phenomenology and Theology*, 127. In such feeling and dispositions, Ricoeur writes further, the subject is "detached from the relation by which the subject would preserve its mastery over the object called religious, over the meaning of this presumed object" (Ibid., 128).
[28] Ibid., 128.
[29] Ibid., 130.
[30] Ibid., 129-30

a phenomenon cannot but appear as verbally or discursively mediated? Where do we anchor our descriptions of the religious disposition if it is accessible only through an irreducibly varied set of concrete manifestations?

Ricoeur himself offers one answer to this question in an earlier essay:

> For a philosophical inquiry, a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse. This first contention does not say that language, that linguistic expression, is the only dimension of the religious phenomenon; nothing is said—either pro or con—concerning the controversial notion of religious experience, whether we understand experience in a cognitive, a practical, or an emotional sense. What is said is only this: whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression.[31]

Although religion, for Ricoeur, is in no way reducible to its linguistic expression (it can be identified, he says, *through*, not *as*, language), the inevitable "coming to language" of religion allows us to identify that expression as the "most appropriate" terrain on which to study religion "on its own terms." Yet, if we want to account for religion on its own terms, ought we not to describe its form of appearing as an experience, rather than interpret it according to its (supposedly) outward manifestation? Indeed, Ricoeur's presentation of his preference for interpreting religion in terms of its linguistic expression as an *alternative* to an investigation of religion as a form of experience is telling. Such an approach, which is intended to take advantage of the more reliably observable linguistic dimension of the religious disposition against its (again, supposedly) inaccessible origin in "so-called" experience, is taken up at the cost of certain philosophical decisions. Not only, it would seem, are experience and its linguistic expression to be set apart, but the communication between these two orders is to occur in only one direction, with religious experience invariably *coming to* language, thereby supplying the outwardly manifest data that the student of religion is to interpret.

Ricoeur thus responds to the challenge of linguistic mediation precisely by accepting it as fatal to the project of the phenomenology of religion. "To speak of 'linguistic mediation,'" Ricoeur writes in the 1992 essay, "is already to summon up the grand edifices of speech and writing that have structured the memory of events, words, and personalities," such that "we cannot even be sure that the universal character of the structure [of religious feeling] can be attested independently of the different historical actualizations in which this structure is

[31] Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 35.

incarnated." "Religion is like language itself," he continues, "which is realized only in different tongues."[32] If, as Ricoeur points out in his earlier essay, its inevitable linguistic mediation teaches us that we cannot access the religious "structure" without making a detour through the discursive elements of culture and history, the very likening of religion to language itself in this later discussion would appear to eliminate the religious phenomenon altogether,[33] making religion solely a function of language and, moreover, of linguistic difference. In light of this likening, Ricoeur recommends that phenomenology give way to hermeneutics: as he concludes, "we must renounce the idea of creating a phenomenology of the religious phenomenon taken in its indivisible universality, and that we must be content, at the outset, with tracing the broad hermeneutic strands of just one religion." On this view, then, we cannot simply suspend the question of religious experience and inquire instead into the nature of religious expression. Rather, the fact that religion itself "duplicates"[34] the irreducible diversity of languages means that there can be little hope for a phenomenological inquiry into religion as a unique form of experience, and that the philosophy of religion can approximate such uniqueness only by performing a hermeneutic of the codified texts and scriptures (as Ricoeur specifically insists) claimed by a single tradition.

From this detour through more recent French phenomenology of religion we have taken from Marion the definition and legitimation of religious experience as an "absolute" or "unconditioned" phenomenon (a phenomenon, that is, not conditioned by the categories or limitations of "possible" experience), and we have added Ricoeur's observation that we do not encounter this excessive phenomenon in its "naked immediacy," but only within the terms of the historical, cultural, and linguistic situations that determine its specific form. Such mediation, for Ricoeur, creates a phenomenological obstacle: for him, the absolute affectivity of religion appears always and already "interpreted" according to its determinate discursive context, and such interpretation is properly addressed only in a hermeneutics of religion. In returning now to

[32] Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," 130.
[33] The difference is that here, in Ricoeur's later essay, language is no longer simply the observable, but differentiated, counterpart to religious experience; rather, religion itself reproduces the irreducible differentiation of language, in which case there can be no unified and discernable phenomenon for phenomenology of religion to describe. It is quite striking that Ricoeur does not treat this resemblance of religion and language as an opportunity for phenomenology, especially given his claims in the essay "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" that "experience, in all its fullness… has an expressibility in principle," that "it demands to be said," and that "phenomenology can be the presupposition of hermeneutics only insofar as phenomenology, in turn, incorporates a hermeneutical presupposition." Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 39, 43.
[34] Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," 130.

Hegel's phenomenology of religion, I want to raise some doubts about the methodological dilemma Ricoeur sets up. What I want to claim is that Ricoeur is right to notice an essentially verbal or expressive dimension of the religious phenomenon, but wrong to regard this fact as a reason to abandon the project of phenomenology.[35] In fact, one could say that Ricoeur has not exposed an obstacle to phenomenology, so much as articulated its next step, since, as Hegel shows, the diversity of concrete linguistic mediations into which religious affectivity is dispersed does not compromise our access to the religious phenomenon, simply because this phenomenon is precisely a linguistic one, and such linguistic diversity is an essential feature of the phenomenon precisely under description. Religion, for Hegel, is an essentially communicative practice, one that reflexively gives voice to the communicative conditions of interpretive agency that characterize human experience most basically. Hegel's turn to religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is (at least, although it is also much more than this) thus an extension of the hermeneutical phenomenology—or, more precisely, the phenomenology of "the hermeneutical"—that Hegel has been practicing from the start. In the end, Hegel gives us precisely a hermeneutics of religion, in the mode, however, of a phenomenology of the "hermeneutic" that religion in fact is—a phenomenology of the basic interpretive framework supplied to us by our "religious life."

3. Ritual action, selfhood, and the hermeneutical significance of religion

3.1 Recognition and ritual

We drew two basic conclusions about recognition in Chapter One. We saw first that recognition—that is, the formative influence of other people—is essential to our experience of being a "self," and we concluded from this that our experience of our own selfhood is shaped by communication with others, given the essential role played by language in the experience of recognition. We saw second, though, that the scenario through which Hegel demonstrates this essential significance of language—namely, the "trial by death" between opposed self-consciousnesses, who must learn to affirm mutually each other's independent subjectivity—is never *an* experience we undergo in fact. Rather, the structures of communication that shape and enable our identities are in large part *already there* for us. In other words, though they are

[35] To put this critique in a way that more directly targets Ricoeur's position: to allow the "mediating" work of language to compromise the project of phenomenology—the description of experience—is to subscribe to a highly decisive assumption, one that takes experience and expression to be immediately and ontologically distinct.

logically necessary to the development of our unique identities (as Hegel's hypothetical "trial" shows), we ourselves did not create these formative structures; rather, in our activity as selves, we respond and adhere to them as communities of shared meaning that preced and exceed us.[36] We are the unique selves that we are on the basis of what we share. To be an "I," for Hegel, is already to inhabit—to be—a "We," such that any act of an "I," even where it is not explicitly acknowledged as such, is an enactment of and within the communicative structures that make up its "We."[37]

To be an individual, on Hegel's account, is thus to be a member of a community of mutual recognition, in that the source of the meaningfulness of one's individual action is the system of communication that, as shared, defines what *meaning* is for "us." In fact, to be an individual is typically (an especially in the modern world) to be a member of a variety of such communities, such as those of our interpersonal relationships, political systems, and broader cultural world. My point here is that each type of community supports and grants significance to our individual self-expression by *determining in advance* what it means to be part of who "we" are in each particular case. In this sense, to be a member of a community of mutual recognition is to be a member of a ritual community, that is, necessarily to perform one's identity in adherence to the norms and practices through which the community—the "We"—of which one is a member defines and distinguishes itself. Recognition functions as ritual, first of all, in *prescribing* the communicative terms through which one's individuality is acknowledged. Insofar as a community is in many ways nothing other than the set of practices and performances through which its members recognize one another, to be "one of us" requires nothing more than that one *does* "what we do," whether or not this doing or this "we" is explicitly recognized. Just as my adherence to certain laws reflects my membership of a particular legal system, the particular facial and bodily gestures that I perform assure my membership of a particular culture, as does my ability to share an "inside joke" reflect a kind of community shared by me and my close companions.

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[36] Of course, as a self each of us is potentially creative, that is, has a unique perspective on the world from which to speak and act. What Hegel's account of recognition shows, however, is that such creativity *presupposes* our adherence to certain normative structures of meaning, if indeed it is to be meaningful.

[37] Hegel formulates a version of this point at the beginning of Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* when he identifies spirit—the "'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'"—as the reality in which each of the abstract forms of experience he has considered—consciousness, self-consciousness, and reason—have their substance and are concretely lived (325-326, M440).

Alongside being prescriptive, the structures of recognition that make up a community function as ritual in a second sense, in being implicitly affirmed in and through the individual actions whose meaning they define and support. Indeed, such affirmation is simply another side of the prescriptive character of recognition: in answering to the norms of meaning that I share with others and that makes us members of the same community, I implicitly affirm those norms as constitutive of "us," every time I act meaningfully. Meaningful action is ritual action, then, insofar as, as an adherence to the performative prescriptions of a certain community, it is *expressive* action, expressive of the community of shared meaning on which it depends. Meaningful action, in other words, is always both a *doing* and a *saying*, both the enactment of a desire or the accomplishment of an aim and an affirmation—an expression—of the context of shared meaning that makes these enactments and accomplishments possible.

Let us consider the example of waving to a friend. I see my friend approaching and, in order to get her attention or to respond to her own gesture, I offer a wave of greeting that *says* "hi." At this level, my action remains more or less instrumental: I desire or intend to say "hi," and I perform the gesture most appropriate for the accomplishment of my aims. In this way, my action *gets done* what I intend for it to get done, in its adherence to the norms that govern the possibilities for meaningful interaction that my companion and I share: I perform my action according to the law(s) of the particular "We" of which we are members. What we should notice further, though, is the way in which this law-abiding action is an implicit affirmation of the "We" that is the source of this law, as that through which this action makes sense. In addition, then, to fulfilling my desires, "[l]aw-governed actions essentially *speak*," as Russon writes, "for they are enactments of the system of values—the systems of meanings—that the participants of the law-governed community hold in common." He continues: "As well as enacting my desires, my law-governed actions also *affirm* you and the others: my action is a way of saying that I respect the fact that I am living in community with others, a way of saying that the world in which I realize my desire—the world in which I affirm/assert myself—is a shared world."[38] Action that accomplishes an aim, which thereby says "I" as an expression of my desire, is thus simultaneously a saying of "We," an affirmation or expression of the systems of communication—the laws and prescriptions that define communities of mutual recognition—that give shape to my desire and provide the context for its fulfillment. Meaningful action, then, is ritualistic in the sense that it is both instrumental and expressive, that the fulfillment of an

[38] Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology*, 213-4.

intention of mine is never simply a matter of *doing* but is always also an implicit *saying*—that is, expression—of the intersubjective context in and by which my doing has meaning.[39]

Of course, as we carry out our daily lives we for the most part do not take ourselves to be giving expression to the spheres of intersubjectivity—the communities—that shape our identity and agency. And yet, as we have seen, our sense of self-identity and our community membership are mutually constitutive, such that the structures of recognition that prescribe and support my self-conscious action are affirmed implicitly even where I take myself to be "just doing my thing." Indeed, one's membership of a community is for the most part enacted implicitly—that is, it has its reality in being enacted, *rather than in being explicitly posited*. Of course, to announce "I am Canadian" when being questioned by a customs official, for example, is to appeal for a certain type of recognition; however, Hegel's understanding of recognition accounts for forms of acknowledgment and community membership that reside at a more fundamental level than our explicit self-utterances, and indeed provide the substantial context in which such utterances are possible and meaningful.

In highlighting the "ritualized"—that is, prescriptive and self-expressive—nature of the systems of recognition that define and distinguish a community, Hegel's analysis supports the understanding of ritual as a feature of everyday, "natural" activities, rather than, as its association with religion often suggests, as solely a specialized form of activity set apart for some "supernatural" purpose or situation. Hegel's analysis thus affirms social anthropologist John Beattie's argument that the difference between ritualized and non-ritualized action has its source, not in the supposed division of the world into "natural" and "supernatural" realms, but rather in the presence or not of a "symbolic element" in what is performed, that is, an expressive dimension of the act that "assert[s] the importance of some social value."[40] As Beattie writes, "the difference between what we call practical, commonsense techniques for doing things, and ritual or 'magico-religious' ways of doing them lies basically in the presence or absence of an institutionalized symbolic element in what is done,"[41] an element that can come quite "naturally" to those performing it. "To an African or Melanesian peasant," Beattie writes, "it is just as 'natural' for a rain-maker to make rain, or for a witch to bewitch his enemy, as it is for a woman to bear children, or for a man to harvest the crop he plants," not because of this peasant's

[39] As Russon writes further, "[b]ecause we are self-conscious beings—because we are intersubjective—our action is always essentially an intersubjective gesture as much as it is a practice of personal fulfilment, whether or not one explicitly acknowledges this" (Ibid., 214).
[40] John Beattie, *Other Cultures: Aims, Methods, and Achievements in Social Anthropology* (Routledge, 2005), 201.
[41] Ibid., 201.

attribution of the causal mechanisms of these situations to supernatural agencies, but because of her awareness of the symbolic demand—a demand to say "what has to be said"[42]—of the situation. Such awareness acknowledges, Beattie writes,

> that the whole procedure, or rite, has an essentially expressive aspect, whether or not it is thought to be effective instrumentally as well. In every rite something is being said as well as done. The man who consults a rain-maker, and the rain-maker who carries out a rain-making ceremony, are stating something; they are asserting symbolically the importance they attach to rain and their earnest desire that it shall fall when it is required. (202)

For Beattie, just as for Hegel, the mark of ritual action is its symbolic or expressive function, rather than any "magico-religious" quality it may appear to have in contrast to purely natural or practical action. (Indeed, for Beattie, the identification of "magico-religious" action as instrumental action that refers to a "supernatural realm" is typical of the narrow perspective of "technologically advanced" and "practically oriented, 'scientistic'" societies that tend to overlook the social significance of symbolic expression.[43])

Yet, there is one important qualification to be made to this consensus between Hegel and Beattie. Whereas Beattie's aim is to assert the expressive (and hence natural, as opposed to supernatural or magical) nature of *explicitly ritualized* action—"in every *rite*," he says, "something is being said as well as being done"—Hegel's account, by contrast, turns our attention to the expressive or ritualized nature of meaningful action *as such*. In other words, while Beattie would have us understand the nature of ritual action in terms of its expressive or symbolic function, Hegel—who would no doubt agree with Beattie on this point— would have us broaden our understanding of what kinds of action qualify as ritual to include not only those marked practices that we tend to isolate as 'ritualistic' but indeed any form of action whose significance depends on the sharing of meaning among members of a community. What for Beattie, then, is a distinction between ritualized and non-ritualized action—between, that is, the specialized symbolic practices that Beattie explores and what he calls "practical, commonsense techniques"—would, on Hegel's account, be a distinction between *two types of ritual*, between, in other words, two types of action whose discrete and perceptible enactment simultaneously effects an expression of the structures of mutual recognition that make these actions possible.

There are, of course, more than two forms of recognition explored in Hegel's phenomenology, and hence more than two ways in which to observe the ritual significance of human action-as-recognition. The (qualified) application of Beattie's distinction between

[42] Ibid., 202.
[43] Ibid., 201.

"practical, commonsense" and "magico-religious" types of action proves helpful, however, not only in inviting a contrast between two forms of ritual action, but also in providing a productive context in which to encounter the specificity of that ritual action that is *religion*. More precisely, we will be better able to place into relief those specialized and explicitly ritualized practices that we tend to identify as "religious" once we have considered the far more *implicitly* ritualized practices that reflect most immediately the coincidence of one's identity and community membership, and that in certain ways provide the sharpest contrast to religious practices—namely, the practices of ethical life.

3.2. The rituals of ethical life

> In Chapter V of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel writes that if we observe
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> in its reality… the self-consciousness that is recognized and acknowledged, and which has its own self-certainty in the other free self-consciousness, and possesses its truth precisely in that 'other'; in other words, if we look on this still *inner* spirit as substance that has already advanced to the stage of having an *outer* existence, then in this notion there is disclosed the *realm of ethical life*. (294, M349)

Ethical life, as Hegel defines it here, is mutual recognition—the achievement of the "truth" of self-consciousness in being acknowledged by its "other"—in the form of an "outer existence." As we recalled above, Hegel understands the mutually affirmative sharing of meaning among diverse self-consciousnesses—"spirit," in other words—to be the concrete context—the "self-supporting, absolute, real being"—of all isolated forms of experience (325, M440). Ethical life, then, is spirit in its most immediate reality, the immediate and actual coincidence of "I" and "We." "Spirit is the *ethical life* of a nation," Hegel writes, "in so far as it is the *immediate truth*—the individual that is a world" (326, M441). Ethical life is the spiritual—that is, recognized and acknowledged—"truth" of my self-consciousness in its immediate, "worldly" reality, a reality that speaks immediately both of me, as an individual, and the community of recognition to which I belong.

What kind of reality is this? In what way, that is, does the world present the "immediate truth" both of my own individuality and the community I share with others (or, of my independent self-consciousness and the universal self-consciousness on which I depend for recognition)? This reality, for Hegel, is action: that performance in the perceptible world through which I enact and express my own intention and in so doing reflect the intentions of those others to whom my action appears as meaningful. While not exhausting the possibilities for how meaningful action takes shape, ethical life in many ways best typifies what we have said above

about the prescriptive nature of recognition. As action that immediately *is* "I" and "We" (the immediate coincidence of a shared system of meaning with the terms for my self-expression), the action of ethical life is necessarily law-abiding action, action that accords with the "laws" that govern "who we are." These laws are not explicitly posited and acknowledged *as laws*, but rather govern our immediate sense of "what is to be done" in a given situation. Hence, these laws—or perhaps *mores*—operate prior to any explicit distinction between ourselves as agents and the world of our action. They provide, rather, the very terms through which, according to our immersion in it as engaged subjects, the world solicits our activity in the first place. Hegel writes:

> The spiritual being thus exists first of all for self-consciousness as law which has an *intrinsic* being… The law is equally an eternal law which is grounded not in the will of a particular individual, but is valid in and for itself; it is the absolute *pure will of all* which has the form of immediate being. Also, it is not a *commandment*, which only *ought* to be: it *is* and is *valid*; it is the universal 'I'… the 'I' which is immediately a reality, and the world *is* only this reality. But since this existent law is valid unconditionally, the obedience of self-consciousness is not the serving of a master whose commands were arbitrary, and in which it would not recognize itself. On the contrary, laws are the thoughts of its own absolute consciousness, thoughts which are immediately its *own*. Also, it does not *believe* in them, for although belief does perceive essential being it perceives it as something alien to itself. Ethical *self*-consciousness is *immediately* one with essential being through the *universality* of its *self*… (321, M436)

Ethical life, as Hegel says here, is "spiritual being": it is the appearance of reality as the domain of our activity as self-conscious agents, an appearance that solicits our action in particular ways, ways that, as implicit intersubjective commitments ("laws") speak also for those others with whom we share our sense of the way in which the world simply *is*.

Because its laws govern *implicitly*, my enactment of ethical life is not the result of a process of reflection or deliberation; I do not *think* of my action as an adherence to law but rather simply do what appears to be the "right" thing to do. "Ethical disposition," Hegel writes, "consists just in sticking steadfastly to what is right, and abstaining from all attempts to move or shake it" (322, M437). In this way, ethical life is at work most definitively in my immediate sense of what is appropriate for a given situation, in what appears to be the obvious or natural thing to do. Take again the example of greetings. Especially in North American cultures, it is customary to shake hands when meeting someone for the first time, whereas other forms of greeting such as hugging or kissing are reserved for persons with whom one is more intimately related. Typically, the particular gesture of greeting that one offers in a given situation is not a matter of reflective thought, but simply appears as the "natural" way to say "hi." In such cases

our discernment of the situation goes unnoticed, as does the extent to which this discernment is a reflection of the interpretive framework that we share with those others whom we are greeting—that is, with whom we share this particular cultural habit. To shake hands with others is simply to do "what we do," that is, to perform the appropriate behaviour called for in certain social situations. What *I* do in such situations is indeed at the same time what *we* do: my action, which is no less an expression of my "self," is here an expression of the habitual ways of engaging with the world and with one another of the particular "ethical" society to which I belong. (For the most part, the "ethical"—that is, implicitly and commonly prescribed—dimension of this behaviour only shows up, typically, when we do the "wrong" or inappropriate thing.) "[In] the universal substance [of ethical life]," Hegel writes, "the individual has this *form* of subsistence not only for his activity as such, but no less also for the *content* of that activity; what he does *is* the skill and customary practice of all" (265, M351).

Such "skills" and "customs," moreover, govern our engagement with the world even in situations that do not present themselves as explicitly social. When comfortably at work on my writing in the coffee shop, for example, I accomplish a purpose of my own, unaware, for the most part, that in my activity I employ and enact a whole series of shared agreements for how this space is to be navigated and how each of us is to find our place within it. Such agreements, Hegel explains, governs *unconsciously* even those scenarios in which I take myself simply to be doing "my thing," to be pursuing uninhibitedly my own aims and intentions.

> The *labour* of the individual for his own needs is just as much a satisfaction of the needs of others as of his own, and the satisfaction of his own needs he obtains only through the labour of others. As the individual in his *individual* work already *unconsciously* performs a *universal* work, so again he also performs the universal as his *conscious* object; the whole becomes, as *a* whole, his own work, for which he sacrifices himself and precisely in so doing receives back from it his own self. (265, M351)

The reality of the coffee shop supports my action—supports, that is, the aspect of my own *self* that I intend to enact there—through the fact that I count on others to engage with it in the same way. Indeed, I go to the coffee shop for the purpose of doing *my* work, and, so long as I am able to do this, I tend not to reflect on the fact that my activity is supported by a sense of what it means to be "in the coffee shop" that I and all others who are there have in common.[44]

[44] In his discussion in M351, Hegel describes a much broader form of social body than is suggested by my—rather modern and unexceptional—example of being in a coffee shop. My aim, however, is to point to the way in which certain social settings function through the implicit and unnoticed reciprocity of individual action and shared expectation.

Because of their immediacy, though, the norms and obligations of a given ethical sphere are necessarily also partial or specific. Whereas, for example, the obvious thing to do when meeting a new colleague at work may be to offer a handshake, it may be equally obvious to perform a quite different form of greeting, such as a warm hug or a kiss, when returning home to one's partner after the workday. Both forms of action reflect an adherence to the "given" norms of a particular social situation, but they differ from one another according to the differing norms involved in each situation. Each situation, that is, presents a specific set of immediate obligations—a specific coincidence of "I" and "We"—such that in each case I am made to enact a specific aspect of my own selfhood (e.g., "co-worker," "partner"). It is, of course, the same "I" that underlies both situations; hence, neither one exhausts my identity as an agent, but rather speaks of one among many possible ethical spheres whose normative immediacy I respond to. For this reason, Hegel explains, our capacity as self-conscious selves to reflect on our own agency means that we ourselves are necessarily the transcendence of our immediate, ethical situation, and thus the point of view to which the "limitation" of ethical immediacy reveals itself. "The ethical order," he writes,

> exists merely as something *given*; therefore this universal spirit itself is a separate, individual spirit, and the customs and laws in their entirety are a *specific* ethical substance, which only in the higher stage, viz. in spirit's consciousness of its essence, sheds this limitation and in this knowledge alone has its absolute truth, not directly as it *immediately* is. In the latter form it is a *limited* ethical substance, and absolute limitation is just this, that spirit is in the form of *being*. (267, M354)

As we have said, I am the individual self that I am through and because of the various systems of recognition of which I am a member and in which my selfhood is affirmed. That the coffee shop is for me the "right" context in which to work, for example, but perhaps the "wrong" context in which to display emotion is a result, not (simply) of my own preferences, but of the immediacy of the ethical norms and obligations to which I am answerable, of my belonging to a particular society, and of my fidelity to its roles and responsibilities. As a self-conscious agent, however, I am capable of adopting a reflective stance toward my action and situation, and of noticing my irreducibility as an "I" to any of the immediate forms of "we" in which I partake. Hence, though I am a sister, a partner, a coworker, a citizen, etc., and though each of these aspects of my identity corresponds to a specific set of immediate, ethical attachments that shapes and influences it, no single one of these particular attachments exhausts my selfhood. I am, rather, the "universal" site of convergence of all of these particular attachments, the reflective and self-

determining agent whose activity is never *just* a matter of unconscious habit, but who is capable of self-consciously taking responsibility for my activity.

3.3. Religion as basic ritual practice

Human action is ritual, we have seen, in the sense that it is never reducible to its present immediacy, but rather is always invested with normative and expressive significance. The ritual action of ethical life is normative in an immediate and unreflective sense: the "laws" of ethical life govern the way in which the world immediately solicits my activity, and I adhere to these laws without conscious reflection, in doing what seems to be the natural, obvious, or appropriate thing to do in a given situation. Consequently, the types of community expressed in such action are necessarily finite and particular. Although the attachments and obligations that make up our ethical life—such as those of our familial relationships—shape and affect us profoundly, they could never speak for us absolutely, insofar as we, as reflective self-conscious agents, are irreducible to any form of activity whose prescriptive nature is simply immediate.

Turning now to religion, we should notice first of all that, although ethical life provides a helpful comparison through which to explore the ritual significance of religion, Hegel in fact contrasts religion not simply with ethical life but with all "actual spirit." In his introduction to the concept of religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (495-505, M672-684[45]) he distinguishes between religion as "spirit that knows itself as spirit" and "actual spirit" or "spirit in existence," differentiating here between the self-consciousness of spirit and the "actual"—that is, specific and historical—communities in and by which this self-consciousness is enacted. As the self-consciousness of spirit, religion is more than simply another particular form of ritual community. Religion, according to Hegel, is that dimension of ritual life that encompasses all finite and particular forms of ritual such as ethical life, and which speaks, therefore, not for this or that particular aspect of my self-conscious identity, but for who I am as such. Religion transcends, therefore, not just the immediate forms of ritual obligation that provide the terms of my activity (e.g., those of familial intimacy, habitual norms) but indeed all discretely identifiable norms (e.g., cultural norms, posited law, etc.).

In his own terms, Hegel expresses this contrast by identifying religion as the "totality of spirit":

[45] Although section M684 appears after the heading "A. Natural Religion," it is quite clearly a continuation of the introductory remarks that Hegel has been making, rather than an initial statement regarding natural religion (the discussion of which properly begins with section M685).

> When self-consciousness and consciousness proper, *religion* and spirit in its world, or spirit's *existence*, are in the first instance distinguished from each other, the latter consists in the totality of spirit so far as its moments exhibit themselves in separation, each on its own account. But the moments are *consciousness*, *self-consciousness*, *reason*, and *spirit*—spirit, that is, as immediate spirit, which is not yet consciousness of spirit. Their totality, *taken together*, constitutes spirit in its mundane existence generally; spirit as such contains the previous structured shapes in universal determinations, in the moments just named. Religion presupposes that these have run their full course and is their *simple* totality or absolute self. (498, M679)

Religion, as the "totality" of spirit, distinguishes itself from all specific, actually existing forms of spirit, so as to make possible spirit's self-consciousness—that is, the taking of a stance in relation to spirit as such. Moreover, as the "absolute self" that integrates all finite "moments" of spirit, the self-consciousness of spirit in religion is at the same time the appearance to consciousness of "the absolute." However, as Hegel indicates, these two sides of religion—consciousness and self-consciousness are in the first place distinct from one another: religion is not, as it were, immediately *self*-conscious in its consciousness of an absolute reality. In another passage, Hegel writes:

> The distinction… between *actual* spirit and spirit that knows itself as spirit, or between itself, *qua* consciousness, and *qua* self-consciousness, is superseded in the spirit that knows itself in its truth; its consciousness and its self-consciousness are on the same level. But, as religion here is, to begin with, *immediate*, this distinction has not yet returned into spirit. What is posited is only the *notion* [*Begriff*] of religion; in this the essence is self-consciousness, which is conscious of being all truth and contains all reality within that truth. This self-consciousness has, as consciousness, itself for object. (501, M682)

According to its "concept," Hegel says, religion is essentially self-consciousness, and in this way is conscious of itself as being "all truth" and "all reality." But, although spirit in religion has "itself for [its] object," its self-knowledge is in the first place characterized by its being conscious of itself *as an object*. The "actual" life of religion, according to the parallel distinctions that Hegel draws in this quotation, manifests itself in the first place as spirit's *consciousness*, the standpoint that perceives an object *other* to itself, with respect to which it, as spirit, cannot properly be said to possess self-knowledge or self-consciousness. Indeed, spirit cannot be properly self-knowing if its "actuality"—its real, historical existence and determinate practices—is not included within its self-knowledge—that is, if this self-knowledge fails to capture its whole "self." Hence, the implicit self-consciousness of spirit in religion must be reconciled to its actual appearance as consciousness of "the absolute" as object, and the actual religious community must arrive at an explicit awareness of its identity with the "object" of its

devotion and affirmation. As Hegel says, "spirit is actual as absolute spirit," Hegel writes, "only when it is also for itself in its *truth* as it is in its *certainty of itself*, or when the extremes into which, as consciousness, it parts itself are explicitly for each other in the shape of spirit" (501-502, M682).

This discrepancy—the distinction between actual spirit and spirit in religion—nevertheless defines the phenomenon of religion, so much so that the "returning into spirit" or reconciliation of this distinction (explored in Chapter Four) not only reveals explicitly religion's function as a community's basic self-utterance but also relativizes religion's status as the form of human expression that alone is able to speak on behalf of "all truth" and "all reality." Religion, for Hegel, is essentially the self-consciousness of spirit *in the form of consciousness*; as a form of ritual, it is the most basic expression of "who we are" in the form of a declaration that "*that* is 'absolute reality.'" That religion eventually "supersedes" this discrepancy should not prevent us from noticing the extent to which it has defined the ways in which human communities have articulated their sense of "all reality and truth." The history of this articulation has been the history of the affirmation that the terms of "all reality" as such are *distinct* from all finite and recognizable human forms of experience. Thus, although as the "totality of spirit" religion comprises the most basic ritual context through which our (shared) reality is experienced, the *practice* of religion, by virtue of its structural discrepancy, has tended to be the ritual expression of our *basic human finitude*, of the fact that the terms of our reality are not of our making, but rather exceed and sustain our finite existence. The history of religion, for Hegel, is the history of the reckoning with this sense of basic finitude and to study religion is for him to study the ways in which what various societies take to be absolute for human experience is identified and affirmed as being constitutively *beyond* what is human. It is to study forms of the human expression of humanity's basic finitude with respect to that infinite reality that exceeds, precedes, and shapes it.

In this context, we can outline three basic characteristics of religion as a form of ritual. First, in terms of its expressive significance, the form of community affirmed in the performance of religious ritual is that which transcends—or, more precisely, undergirds—all other finite forms of community. In our religious practices we speak for our participation in community *as such*, for our sense, that is, of what it means to be part of the human "We," to be a member of the community of shared meaning that defines human reality in an ultimate sense. Whereas, as noted above, the commitments of ethical life to which we are answerable can only ever make a partial

claim on our identities, the pretension of religion is to allow for the affirmation of the "absolute self." Each of the specific ritual contexts that support and make sense of my action—such as that of family, public life, law, and culture—offer a shared medium—a "We"—through which my identity, as acting "I," is affirmed. Yet the "We" and "I" enacted in such cases are partial: I am not *just* a member of a family, etc., but rather I am the self that transcends each of these finite spheres of influence, the "absolute truth," as Hegel says,[46] that is irreducible to any one of its particular attachments. As ritual, then, religion is a saying of "We" that is not simply the enactment of a particular—ethical or otherwise—form of mutual recognition, but rather is the saying of "who we are" in a way that affirms our constitutive belonging, our membership *as such*, to the world of human significance.

Second, as this comprehensive form of self-expression, the normative significance of religion could never be simply immediate and partial, but rather is similarly comprehensive or basic. Hegel's account of ethical life shows us that the everyday activities that we as individuals perform, as well as the worldly objects with which we perform them, derive their meaning from being situated within a broader—though implicitly—social context. Over the course of a given day I may find myself engaged in a variety of activities, such as eating, reading, riding my bicycle, taking the subway. None of these actions, however, is reducible to its present immediacy. Rather, each is situated within and made meaningful by the broader context of my—ultimately social—*purpose* in acting (such as the performance of my professional duties), which itself is situated in the even broader contexts of social life and culture that define my possibilities. Hegel gathers the broader contexts of shared meaning on which our action, as meaningful, depends under the label "spirit,"[47] and he refers with the term "religion"[48] to the most basic form that spirit takes in human experience. While ethical life taught us to notice the socially or intersubjectively contextualized nature of individual action, in turning to religion we turn our attention to the *most basic of such contexts* within which human action is performed, the site of the fundamental or ultimate terms in which human action is situated and made meaningful. Religion, for Hegel, is the dimension of spirit—of the sharing of meaning—that is not situated in any further, more basic dimension. Its terms are "absolute," in the sense that they are the terms given by that form of mutual recognition that is not derivative of or relative to any

[46] See 267, M354, quoted above.
[47] "Spirit's immediate unity of with itself is the basis, or pure consciousness, *within* which consciousness parts asunder" (502, M682).
[48] "Religion is the perfection of spirit," Hegel writes, "spirit into which its individual moments—consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit—return and have returned *as into their ground*" (499, M680, emphasis mine).

more fundamental sphere of human significance. All other finite and particular forms of recognition are, rather, derivative of the terms of *religion*.

Before turning to the third characteristic of religion as ritual, I want to note that this reference to the "comprehensive" nature of the normative significance of religion is likely to invite comparisons with John Rawls' notion of "comprehensive doctrines," under which label, in his *Political Liberalism*, Rawls considers religious views and convictions. The comparison is apt in at least one respect, insofar as Rawls considers a person's view (of the ultimate truth or good) to be "comprehensive" when it reflects a "precisely articulated system" that comprises and organizes "all recognized values and virtues" that give shape to that person's motivations and actions in the world.[49] Religion, in Hegel's understanding, constitutes precisely such a system: it is the "totality" of ritual substance that determines, at the most basic level, what is of ultimate value for individuals, as well as how that ultimate value is to be expressed and answered.

However, this comparison requires an important qualification. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls outlines three defining characteristics of what he calls "reasonable[50] comprehensive doctrines." First, such doctrines are "an exercise of theoretical reason," by which Rawls means that they arrange "the major religious, philosophical, and moral aspects of human life in a more or less consistent and coherent manner." In this way, a reasonable comprehensive doctrine "organizes and characterizes [these] recognized values so that they are compatible with one another and express an intelligible view of the world." Second, Rawls explains, such doctrines are likewise an exercise of practical reason, insofar as their organization function works, in real situations of action, to "singl[e] out which values to count as especially significant and how to balance them when they conflict." Third, says Rawls, "while a reasonable comprehensive view is

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[49] Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 13. The full passage, which distinguishes "moral conceptions" (of the good, e.g.) from the strictly *political* conceptions (of justice) that are the subject of Rawls' work, runs as follows: "A moral conception is general if it applies to a wide range of subjects, and in the limit to all subjects universally. It is comprehensive when it includes conceptions of what is of value in human life, and ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and associational relationships, and much else that is to inform our conduct, and in the limit to our life as a whole. A conception is fully comprehensive if it covers all recognized values and virtues within on rather precisely articulated system; whereas a conception is only partially comprehensive when it comprises a number of, but by no means all, nonpolitical values and virtues and is rather loosely articulated" (Ibid., 13). Hegel's conception of religion would reflect, in Rawls' terms, a "fully comprehensive" system; that is, it would not simply pertain to the ideals and conceptions of value that Rawls lists, but would comprise the most basic, intersubjective system within which these ideals and values are integrated.

[50] My concern here is to explore the "comprehensive" nature of the religious systems for Rawls and Hegel; the question of the "*reasonable*" nature of religious comprehensive doctrines is the subject of Chapter Five below.

not necessarily fixed and unchanging, it normally belongs to, or draws upon, a tradition of thought and doctrine."[51]

The difference in what would be Hegel's account of religion as a "comprehensive view" pertains to the first and second of Rawls' characteristics. As the discussion above should have made clear, religion, for Hegel, is most certainly a practical matter; indeed, as ritual action, religion is most fundamentally and pervasively for Hegel a kind of *practice*, rather than a reflectively intellectual "view" or "doctrine." For this reason, the Hegelian understanding of religion as "comprehensive" would pose a challenge (while agreeing with most of everything else) to Rawls' characterization of comprehensive doctrines as, first and foremost, the exercise of *theoretical* reason. Yet, this qualification is all the more pertinent, as religion, for Hegel, constitutes precisely the basic organizational fabric of a person's "intelligible" engagement with her world. Hence, although Hegel would encourage us to locate the practical dimension of religion as more basic to the religious phenomenon than any of its explicitly theoretical expression,[52] he would nevertheless affirm the understanding of religion as the basic context within which the world of our activity "makes sense" and is "intelligible" to us. Religion, in other words, would be precisely a form of reasoning, for Hegel—that is, the basic ritual context through which our "rational" activity is enabled and sustained.

The third feature of religious ritual pertains to the appearance of religious practice in cases in which the *basicness* of one's ritual context becomes the object of religious affirmation. Here, we see that the rituals of religion differ from the unreflective character of the bonds of ethical life. For the latter type of action, the specifically ritual dimension remains implicit in the perceptible act that I perform; as we said above, in such cases I simply do "what is done" in my situation, and the fact that I am *acting*—that is, responding to a normative summons, which I in turn express—goes unnoticed. In religion, by contrast, the specifically *ritual* dimension tends to stand out. The norms of religion, in governing most basically what it means to be the self that I am, tend to distinguish themselves as explicitly ritualistic, by virtue of their difference from all "actual" normative communities. Hegel's analysis of recognition in general reveals our

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[51] Ibid., 59.

[52] In Hegel's view, the understanding of religion, as "comprehensive," as an exercise of theoretical reason—a "doctrine"—reflects both (a) the (self-)understanding of religion of a *specific* religious tradition and (b) the development on which this "doctrinal" self-understanding of religion is based. Hence, Hegel would not dispute Rawls' association of religion with theoretical reason (indeed, Hegel's account of Christianity makes precisely this association); however, on Hegel's account, religion, which conceptually is the implicit ritual context of human thought and action must *become* a matter of explicit doctrine. This development of religion is the topic of Chapter Four below.

dependence on other people for our sense of ourselves. Although it is possible to become aware of one's dependence on the formative experiences of one's family life, one's society, one's political system, etc., it is in religion, Hegel thinks, that we speak of our *ultimate* dependence, of the fact of our dependence as such on structures of shared meaning that exist outside of us, which specific forms of community only partially reflect. In acknowledging the finitude of all particular forms of recognition—of "We"—religious ritual takes the form, therefore, not of an implicit reenactment of a "We," but rather of an explicit statement that no particular "We" speaks for us absolutely. In setting itself apart from all finite forms of community, then, religious ritual is expressive or communicative action that explicitly "marks" itself as ritual: unlike the unreflective practices of ethical life, religion a species of action that appears explicitly in its performative—in other words, "ritualized"—distinction.

CHAPTER THREE: IS FORGIVENESS A RELIGIOUS ACT?

Although forgiveness and religion differ in terms of how they are actually practiced, one of the major aims of this study is to show that, according to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, both can be understood as forms of activity that affirm the conditions of human action and communication as such, and which therefore express also the particular "community" of those among or by whom they are performed. Whereas our studies of forgiveness and religion in the previous two chapters have in many places suggested this parallel, my goal here is to address it directly, in order to set up my explorations of its implications on Chapters Four and Five.

Let us begin by reviewing what has been established so far. Our exploration of Hegel's account of conscience in Chapter One resulted in a challenge to the understanding of forgiveness as an act that separates an agent from her wrongful action. On this view, forgiveness would overlook the offender's mistake, assuring her that my sense of *who* she is is not defined by *what* she has done, that her particular deed does not dictate her identity in an absolute sense. Yet, as we saw, conscientious agency is motivated precisely by the recognition that *who I am* demands a particular *what*—that is, an action—and that to separate *who* from *what* actually amounts to a refusal to forgive. Forgiveness misses its mark if it recognizes merely an idealized vision of the agent (somehow already absolved from her action), and not the *real* agent as the author of her particular transgression. An act of genuine forgiveness, one that addresses the agent's guilt itself and renews her ability to act without condemnation, will address her transgression directly, acknowledging the necessarily finite and partial nature of human action in realizing the good. Forgiveness, according to Hegel, is a perception of human agency *inclusive* of its finitude, particularity, and transgression; it is the comprehensive perception of human agency, which sees and affirms "all" of who we are.

We concluded Chapter One by noticing the "meta-communicative" significance of forgiveness. Whereas forgiveness typically takes the explicit form of someone saying "I forgive *you*," in fact forgiveness speaks implicitly for both parties involved, being prompted by the recognition—expressed in the action of confession[1]—that "we" together are defined by our transgressive particularities as singular agents. In Chapter Two we explored Hegel's

[1] The agent who confesses, Hegel writes, "gives himself utterance solely on account of his having seen his identity with the other; he, on his side, gives expression to their common identity in his confession" (490, M666).

understanding of religion as similarly a comprehensive expression of who "we" are, but one whose "meta"-communicative dimension is initially visible in its pointing to an "absolute" reality that is beyond the community of "we" who bear witness to it. Anticipating later developments in the phenomenology of religion, as we saw, Hegel's account of religion demonstrates this affirmation of the absolute *object* to be an implicit *self*-affirmation: not unlike forgiveness, religion operates at the most basic context of ritual activity wherein we, in our words and deeds among one another, enact and affirm what it means to be a member of the human community.

Given this parallel, is it reasonable to consider forgiveness a religious act? We might imagine already how Hegel's answer to this question would be "no," since, while religion essentially involves an appeal to an object or source "beyond" the community of the faithful (in other words, a "higher power"), it is very clearly "we" who are affirmed in the act of forgiveness. Yet, two points complicate this straightforward answer. First, in his description of forgiveness as "God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge" (494, M671), Hegel clearly wants us to have in mind a religious phenomenon of some sort when thinking about forgiveness. And second, understood in terms of its significance as basic ritual, religion itself works against our interpretation of it as essentially a matter of looking beyond who "we" are. As these points suggest, then, forgiveness may in fact turn out to be a religious act of some sort, to the extent that religion is defined, less by its appeal to an absolute object "beyond" the human community, and more by the kind of "utterance of the community concerning its own spirit" that characterizes forgiveness (482, M656[2]).

In order to clarify Hegel's specific understanding of the religious significance of forgiveness, I consider below the accounts of forgiveness of two more recent philosophers, Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricoeur. Whereas Arendt insists on the strictly human—and more specifically, political—nature of forgiveness, Ricoeur argues that forgiveness presupposes an act of faith that necessarily inscribes it within the "Abrahamic memory." When pressed, though, the positions of these thinkers are not so much alternatives between which we must choose, as differing accounts of forgiveness as representing the very limit between the "religious" (or "divine") and the "strictly human." In this way, Arendt and Ricoeur's reflections on the nature of forgiveness provide a helpful context for understanding Hegel's conceptions of forgiveness and

[2] Indeed, Hegel offers this phrase as a definition of religion in his discussion of conscience.

religion as parallel—and ultimately intersecting—ways in which human action is brought into meaningful contact with its "absolute" source.

1. Forgive and forget?

To begin, let us return to what we were recalling about forgiveness above—namely, its perception of the agent in a way that includes her transgressive particularity. Along these lines, it is common to insist that forgiveness, despite the adage, is *not* the same as forgetting. Forgiveness, that is, is typically accompanied by the claim that some wrongs cannot or should not be forgotten, and indeed that the merit of forgiveness is measured by its capacity not to allow the wrong done to fade into the oblivion of forgetting. And yet, it must be admitted that a sense of forgetting is intrinsic to the everyday practice of forgiving as we tend to imagine it. That is, we typically imagine forgiveness to be a response to another person's action that *overlooks* its malicious or damaging quality, and that distinguishes *her* as a person from the regrettable thing that she did. Understood in this way, to forgive is to choose not to count someone's action against them, to disregard—to "forget"—this particular action in making one's overall assessment of who this person is. To forgive is to say, "I see that you are more than your wrong-doing; though I acknowledge the wrongness of your action, I forgive *you*," because I recognize that your (finite) act does not speak for the (infinite) truth of who you are as one who can always do better.

As Ricoeur and Derrida argue, forgiveness that overlooks wrong-doing actually misses its target, since it addresses an agent who is in a sense already forgiven, already no longer the author of the wrong. "[S]eparating the guilty person from his act," writes Ricoeur, "in other words forgiving the guilty person while condemning his action, would be to forgive a subject other than the one who committed the act."[3] Derrida highlights the case of the repentant wrong-doer, who, "from that point is no longer guilty through and through, but already another, and better than the guilty one. To this extent, and on this condition, it is no longer the *guilty as such* who is forgiven."[4] Forgiveness as the separation of the agent from the act does not account for all that it ought to, since, instead of forgiving me *in* my guilt, it bypasses the part of me that desires

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 490.
[4] Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 35.

forgiveness, thus presupposing the very forgiving perception it means to enact, and leaving me feeling as though it were someone else who is forgiven.

In short, this recognition of agency in spite of wrong-doing expresses a *conditional* form of forgiveness. This forgiveness frees me of my guilt only on the condition that I am in some way already not the author of my bad action, or else on the condition that I first ask for it, producing for myself the self-image that I then ask others to recognize. This is not to say that such conditional forgiveness ought not to be performed; indeed, in many cases the expectation of remorse and the request for forgiveness are entirely reasonable, insofar as our freedom as agents in many ways depends on being separated from the injurious consequences of our past action.[5] What Ricoeur and Derrida find questionable, however, is whether forgiveness is reducible to what is "reasonable,"[6] and hence whether conditional forgiveness—which presupposes that the forgiven agent is somehow different from the one who erred—is exhaustive of what the idea of forgiveness demands.

Indeed, as Derrida says at the beginning of his 1999 lecture "On Forgiveness," the very idea of forgiveness implies unconditionality. "In principle," he writes, "there is no limit to forgiveness, no *measure*, no moderation, no 'to what point?'"[7] To forgive on condition of the separation of the agent from the act is to inscribe such a limit ("we will forgive, only if…"), and, while such conditions are always reasonable, the *idea* of forgiveness contains the possibility that forgiveness would pronounce judgment—forgivingly—*on the wrongful action itself*. For Derrida, the idea of forgiveness has embedded within it the demand to forgive in the midst of guilt, in the midst, that is, of the agent's *inseparability* from her wrongful action.[8]

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[5] This corresponds to Hannah Arendt's understanding of forgiveness as "release," which she associates more closely with the precondition of "changing one's mind" (*metanoia*) rather than repentance. See Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 240: "Only through [a] constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new."

[6] Although Derrida and Ricoeur are similarly suspicious of forgiveness as the separation of the agent from the act—in his remark above, Ricoeur credits Derrida with first articulating this problem—their reasons for this suspicion are different. For Derrida, who we might say focuses on the *giving* of forgiveness, any actual performance of forgiveness is only ever a partial—that is, conditioned—instantiation of the idea(l) of unconditioned forgiveness that informs any such performance. For Ricoeur, whose concern in this regard is the *request* for forgiveness, forgiveness remains an "impossible" that I am unable to invoke on my own strength, owing to the incapacitation that I experience in being "bound" to my guilt.

[7] Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 27.

[8] Consider that, in response to the recognition, "you are not what you have done," it is not nevertheless possible to reply, if only to oneself, "but I *am* what I have done; I committed the wrong, and what I desire is to be forgiven *as the wrong-doer*, rather than someone already separated from it." The problem surrounding conditional forgiveness is

Notwithstanding the practical difficulties of enacting such unconditional forgiveness, are there ways to realize this ideal of forgiveness that continues to perceive the agent as the author of his wrong?

One possibility for a forgiveness that refuses to forget in this way would be one that *re-signifies* the wrongful action, on the one hand recognizing its inseparability from the agent who performed it while, on the other hand, adopting a new perceptual stance toward it whereby it no longer speaks of this agent's inability to do the good. Forgivingly re-interpreted, then, my wrongful actions are not exceptions to who I am (e.g., a moral agent striving to do the good) but are, in a sense, the rule; that is, forgiveness is here the recognition that I err inevitably, and that my error—that is, my particular individuality—is as constitutive an aspect of my identity as is my commitment to do better.[9] To re-signify wrong-doing is not necessarily to excuse it, moreover, but rather is to acknowledge that it has a place in the overall picture of who I am as a subject whose identity is never settled. Forgiveness in this sense would not oppose itself to other forms of perception—such as that of law, according to which I must pay my debt, or that of morality, which requires me to abstract from the determinacies of my situation and personality—but rather would offer a more—indeed, the *most*—comprehensive perception of an individual agent. To refuse to separate me from my action is to perceive all of me, the "whole" picture of who I am, my failings included.

2. Forgiveness at the limit (of human initiative)

Forgiveness as the reinterpretation of action thus answers more effectively to the "in principle" unconditional nature of forgiveness than does forgiveness as forgetting:[10] as

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thus the fact that it risks reproducing the anxiety that one is not properly—that is, wholly—perceived in being offered forgiveness, that one is not truly seen in the depths of one's guilt, and that there is *still more* to be forgiven.

[9] These different recognitions of identity correspond to the differing perceptions of moral agency between what Hegel calls "the moral view of the world" and conscience. The point here is that, in recognizing the determinacies of action and the particularities of individuals as constitutive of moral agency in the real world, the terms of conscience enable a more comprehensive recognition of the human agent. The pre-conscientious moral stance, by contrast, cannot support the recognition of "the whole self," since agency is here judged according to a universal standard that distinguishes itself from the particularities of my situation and my personality.

[10] The idea that forgiveness as the reinterpretation of action offers a more comprehensive perception of human agency than forgiveness as forgetting is helpfully discussed in Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?: Signs of Responsibilities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Chapter 16, especially pp. 338-341. With reference to Talmudic commentary, Gibbs explains that, whereas an attitude of fear towards one's wrong-doing may lead to a desire to erase my past action, the experience of being loved—by an other, necessarily (cf. Gibbs' discussion of Levinas at pp. 345-353)—allows for the possibility that my wrong-doing be reinterpreted as "an opportunity for creativity," and indeed a "source of righteousness" (340). Lovingly reinterpreted, then, one's wrong-doing becomes the basis for

reinterpretive, forgiveness does not require anything in advance, but gratuitously offers a new signification to the wrong that was done. Let us make two observations about what this kind of forgiveness entails.

In the first place, such forgiveness could not be offered from a standpoint of judgment beyond the sphere of human finitude, since it is initiated precisely by the acknowledgment that human activity is ineradicably, "absolutely" finite. Indeed, the act of forgiveness is *itself* as finite and contingent as all other forms of human activity, as partial and one-sided as the action that it forgives. Forgiveness is not the erasure of human failure, therefore; it is, rather, the acknowledgement that contingency—and thus a propensity toward failure—is a definitive characteristic of human action as such, and thus is the basic human condition shared by forgiver and recipient of forgiveness alike.

In self-reflectively commenting on the nature of human action as such, in the second place forgiveness is a *qualitatively distinct* form of human activity. The communicative significance of forgiveness thus transcends its appearance as a finite gesture in offering a comprehensive judgment about an agent's relation to her action. This "transcendent" dimension of forgiveness should be qualified, though. In forgiving, I appeal to the "absolute perception" of a person, not because I occupy a standpoint of judgment outside of the sphere of human action,[11] but because I judge that a person's partial and determinate action is essential to who she is, that she is who she is precisely *through* the determinate actions and qualities that comprise her unique identity. Such a judgment is prompted by my acknowledgment that the standpoint outside of the "frailty of human affairs," as Arendt calls it,[12] is impossible for both of us, and that we fundamentally share in the finitude of human agency. In this way, while it does not issue from any "beyond," forgiveness enacts a form of perception that transcends any standpoint that "you" or "I" alone could assume; it is the acknowledgment that *we are already forgiven*, here and now, as determinate individuals and in the midst of our finitude.

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new action, rather than a source of incapacity. "Fear of punishment," writes Gibbs, "prompts one to erase the past, but love leads one to bring the past back into a source for new growth" (Ibid., 341).

[11] Forgiveness understood this way would remain conditional—that is, conditioned by the authority I derive, as forgiver, from standing outside the domain of concrete human action. My standpoint here would resemble that of a judge in a legal system, who inhabits and acts out of a particular office that differs from her actual personhood. Forgiveness here would be relative to—that is, conditional on—the system of justice on which this office depends; it would not be forgiveness *as such*.

[12] See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188-192.

In view of its evident (quasi-)transcendent quality, then, it is no surprise that for some the question of forgiveness would be coextensive with the question of the nature and limit of what is humanly possible. Posing in his own way the question with which we began, Derrida writes,

> Is forgiveness a thing of man, something that belongs to man, a power of man—or else is it reserved for God, and thus already the opening of experience or existence onto a supernaturality just as to a superhumanity: divine, transcendent, or immanent, sacred, whether saintly or not? All the debates around forgiveness are also regularly debates around this "limit" and the passage of this limit. Such a limit passes between what one calls the human and the divine and also between what one calls the animal, the human, and the divine.[13]

In other words, is forgiveness a religious act? Do the apparently "transcendent" features of the act of forgiveness link forgiveness essentially to the religious appeal to a higher—"transcendent," "divine," "supernatural"—order? Does that fact that, in forgiving, I speak for a perception of finitude that is "beyond" my individual perspective entail that forgiving is a form of religious speech (as an appeal to or affirmation of a power beyond me)? And does this kinship with religious speech help explain why forgiveness so often marks a challenge to the stable and regulating work of the institutions of law and politics?

For Hannah Arendt, while it is in some sense "absolute" among human activities, forgiveness is neither a religious act, nor one that refers to any order beyond the "realm of human affairs." Although it was Jesus of Nazareth who discovered the role of forgiveness in the human realm, "the fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in a religious language," Arendt insists, "is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense."[14] As she explains in *The Human Condition*, the "faculty of forgiving" possessed by human beings offers the "redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing,"[15] by releasing us from the consequences of our action and thus enabling us to act anew.[16] Forgiveness, according to Arendt, marks (along with the act of making promises[17]) the *self*-redemptive

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[13] Jacques Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 44-5

[14] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 238.

[15] Ibid., 237.

[16] "Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell" (Ibid., 237).

[17] For Arendt, forgiving and promising are parallel self-redemptive forms of action, each answering to the uncertainty and frailty of human action with respect to a different sense of time. As she writes, "the two faculties

capacity of human action, and thus is not premised on any intervention from outside the sphere of human affairs. "Here," she writes, "the remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities of action itself."[18] Of course, this salvific nature of forgiveness—the fact, that is, that through it action remedies its own dangers—helps to explain the association of forgiveness with divine initiative and agency. As Arendt points out, however, the teachings of Jesus can be read as depicting forgiveness specifically as a matter of human power and initiative. "It is decisive," she writes, "that Jesus maintains against the 'scribes and pharisees' first that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive, and second that this power does not derive from God—as though God, not men, would forgive through the medium of human beings—but on the contrary must be mobilized by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also."[19] In response to the Derridian question, then, Arendt would locate the power to forgive squarely within the limits of the human, invoking nothing less than the teachings of Jesus as her principal support.

However, Arendt's interpretation of forgiveness as a thoroughly human (that is, political) possibility comes at the cost of the inability to address those forms of evil that, "transcend[ing] the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power,"[20] cannot be matched with a corresponding punishment. It is "quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs," she writes, "that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene."[21] Such evils, by "dispossess[ing] us of all power," "radically destroy" the human capacity to forgive and the public realm of human action on which it depends, and thus rule out the question of forgiveness

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belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose 'sins' hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men" (Ibid., 237).

[18] Ibid., 236-7

[19] Ibid., 239. In support of this reading Arendt cites Luke 5:24 ("But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home") and Matthew 6:14-15 ("For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses").

[20] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

[21] Ibid., 241.

altogether.[22] For Arendt, forgiveness corresponds to punishment as its "alternative": both represent "potentialities of human action" whereby agents release one another from the otherwise endless consequences of their action, and thus are restricted to the domain of human interaction in which this mutual release occurs.

It is especially with respect to this question of radical evil that Derrida and Ricoeur take issue with Arendt's account of forgiveness—Derrida, because the question of forgiveness only properly appears, he argues, in the presence of what one has deemed "unforgivable,"[23] and Ricoeur, because the restriction of forgiveness to what human beings are capable of understanding and performing in the public realm misses the "enigmatic" *incapacity* of guilt as what precisely demands to be forgiven. To an extent, Derrida and Ricoeur's objections to Arendt's account are quite similar: both take Arendt, in arguing that forgiveness cannot apply to "radical," "unforgivable" evil, to be treating as an exception to forgiveness precisely the kind of moral challenges to which it most properly applies. However, whereas Derrida's reflections address specifically the *concept* of forgiveness, Ricoeur challenges the deeper philosophical anthropology implicit in Arendt's understanding of forgiveness as a strictly human power, along similar lines to what we have noticed above about forgiveness as the comprehensive perception of human agency.

For Ricoeur, the "everyday," Arendtian forgiveness of the unintended consequences of our actions fails to reach the true depth of guilt, which, as he argues, is not reducible to our contingent misdeeds. As he argues in "Difficult Forgiveness," the epilogue to his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, behind or beneath our flawed actions *de facto* resides a "de jure unforgivability," an "experience of fault" that such empirical moral failures reveal but do not cause.[24] Properly to understand the experience of guilt, for Ricoeur, requires that we look

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[22] Ibid., 241. Again, Arendt cites the biblical account in asserting this humanized understanding of forgiveness: "Here, were the deed itself dispossesses us of all power, we can indeed only repeat with Jesus: 'It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea'."

[23] "In order to approach now the very concept of forgiveness, logic and common sense agree for once with the paradox: it is necessary, it seems to me, to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that *calls* for forgiveness? If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable… then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear" (Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32).

[24] "Culpability, guilt, like the other 'boundary situations,'" Ricoeur writes, "is implied in every contingent situation and belongs to what we ourselves have designated by the phrase our 'historical condition' on the level of an ontological hermeneutics" (Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*,, 460). Ricoeur borrows the term "boundary situation" from Karl Jaspers, who understands the experience of fault as a kind of existential "given," that is, one of the "nonfortuitous determinations of existence that we always find already there, such as death, suffering, struggle" (Ibid., 460). In this way, Ricoeur aligns himself with the Heideggerian understanding of guilt, according to which, as

beneath the quality of the particular act itself to the quality of its "causality" in the selfhood of the agent.[25] In this connection Ricoeur speaks of an "unfathomable causality hollowed out behind the actions in the interiority of the subject": at this depth the agent discovers an inability to detach herself from her bad action, an inability that the "release" from the empirical consequences of one's bad action cannot address. "At this level of depth," Ricoeur writes, "self-recognition is indivisibly action and passion, the action of acting badly and the passion of being affected by one's own action."[26] I am "bound," as it were, to my bad action, and thus disconnected from my capacity to act anew[27]—that is, to be other than the guilty self who has acted wrongly.

For Ricoeur, it is precisely this incapacitating attachment to one's bad action that Arendt's account of forgiveness overlooks. "In my opinion," he writes,

> what is lacking in the political interpretation of forgiveness… is any reflection on the very act of unbinding proposed as the condition for the act of binding. It seems to me that Hannah Arendt remained at the threshold of the enigma by situating the gesture of forgiveness at the point of intersection of the act and its consequences and not of the agent and the act. To be sure, forgiveness has the effect of dissociating the debt from its burden of guilt an in a sense of laying bare the phenomenon of the debt, as a dependence on a received heritage. But forgiveness does more. At least, it should do more: it should release the agent from his act.[28]

For Ricoeur, when restricted to the domain of politics—the public space of "visibility" within which human action and its consequences appear—forgiveness is unable to perform the "unbinding" that the recovery of the capacity to act from the grips of guilt demands. None of the institutional planes—be they juridical, political, or moral—on which forgiveness is typically attempted are able to reach the "de jure character of the guilty self," since these institutional

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Julia Kristeva explains, "human existence is 'guilty' insofar as it 'factically exists.' It does not need to make itself guilty of something by omission or commission. In fact, it possesses 'guilt' because it is a *Dasein*, 'thrown into being.' In other words, it owes being to something that it is not itself; it is indebted vis-à-vis being by virtue of its very existence." Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis, Volume 2*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002), 17.

[25] Ibid., 461-2.

[26] Ibid., 464, 462.

[27] The experience of guilt, Ricoeur explains, exposes an "abyss" between the agent and her capacity to act, which disrupts the process of articulation whereby I say "I can," and thus inhibits my capacity to self-identify as an agent capable of acting. Here Ricoeur demonstrates the rootedness of his idea of guilt in his notion of "imputability," which, he explains, "constitutes… an integral dimension of what I am calling the capable human being." As he writes further, "it is in the region of imputability"—the region, that is, in which "I can speak, act, recount, [and] hold myself accountable for my actions"—"that fault, guilt is to be sought. This is the region of articulation between the act and the agent, between the 'what' of the actions and the 'who' of the power to act—of agency. And this articulation, in the experience of fault, is in a sense affected, wounded by a painful affection" (Ibid., 460).

[28] Ibid., 490.

spheres deal only with possible—that is, reciprocal, conditional—forgiveness, and fail to register the "impossible forgiveness" required to address the "unforgivable fault" at the heart of the guilty self.[29] For Ricoeur, and as we have already hypothesized, a true unbinding must do more than separate the agent from her action; it "is to be sought," rather, "on the side of a *more radical uncoupling* than that supposed by the argument between a first subject, the one who committed the wrong, and a second subject, the one who is punished, an uncoupling at the very heart of our power to act—of agency—namely, between the effectuation and the capacity it actualizes." This "intimate dissociation" between the wrongful action and the very capacity to act, which renders the guilty subject "capable of beginning again," is for Ricoeur "the figure of unbinding that commands all the others."[30]

Here one of the distinctive traits of Ricoeur's understanding of forgiveness comes to the fore: "everything," he writes, "hangs on the possibility of separating the agent from the action. This unbinding would mark the inscription, in the field of the horizontal disparity between power and act, of the vertical disparity between the great height of forgiveness and the abyss of guilt."[31] It is this vertical disparity, moreover, that (*pace* Arendt) reveals that "the capacity of commitment belonging to the moral subject is not exhausted by its various inscriptions in the affairs of the world."[32] This forgiveness, which transcends—or at least challenges—that which is "possible" for human initiative, requires a form of action that differs from those that find their place at the juridical, political, and moral levels. The "intimate dissociation" between agent and act at the heart of the guilty self, Ricoeur writes, "expresses an act of faith, a credit addressed to the resources of self-regeneration." "To account for this ultimate act of trust," he continues, "there is no recourse to assume the ultimate paradox proposed by the Religions of the Book and which I find inscribed in the Abrahamic memory."[33]

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[29] Ibid., 490. "It was… in reply to this de jure unforgivability that we established the requirement of impossible forgiveness. And all of our subsequent analyses have been an exploration of the gap opened up between the unforgivable fault and this impossible forgiveness. The exceptional gestures of forgiveness, the precepts concerning the consideration owed to the defendant, and all the behaviours that we ventured to maintain on the planes of criminal, political, and moral guilt, for the *incognitos* of forgiveness—and which are often no more than alibis for forgiveness—were applied, with difficulty, to fill this gap."

[30] Ibid., 490.

[31] Ibid., 490. As he writes at the beginning of the epilogue, "the trajectory of forgiveness has its origin in the disproportion that exists between the poles of fault and forgiveness. I shall speak throughout this chapter of a difference in altitude, of a vertical disparity, between the depth of fault and the height of forgiveness" (Ibid., 457).

[32] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 490.

[33] Ibid., 490.

The paradox Ricoeur refers to, specifically, is that of repentance, which inscribes in time the eternal[34] "gift" of forgiveness, experienced paradoxically as the source of the temporal gesture that invokes it. As Ricoeur argues, forgiveness occurs as the temporal and contingent act of recognizing the antecedent power of the source of my action: "the existential response to forgiveness is implied, as it were, in the gift itself, while the antecedence of the gift is recognized at the very heart of the inaugural gesture of repentance.[35] Forgiveness is impossible, for Ricoeur, not in the sense that it never *happens*; rather, the depth of the capable self to which it applies, as well as its tendency to disrupt the stability of those institutions that govern human relations, means that forgiveness, when it does appear in the sphere of human interaction, does so "incognito,"[36] and in the form of a "gift" that we could never bring about on our own human strength. The possibility of forgiveness, hence, is something in which we can only put our faith; it is decidedly not, for Ricoeur, one of the "potentialities of action" available to us as political agents as it is for Arendt, but rather is an antecedent, morally regenerative power whose appearance calls us to the religious posture of trust.

Especially given Ricoeur's explicit criticisms of Arendt's view of forgiveness,[37] it might appear that these are two alternatives between which we must choose—that forgiveness must be a matter *either* of human *or* divine initiative. In framing the issue this way, however, we risk overlooking the unique possibility for human activity represented by forgiveness in complicating any strict division between the human and the divine. Indeed, is it not possible that both authors misjudge the religious resonances of the act of forgiveness—Arendt by underestimating the stakes of the redemption of human agency in the experience of forgiveness, and Ricoeur by

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[34] "If [forgiveness] is the supreme height, then it permits neither before or after, whereas the response of repentance occurs in time… The paradox is precisely that of the circular relation between what 'remains' forever and what comes to be in each instance" (Ibid., 491).

[35] Ibid., 490-1.

[36] Ricoeur refers to the "incognito of forgiveness" specifically with respect to the uneasy relationship between forgiveness and political norms such as justice and public dialogue. Cf. ibid., 458: "If it is true that justice must be done, under the threat of sanctioning the impunity of the guilty, forgiveness can find refuge only in gestures incapable of being transformed into institutions. These gestures, which would constitute the incognito of forgiveness, designate the ineluctable space of consideration due to every human being, in particular to the guilty." And cf., ibid., 485: "It is not a sign of despair to recognize the noncircumstantial, but more properly structural, limitations belonging to an enterprise of reconciliation which not only requires a great deal of time but also a work upon the self, in which it is not an exaggeration to see under the figure of a public exercise of political reconciliation something like an *incognito* of forgiveness." It is especially this apparent incompatibility between acts of forgiveness and political institutions that Ricoeur points to here, combined with his interpretation of forgiveness in religious terms, that prompts the question of this present study—the question, namely, of the parallel between this incompatibility and the incompatibility between religious gestures and political institutions.

[37] See in particular the section entitled "Forgiving and Promising," ibid., pp. 486-9.

underappreciating the "human, all-too human" nature of even the paradoxical forgiveness that he locates in the "Abrahamic memory"—and in this way fail to regard forgiveness as precisely *the point of contact between* the human and the religious (or divine)? Framed with this question in mind, the difference between Arendt and Ricoeur on the question of forgiveness (or rather, the question of human capacity that forgiveness invokes[38]) is in fact not all that great. Posing the question in Arendt's direction, then, we might ask: is the range of what can appear within the worldly domain of "human affairs" in fact reducible to what we, as human agents, are able to invent or produce on our own strength? Might not the range of human activities extend beyond that in which we take initiative, and include something like an "act of faith" in which we respond to an initiative beyond us? And to Ricoeur we might ask: does the fact that forgiveness is available only to an act of *faith* necessarily imply that forgiveness does not intersect with human activity in Arendt's—political[39]—sense? Does the "ultimate act of trust" on which forgiveness is premised turn our attention away from the domain of worldly human action?

3. The divinity of conscience: Forgiveness and religion as intersecting practices of "discerning the source"

These questions lead us to the hypothesis that the sphere of human activity is not exhausted by what one is able to produce or initiate on one's own strength, but rather includes actions in which one responds to—that is, takes responsibility for—a source or initiative that altogether exceeds one's own capacities. To invoke the notion of trust (or faith), as Ricoeur does in the case of forgiveness, is not to diminish the significance of human agency, therefore, but rather is to point to our essential involvement, as finite agents, in the infinite reality on which we

[38] Despite Ricoeur's criticisms, it is not clear that the problem of incapacity is altogether lost on Arendt. While forgiveness, for Arendt, clearly concerns "our capacity to act" (*The Human Condition*, 237), she locates the restoration of this capacity in the public domain of recognition between individuals, whereas for Ricoeur guilt is only properly addressed in the interior depth of the self. Between them, hence, resides a difference in the very conception of selfhood. Guilt reveals, for Ricoeur, that we are as selves always something other and deeper than our actions (and so the problem of action's consequences does not get to the "heart" of guilt), whereas for Arendt this interior depth of guilt would be a derivative experience, since for her the unique "who" that we are is most properly revealed and sustained in action and speech performed in the presence of others (from which perspective the opaque depth of "radical evil" would be a marginal phenomenon).

[39] "Politics," for Arendt, designates the public space in which, speaking and acting "in concert," human beings appear to one another in their singular identities, and in this way differs from the institutional sphere of law and government (which Arendt typically associates with the human activity of "work," not "action") (*The Human Condition*, 244; cf. also 199-207). Hence, Ricoeur's lack of faith in the "political interpretation" of forgiveness, premised on the "sometimes monstrous failure of all efforts to institutionalize forgiveness," intersects with Arendt's understanding of politics without wholly encapsulating it (Ricoeur, "Difficult Forgiveness," 488).

depend. The object of faith, in other words, is never wholly "beyond" the sphere of human responsibility; as human agents we are essentially involved in the discernment, realization, and application of realities of which we are nevertheless not the authors or producers, a fact that challenges from both sides any attempt to disentangle the "divine" and "human" spheres.

This proximity to the posture of faith certainly explains why an exploration of forgiveness would invite an exploration of religion, a possibility that Ricoeur explicitly raises. Citing the recovery of human agency in forgiveness, he writes: "under [the] modest heading—'the restoration… of the original predisposition to do the good'—the entire project of a philosophy of religion centered on the theme of the liberation of the ground of goodness in human beings is veiled and unveiled."[40] Here, Ricoeur treats the distinctive "difficulty" of forgiveness as an opportunity to investigate religion philosophically as a significant, if not necessary, resource for the restoration of the human capacity to act from the depths of moral despair. However, while forgiveness is certainly an important moral concept, especially within the Western religious heritage,[41] is it is not obvious that the religious dimension of forgiveness must be interpreted immediately in moral terms. In other words, would not the phenomenological parallel between forgiveness and religion that we have been noticing—namely, that both invite the question of the "limits" of human experience and capacity—itself justify an exploration of their interrelation, prior to the invocation of moral questions? If so,

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[40] Ibid., 492. Ricoeur refers to Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, which, on Ricoeur's reading, offers a hermeneutic model for understanding the narrative, symbolic, and institutional forms of religion as representational apparatuses expressive of the priority of our original "predisposition" to do the good over our radical "propensity" for evil (Ibid., 492). For Ricoeur, Kant's account of the "supernatural" restoration of one's power to act to its original predisposition contains a limited, but evident, reference to the vertical dimension operative in forgiveness. "Discussing the inscription of the spirit of forgiveness in the operations of the will," writes Ricoeur, "Kant confines himself to assuming the 'supernatural cooperation' capable of accompanying and of completing the inclusion of moral 'incentives in the maxims of our power of choice.' This knot is at one and the same time the unbinding of forgiveness and the binding of promising" (Ibid., 493).

[41] "Against the backdrop of [a] philosophical reading of Western religions," Ricoeur writes, "the enigma of forgiveness stands out in the sphere of meaning belonging to these religions" (Ibid., 492). Although, as I am suggesting in this chapter, it is not immediately obvious whether forgiveness is a religious phenomenon of some sort, nor what it would mean if it were, it is clear, as Ricoeur claims, that the question of forgiveness necessarily puts us within the territory of the "Abrahamic" idiom. As Kristeva also notes, "Christian forgiveness is inscribed in a defined context: the interiorization of evil, the consciousness-guilt correspondence, the absurdity and scandal of suffering, and the "justification" and forgiveness of sins through and in the passion of Christ. To think about forgiveness in philosophy and psychoanalysis inevitably places us in this landscape" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt*, 15). However, the "inscription" (Ricoeur) of forgiveness within the Abraham tradition is not exclusively Christian. As Elliot Wolfson shows, forgiveness remains an important theme in certain forms of Jewish symbolism (especially Zoharic literature and the liturgy of Yom Kippur), given its significance in connection with the covenantal relation between human beings and God. See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 228-230.

should we not first explore this parallel *on its own terms*, instead of presuming that forgiveness and religion must be understood in moral terms or that they must answer to moral questions?

One of the advantages of postponing the moral interpretation of religion and forgiveness, I want to suggest, is that it allows us to explore this parallel from both directions, addressing not only the possible religious significance of forgiveness but also the possibility that forgiveness would inform our understanding of religion.[42] What this approach enables, I want to suggest, is an account of religion and forgiveness as not simply parallel but *intersecting* communal practices. Although, as I have tried to show, Arendt and Ricoeur's reflections are suggestive in this direction,[43] it is Hegel who best enables us to explore this intersection, as it is in his account that religion and forgiveness reveal their essential implication with one another, in a way that neither presupposes any specific interpretive framework nor seeks to confirm any pre-established thesis about their relation. Hegel's *Phenomenology* is an attempt to describe the self-manifestation of the realities of our lived experience, and so any clues regarding the intersection of religion and forgiveness must be taken from the way in which these activities reveal themselves. Since Chapters One and Two, respectively, offered phenomenological accounts of forgiveness and religion as forms of human communication, what I want to do here is simply to

[42] The one-sidedness of the moral interpretation is especially evident in its tendency to treat the restorative power of forgiveness as an opportunity to assert the privilege either of religion in general or of a particular religious idiom as the "absolute" source of moral repair. Because, as we will explore further in the following chapter, religion and forgiveness coincide in a community's act of collective self-expression, the community's understanding of what can be forgiven is entangled with its understanding of its own basic essence, in which case forgiveness is always articulated idiomatically in terms of who "we" are and how "we" choose to forgive. Hence, to avoid such claims to religious privilege—for example, that forgiveness is premised on a religious belief of some sort, or is the possession of a particular religious idiom—we should avoid hastily interpreting the interrelation of religion and forgiveness in the terms of another (e.g., moral) phenomenon. In the first place, such an interpretation causes us to overlook the more basic dimension of human experience that this intersection occupies, and which in fact contextualizes (and thus help explain) the particular terms of moral experience. As we saw in the previous two chapters, religion and forgiveness possess a "functional" similarity as forms of communication whose sociolinguistic significance reaches "beneath" the more relative situations of moral and rational agency. Second, postponing the moral hermeneutic of religion enables us to observe the spheres of human interaction in addition to morality to which the intersection of religion and forgiveness applies. I have in mind here the political implications of this intersection, according to which—as I explore in the final chapter—the inherent responsibility of religious conviction and practice to the demand of forgiveness exposes religion to a form of tolerance that exceeds that which is typically prescribed in liberal political theory.

[43] It is especially puzzling that, while in the epilogue to *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur is content to explicitly identify forgiveness as the interpretive key to a philosophical exploration of religion in moral terms, he makes no such identification (not explicitly, anyway) when he himself performs this exploration of religion (I am referring here to Ricoeur's 2000 lecture entitled "Religious Belief: The Difficult Path of the Religious," which I discuss below). If, as Ricoeur's epilogue insists, a discussion of the nature of forgiveness points us necessarily in the direction of religion, one wonders why a discussion of religion (in precisely the same terms as the epilogue) would not also point us, reciprocally, in the direction of forgiveness. If forgiveness can be understood as an essentially religious phenomenon, might not religion be conceived of as essentially forgiving?

comment on their intersecting significance based on the conclusions of the previous two chapters.

To begin, let us return to the nature of faith or trust as a kind of discerning response to the source of one's capacities. In his own discussion of the nature of faith (as trust), Hegel writes:

> Whomsoever I trust, his *certainty of himself* is for me the *certainty of myself*; I recognize in him my own being-for-self, know that he acknowledges it and that it is for him purpose and essence. Trust, however, is faith, because the consciousness of the believer is *directly related* to its object and is thus also intuitively aware that it is *one* with it and in it. (406, M549)

Trust, Hegel explains, is the experience of finding the essence of one's self-identity to reside in an "other." I find that what is "object" for me is that in which I recognize myself most fully, and I am, to use Hegel's language, "directly related" to and "one with" this object on which I depend, in such a way that my particular self-identity is *its* "purpose and essence" as much as it is the source of *my* essence as a self. Trust is, to a significant extent, a form of self-experience: no matter how fervently it is claimed, in religious terms, say, that trust—or rather, faith—is the submission of all authority and agency to God, there is a measure of reciprocity to the experience of God insofar as my certainty in God is at the same time my *self*-certainty. To recognize the entirety of one's "being-for-self" in the object of faith is also tacitly to acknowledge one's own essential role in the articulation of this object: if I am not what *I* am without it, then neither can *it* be what it is without me.

Indeed, for Hegel, this kind of tacit reciprocity between self and other is characteristic not simply of the particular religious stance of faith but of religious consciousness in general. In its various forms as the "consciousness of absolute essence," religion is the experience of *one's own* absolute finitude, of the absolute relativity of one's individual standpoint to the absolute object to which all the familiar terms of one's experience answer. To a decisive extent, then, religion is an experience of one's own selfhood—of *self*-consciousness—since, where the object of religious experience thoroughly exceeds my interpretive capacities, I am more immediately in touch with my total inadequacy to grasp this object than I am with this object itself. It is no surprise, therefore, that Hegel identifies the complete phenomenon of religion as "absolute reality in and for itself, the *self-consciousness* of spirit" (495, M672; my emphasis): the absolute other of religious consciousness is, on fuller analysis, the representation of *my* stance toward absolute reality and, consequently, who *I* am most basically and essentially.

Moreover, religion is the self-consciousness of *spirit*, since, as we explored in Chapter Two, the "self" at issue in religious expression is in fact the collective reality of human practices—who *we* are—that contextualize individual agency at the most basic level. As Hegel shows in his account of conscience, the "absolute self-consciousness" (483, M657) enacted in recognition of one's inescapable interpretive responsibility is most properly realized in the context of "absolute spirit," as it is this shared activity of spirit—the mutual recognition of mutually conscientious agents—that provides the consummate acknowledgment and fulfillment of all that a "self"—an interpretive centre of significance—can be. Here the reciprocity of self and other that characterizes the faithful or religious stance announces itself more fully, since what was initially treated as the exposure to an absolute *object* is now recognized, according to the fuller account of the religious phenomenon, to involve essentially *our finite and practical response* to this object.[44]

For Hegel, then, postures such as the faithful receptivity to an absolute object are of interest for what they reveal about how *we* comport ourselves "absolutely," just as our religious practices of affirming "the absolute" are for what they reveal about how we define ourselves as a community. However, since religious experience is most immediately articulated in terms of one's exposure to an absolute *object*, we must look to other, more obviously social practices, for the "self-consciousness of spirit" implicitly at work in religion. Such practices, according to Hegel, are those of confession and forgiveness, the acts of conscientious mutual recognition through which individuals "come to terms"—literally, in a sense[45]—with the conditions of their own individual agencies. As we explored in Chapter One, confession and forgiveness support human action at the most comprehensive level by reckoning with (that is, forgiving) its inherently interpretive (that is, transgressive) nature. In confession one acknowledges and accepts the inescapably singular nature of one's participation in the shared world, and in forgiveness one acknowledges the inescapably shared nature of this singularity, affirming that the communicative possibilities one shares with others are indeed able to accommodate the singular and transgressive action they make possible.

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[44] As an *exposure* to "the absolute," religion is—as the ambiguity of the term "exposure" implies—equally active and passive, a receptivity to the object of one's experience that nevertheless highlights the specificity of one's own response.

[45] Literally, since confession and forgiveness signal the recognition of the absolute significance of "terms"—that is, communication—for the fulfillment of human agency.

In this way, confession and forgiveness represent a form of communication that forms the horizon for all other communicative acts. While all forms of speech presuppose, in one way or another, the mutual recognition of singular identities, it is the unique function of confession and forgiveness actually to *perform* this recognition—that is, precisely to *communicate* (although not always explicitly) that communication—in particular, the community of mutually recognizing conscientious agents—is the ultimate domain wherein human agents fulfill their interpretive capacities. Confession and forgiveness are acts of "speech about speech,"[46] therefore, collective self-expressions that affirm something about the system of human activity as a whole—namely, its self-reckoning (that is, absolute) nature. Confession and forgiveness are therefore forms of "meta-action"; they are the enactment of the self-restorative powers of human action and communication, whose significance is not reducible to the systems of communication that they mobilize and sustain.

It is this kind of irreducibility that prompts Molly Farneth to claim that the acts of confession and forgiveness have a distinctly religious or theological significance. "Hegel's use of the term 'God,'" at the end of Chapter VI, she writes, "squares with his view of confession and forgiveness as sacramental practices."[47] Drawing on a Lutheran understanding of sacramental rituals, Farneth explains that "sacraments symbolize the divine reality through a visible sign, such as the bread and wine in the Eucharist, and they actualize the signified reality, as with Christ's real presence in the Eucharistic host."[48] As Farneth argues, confession and forgiveness incorporate the three key features of all sacramental acts, according to Luther—namely, "visible sign, signified reality, and faith"[49]—and in this way "serve as signs of a reconciliation that is actualized in the ritual."[50] Indeed, the key to the sacramental dimension of confession and forgiveness, for Farneth, resides in their simultaneously *actualizing* and *symbolizing* functions with respect to the "absolute spirit" that they comprise. As she writes, "certain shared practices—

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[46] Alternately, forgiveness is "a saying which says its own saying" (Robert Bernasconi, "Hegel and Levinas: The Possibility of Forgiveness and Reconciliation," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Elise Katz (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 65), or a "speech act [that] performatively generates the sociability to which it attests," as "an utterance that speaks of nothing other than that there is 'utterance'" (Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 131).

[47] Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 96.

[48] Ibid., 74.

[49] As she explains, "confession and forgiveness are speech acts that pair word and deed: the word of forgiveness… is the sign, and the actualized forgiveness is the signified reality. The faith that one can and does forgive the other is the final aspect of their reconciliation" (Ibid., 74-75).

[50] Ibid., 76.

sacramental practices—make it possible for communities to express their deepest commitments while making those commitments *actual* and *present* among them. Confession and forgiveness are sacramental practices in this sense."[51] As practices that both enact and express (that is, *re-present*) what is "absolute" for a community, confession and forgiveness involve the "emergence" of a reality—the appearing "God," in Hegel's terms—that is irreducible to the individual participants of the sacramental experience. "God's appearance in the midst of those who confess and forgive," Farneth writes, "is the actualization of the absolute—understood in religion's representational terms as God." As she affirms, hence, "there *is* something emergent about absolute spirit," insofar as "the spirit that proceeds from the unity of substance and subject is more than the sum of its parts," and is, hence, "irreducible to the dyad of wicked consciousness and judging consciousness."[52]

However, while this "emergent"—that is, collectively self-expressive—dimension of human community is more readily *accomplished* in the practices of confession and forgiveness, it is less often explicitly *noticed* (unlike religion, which, especially in its initial form as the "consciousness of absolute essence" is explicitly the noticing of an absolute, "emergent" reality).[53] The statement "I forgive you" is a specific utterance directed towards a specific set of circumstances, the meta-communicative or self-expression dimension of which thus remains implicit. In this way, forgiveness, which achieves what Hegel calls "absolute spirit," is no less finite than the action that it forgives. To forgive, to say "you still 'count' among us; the dialogue between us can still go on," is to affirm someone's irrevocable belonging to the practices of shared-meaning; it is to put to work the absolute reconciliatory potential of the structures of recognition that make this community what it is. And yet, forgiveness is always a *particular*

[51] Ibid., 76.
[52] Ibid., 96-97
[53] Strictly speaking, that is, the determinate act of forgiveness does not itself accomplish spirit's self-affirmation as absolute—that is, as "all essence and all actuality" (497, M677). It is not, in other words, precisely the "self-consciousness of spirit," not the phenomenon of *religion*. Conscience, a communicative and intersubjective reality, accomplishes the absolute form of "spirit," but it does not of itself produce the knowledge that spirit is itself "the absolute." In Hegel's terminology, the form of collective self-knowing explored in his account of conscience is still "pure" (M677). Hence, a further development is required in order for the lesson of conscience—the absoluteness of human communication, reflected by the appearance of God "in the midst" of human activity—to be extended to "all reality." In other words, the "existence"—that is, determinacy—that the opposed individuals "let go" in overcoming their antagonism must be reconciled with the "pure knowledge" whereby these individuals know themselves as no longer so opposed. As Jamros argues, "conscience leads only to a 'pure knowing' that excludes the material side of human being. But this is the side which [*sic*] gives existence to human thinking… Therefore the pure thinking of conscience needs to be improved by showing that it leads to real human existence." Jamros, "'The Appearing God' in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in Stewart, ed., *The* Phenomenology of Spirit *Reader* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 341.

interpretation of the situation that prompts it, a particular "take" on "who we are" and on what it means to be a part of this "we." In this way, the absolute import of the gesture of forgiveness is not necessarily recognized; that is, the activity through which a community reckons with its own "absolute essence" is not immediately recognized as an utterance of "we," and the enactment, in words, of a community's absolute reconciliatory potential is not the same as the acknowledgment *that* such potential resides *in words*.

Hegel captures this discrepancy when he says, the "word of reconciliation is the *objectively* existent spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself *qua universal* essence, in its opposite… a reciprocal recognition which is absolute spirit" (493, M670). Forgiveness, the "word of reconciliation," realizes "absolute spirit" in the form of an "objectively existent" act of communication, that is, in the form of a speech-act whose objective—that is, perceptible, but also specific and momentary—character sets it apart from the "absolute" it accomplishes. In this way, forgiveness reproduces the very discrepancy of finite action and absolute essence it is meant to reconcile, since the absolute power of reconciliation appealed to in forgiveness necessarily exceeds or transcends the finite utterance in which forgiveness is performed. "The reconciling *Yea*, in which the two 'I's let go their antithetical *existence*," recall, "is God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge" (494, M671). That Hegel's phenomenology of religion directly follows these remarks reflects his view that, especially historically speaking, a community's articulation of that which possesses absolute reconciliatory power is typically oriented toward something *other* than its own potential as a finite form of human being together. Thus, Hegel's study of experience cannot conclude simply with his account of forgiveness as "absolute spirit"; were it to do so, it would bypass an essential dimension of the way in which spirit reveals itself—namely, in terms of the *distinction* between "spirit"—who *we* are—and the reality of "the absolute." In attending to the phenomenological specificity of religion, therefore, Hegel urges us not to reduce this absolute reality to the form of spirit—namely, the intersubjective situation of conscience—in which it appears. Although religion is essentially a matter of *human* practice, the definitive function of religion is to expresses the relative nature of all "merely human" practices with respect to what "we" as a human community take to have absolute value.

Therefore, while Hegel defines the full phenomenon of religion at the beginning of Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as "absolute essence in and for itself, the self-

consciousness of spirit," it is important not to identify these two aspects too hastily.[54] In describing it as the site for the appearance of God, Hegel presents the situation of forgiveness as invoking a source or power that the terms of conscientious mutual recognition cannot adequately capture. That is, forgiveness gives rise to a certain "absolute," and while Hegel does indicate that we are here bearing witness to "absolute *spirit*," it is not possible simply and immediately to *say* that the content of the religious phenomenon is spirit, the "we."[55] In other words, while the *content* of religion and forgiveness is identical, since both are declarations of the basic essence of the communities that practice them, the *form* of religious practice uniquely distinguishes itself from this content, putting the community's basic self-expression in terms of some object beyond the community. To understand religion, for Hegel, is to resist the urge to resolve this discrepancy insofar as the phenomenon of religion *is precisely its discrepancy between form and content* (the discrepancy between spirit and its self-consciousness).[56] If in forgiveness we confront a finite, intersubjective situation that plays host to a certain "absolute" possibility, in religion we confront those practices through which human communities bear witness to this absolute, to their contact with regenerative and reconciliatory source that they—that "we"—could neither invent nor initiate.

Ultimately, for Hegel, the collective "self" of the community and this absolute "object" it affirms in its religious practices are not separate realities, and the two sides of the phrase "absolute essence in and for itself, the self-consciousness of spirit" mean the same thing. However, Hegel also thinks that it is phenomenologically significant that certain human practices—what he calls "absolute spirit"—involve an appeal to a reality that exceeds human practice in some way, and that, reciprocally, such appeals (what we typically call "religion") are

[54] That is, he does not immediately posit religion as "the self-consciousness of absolute spirit."
[55] Hegel makes this point several times in his introduction to the concept of religion (M672-684) in characterizing the "immediate" form of religion. For example: "spirit which, to begin with, has an *immediate* knowledge of itself is thus to itself spirit in the *form* of *immediacy*, and the determinateness of the form in which it appears to itself is that of being" (501, M682). Once again, Hegel demonstrates his opposition to reductive interpretations of religion. It is not sufficient simply to *assert* that the affirmation of "the absolute" is in fact a matter of human self-conscious and not simply a matter of "being"; rather, we must observe the way in which religion *itself* leads to this conclusion.
[56] In Hegel's terms, religion is the self-consciousness of spirit in the form of consciousness. One the one hand, then, the forms of the "consciousness of absolute essence" that appeared at previous moments in Hegel's study were not adequate points of departure for a study of religion, insofar as the implicit significance of religion as the "self-consciousness of spirit" was not yet explicitly posited. On the other hand, though, religion is not immediately conscious that *spirit* is the absolute that it affirms—it is not immediately *self*-conscious—and so it instead affirms this absolute as a distinct phenomenal "object" that exceeds both finite consciousness and spirit as the community of finite subjects. However, this discrepancy actually allows the specificity of religion to stand out, insofar as the difference between who "we" (finitely) are and what we affirm (as absolute) is definitive of the phenomenon that Hegel studies as "religion."

revelatory of how human societies have defined themselves. Hegel's phenomenology, therefore, enables an understanding of forgiveness and religion as distinct, but parallel, human practices: both speak for the absolute significance of human communication—forgiveness, by expressing that while "there is no meaning if meaning is not shared,"[57] the sharing of meaning is ultimately a sharing among *singular* perspectives who can never be reduced to what is "shared," and religion, by providing the terms through which "we" as a community express the absolute status of that—object—through which the ultimate meaning of things is recognized and affirmed; both, moreover, possess an inherent structural discrepancy, insofar as their invocation of what is "absolute" exceeds the finite terms in which they, as actions, are performed and known—forgiveness being the enactment in the form of finite words of an absolute form of mutual recognition, and religion is the articulation of this similarly absolute in finite terms. Forgiveness and religion alike, then, are practices of "discerning the source," practices in which we employ the terms of our finite situation in expressing the "absolute" source of our shared reality.

Hegel's phenomenology of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* attests to the fact that the reality of "absolute spirit," although achieved (implicitly) in the practices of confession and forgiveness, produces a form of expression whose function is to bear explicit witness to what "we"—as "spirit"—take to be absolute. His claim, however, that between confession and forgiveness as an absolute *practice* and religion as the *expression* of the absolute there is merely a *formal* difference attests to the fact that forgiveness and religion concern the same "absolute spirit" among persons, and that these evidently parallel forms of human practice turn out ultimately to *intersect* in a common identity. Since, as I have argued above, it would be phenomenologically presumptuous to explain or interpret this intersection in terms other than the self-manifestation of the phenomena themselves, our only recourse is to observe how it is revealed by forgiveness and religion *themselves*. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, this revelation is the precise task of Hegel's phenomenology of religion. If, as Hegel indicates early in his study of religion, the two "sides" of the religious phenomenon—"absolute reality in and for itself" and "the self-consciousness of spirit"—are ultimately two sides of a *single* phenomenon, our task as phenomenologists is to observe how *religion itself* reveals this identity, how religion, as the explicit project of articulating "the absolute," develops toward an

[57] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.

explicit affirmation of forgiveness as the absolute form of recognition. To study religion, for Hegel, is to study the way in which the absolute object of religious consciousness comes to reveal itself to have the significance of spirit, and, in turn, the way in which spirit becomes conscious of itself as possessing the "absolute" significance that was attributed to the religious object. To study religion, moreover, is to explore the way in which religion, as an ongoing project of self-criticism and self-transformation, *itself* generates the terms through which to understand this correlation, owing to the fact that there is no higher authority to which religion answers, nor any more fundamental context within which it is situated. As the appearance of "the absolute," religion denotes precisely the experience of being confronted with the very terms through which experience itself is meaningful; to the extent that these terms are the terms of "spirit"—the sharing of meaning—the study of religion is the study of the way in which religion produces the explicit awareness of spirit as the fundamental context in which human experience is lived.

4. Forgiveness and Religion: Ricoeur's Two "Difficulties"

As a transition to the next two chapters of this study, I want to conclude this discussion by briefly indicating the kind of analysis of religion enabled by this exploration of the intersection of religion and forgiveness. Above, I drew especially on Ricoeur's discussion, in "Difficult Forgiveness," of the particularly religious significance of forgiveness, a connection that served Ricoeur well in his articulation of the source of moral regeneration. Although I raised some doubts about the effectiveness of this moral interpretation of forgiveness, I argued that the connection between forgiveness and religion is worthwhile, insofar as it reveals that forgiveness implies immeasurably more than simply the overlooking of wrong-doing or the suspension of punishment. The act of forgiveness, rather, is an expression of that which enables human action in the first place; it is not one form of communication enacted among human beings alongside others, but rather enacts a kind of "absolute communication" wherein we as individuals recognize and affirm one another's inextricable belonging to the ongoing project of shared meaning. However, if religion is able to widen our understanding of forgiveness in this way, is there a way in which forgiveness can widen or otherwise influence our understanding of religion?

In his 2000 lecture "Religious Belief: The Difficult Path of the Religious," Ricoeur offers

a philosophical interpretation of religious belief that in many ways carries out the philosophy of religion proposed in his epilogue to *Memory, History, Forgetting*. In the lecture, Ricoeur begins with the same "intimate binding of oneself by oneself"[58]—the incapacitation of guilt or fault—that guides his exploration of forgiveness in the epilogue, arguing that "the religious problematic can be summarized as the extraordinary capacity to make the ordinary person capable of doing the good."[59] The significance of religion, for Ricoeur, resides in the "resources" it provides in facilitating the "deliverance of the core of goodness from the bonds that hold it captive," and thus in putting persons in contact with the "extraordinary" restorative power of the religious message.[60] Presented in these terms, therefore, "the religious" occupies the same territory as forgiveness—namely, the "double enigma" of unfathomable guilt and restorative gift that surround the human capacity to act. And, just as the experience of fault opens up an "abyss" at the heart of the self, so too in religion are we exposed to our basic self-opacity, the fact that our sense of wholeness as individual selves is governed by forces we do not possess.

Curiously, the theme of forgiveness does not explicitly appear in the lecture on religion, despite the obvious resonances between this discussion and Ricoeur's analysis in the epilogue. Still, it is clear that, for Ricoeur, both forgiveness and religion address themselves to the source (or depth) of human agency, as each play a crucial role in the restoration of the human capacity to act from the bondage of guilt. Moreover, forgiveness and religion share an uneasy relation with any "horizontal"—that is, regulative, predictable, or merely human—order of discourse. We are thus led to ask: if, according to the epilogue, religion helps us understand the "vertical distance" from which the restorative gift arrive, and thus helps explain why forgiveness can enter the domain of politics only "incognito," might not forgiveness—conceived especially with respect to its tension with the political—help us understand the tensions surrounding the place of religion in politics? To play on the titles of Ricoeur's pieces, to what extent do forgiveness and religion present the same "difficulty"?

I will offer only a basic answer here, since this intersection or identity of "difficulties" is central to the next two chapters of this study. Briefly, if the difficulty surrounding forgiveness is

[58] Paul Ricoeur, "Religious Belief: The Difficult Path of the Religious," in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, eds. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 28.
[59] Ibid., 30.
[60] Ibid., 30. As systems of symbols, religions represent the originary event or source that exceeds and restores the human capacity for self-regeneration; as systems of belief or doctrine, religions support the collective affirmation of those who testify to the regenerative power of their shared symbol; and as communities, religions enable the non-political gathering of mutual aid for the listeners and interpreters of the founding message.

the impossibility of establishing any "strictly human" domain for the "unbinding" that it effects (e.g., the impossibility of legislating forgiveness), the difficulty surrounding religion is the difficulty of resisting the temptation *not to forgive*, that is, the temptation to appropriate the source of this unbinding within the limits of one's own idiom, which one then (sometimes violently) protects from contact with other such idioms. Here, the integration of forgiveness into a philosophy of religion demonstrates its value in helping us to appreciate the perpetual tensions between religious communities and political institutions. We see first of all why the religious community must remain "meta-political," as Ricoeur says, since religion facilitates our encounter with the most basic and "enigmatic" aspects of our agency—as exposed in the "depth" of fault and the "gift" of forgiveness—that no political institution could ever wholly or adequately accommodate. And yet, the intersection of religion with forgiveness works *against* any act of self-protective insulation from the political domain—that is, from contact with the religious foreigner—since, in "housing" the enigma of forgiveness, the religious community hosts a regenerative source of life that it can never contain (in which case an all-too rigid attachment to its own articulation of this source in one's expression of it risks becoming an idolatrous appropriation of this source). The fifth and final chapter of this study will explore in more detail how this intersection of religion with the norm of forgiveness weaves a norm of public responsibility within the very fabric of religious devotion, according to which religious idioms are on their own terms exposed to dialogue with their religious others. Such responsibility, though, is premised on the fact that the norm of forgiveness its not imposed on religious idioms from the outside, but rather is intrinsic to their very logic as affirmations of "the absolute." Before turning to the question of politics and public dialogue, then, we must first establish how it is that forgiveness reveals itself to be the intrinsic norm of religious practice. This is the task of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: CHRISTIANITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF RELIGIOUS *VORSTELLUNG*

The typical form of religious practice, in Hegel's view, is a community's act of "pointing" to an absolute object that, as its source, resides "beyond" the community—and, indeed, beyond the domain of human affairs altogether. However, the implicit significance of such practice, according to Hegel, is this community's enactment or expression of the basic terms through which it defines itself. In this way, as we saw in the previous chapter, religion possesses a structural parallel with forgiveness, an act in which the parties involved speak not only for themselves but for the shared finitude that is "beyond" either one of them as individuals. In fact, the appearance of such a "beyond" in the context of forgiveness provides the point of departure for Hegel's phenomenology of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "the reconciling *Yea*," Hegel asserts in the final sentences of Chapter VI, "is God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge" (494, M671). Hegel's claim, however, that the word of reconciliation offered in forgiveness *is* "God" seems to suggest that the relationship between this word and the object of religion is stronger than simply one of parallel communicative acts. What, then, is the relation between these parallel (and thereby differing) actions, given the common reality that they enact? Are religion and forgiveness themselves to be identified in some way, according to Hegel?

This chapter offers a reading of Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as basically an answer to these questions. For Hegel, religion and forgiveness reflect two ways of expressing the structural discrepancy at the heart of a finite community's "absolute" self-expression. If forgiveness is the "absolute enactment of finite spirit" (a finite community's way of reconciling to itself its members' transgressive creativity as singular agents), then religion, by contrast, is the "finite articulation of absolute spirit"; as a practice, then, religion does not so much enact "absolute spirit" (as forgiveness does) as *declare* its absoluteness, pointing beyond the (finite) community itself to the absolute standard (of forgiving recognition) to which it answers. A community's religion, then, is its way of reckoning with its being shaped and defined by an absolute standard (of forgiveness) that no one of its finite, self-expressive acts can adequately capture. In this way, the tension between finite (word) and absolute (recognition) that underlies any performance of forgiveness is the explicit theme of religious communication; religion and forgiveness are not *simply* parallel, therefore, but rather are rooted in a single communicative

phenomenon. Starting from the distinct manifestations of this phenomenon in the form of religion (as the consciousness of an absolute object) and forgiveness (as the absolute enactment of mutual recognition), Hegel's study of religion in Chapter VII traces the development of religion according to how this distinction of form gradually reveals an underlying identity of content. What we see, therefore, is an eventual exposure of the "absolute" affirmed in religious practice as beyond the community to be precisely the "absolute spirit" of the (forgiving) community that performs this affirmation—the community, as Russon writes, "that recognizes its own recognizing of the divine… to be the living presence of that divinity."[1]

As the length of the "Religion" chapter implies, Hegel is not interested in simply asserting this identity, for to do so would be not only to overlook the phenomenologically distinct dimension of human activity that is religion, but also to miss the unique historical development undergone by religious expression, as various communities and cultures strive to locate the most appropriate terms through which to give voice to who they are. Although by the end of Chapter VI of Hegel's work we as readers can anticipate that the object of religious affirmation will show itself as "absolute spirit," there is more to be said about this phenomenon insofar as the terms in which such a spirit expresses "the absolute" are not necessarily recognized as a collective *self*-expression.[2] What is new in Hegel's phenomenology of religion in Chapter VII is thus not the shape of spirit being studied, but rather that spirit's self-consciousness, as, in the words of Hyppolite, "spirit itself which, having arrived at self-knowledge, seeks an expression adequate to its essence."[3]

The *in*adequacy of such self-expression derives from the fact that the self-expressive dimension of religious practice tends to remain implicit, with absolute spirit representing itself in

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[1] Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology*, 249.

[2] As Westphal confirms, Hegel's dialectical pursuit of the absolute standpoint of knowledge is not complete at the end of Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, despite the fact that, there, we as readers recognize the appearance of the community of forgiveness to accomplish the absolute reconciliation of subject and object, self and other. Whereas, he explains, the end of Hegel's Chapter VI presents us with the actual equation of the forgiving community with God, in which is represented this absolute reconciliation, it is the task of Chapter VII to trace the development of this equation, according to which the community—spirit—discovers *for itself* its identity as the site of the absolute. In the simple appearance of "absolute spirit" subject and object are still "other" to each other, and so the knowledge of absolute spirit is not, properly speaking, absolute. "In religion," contrastingly, "spirit moves beyond its mere being or actuality to the knowledge of itself" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 188).

[3] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 537. As Hyppolite emphasizes, the concern in Hegel's Chapter VII is indeed to determine the most adequate *form* of spirit's self-consciousness since, initially, "spirit that knows spirit is simultaneously self-consciousness and consciousness," that is, self-knowledge in the form of the knowledge of an object. As he explains further, "the object which consciousness contemplates is always spirit and no longer an alien world (it is in this sense that religion is self-consciousness of spirit), but at the same time it is an object of consciousness, an object whose form is not immediately the complete revelation of essence" (Ibid., 535).

the form of an absolute object, thereby separating its activity (of affirmation) from the object "beyond" to which this affirmation is directed. In this way, the form of "we-saying" that is religious expression remains fundamentally in tension with itself, understanding itself—initially, at least—as pointing to a reality irreducible to any particular "we." But this tension nevertheless propels the development of religion toward the overcoming of this separation, as it comes to recognize its affirmation of the religious object as its own self-affirmation. The history of religion, for Hegel, can thus be presented as the development of a unique form of human expression, in which the religious community comes to acknowledge its finite activity as the only possible site for the appearance of the absolute. In what Hegel calls the "perfection" of religion, the absolute object affirmed in religious expression is "revealed" to represent the absolute significance of the communicative situation of forgiveness, and hence toward the revelation of the essence of religion as the forgiveness of finitude.

The first section of this chapter addresses Hegel's understanding of religion as "representation" (*Vorstellung*), that is, the portrayal of the basic communal self-understanding affirmed in religious practice in the form of an object "beyond" or in some way other to the religious community itself. I show here that, as representational, religious expression is essentially self-critical, as, in portraying as "other" what is in fact its own self, the religious community fails to conform to the standard of knowledge that it sets for itself (in trying to "know" the absolute). In the second section I show how this self-critical trait of religion propels the development of religious expression. Here, I trace Hegel's account of the various "media" through which religious expression gives shape and content to its sense of absolute reality, focusing especially on the self-transformation of these media as they strive to express more adequately and explicitly the "self" that they implicitly affirm. In the third section I turn to the form of religious expression that, for Hegel, fulfills most adequately the function of religious communication—namely, Christianity. For Hegel, Christianity is the form of religious representation in which "the medium is the message"; it is the religion that, centered on the incarnation of divine reality in and among the human community, announces most explicitly the identity of human community with the "absolute" that its religious practices affirm.[4] Specifically,

[4] Just as Christianity, for Hegel, offers the most definitive revelation of the function of religion as the expression of the divine-human relation, it is the theme of incarnation that is for him central to Christianity and its revelatory capacity. As William Desmond writes, for Hegel "the richest of religious representations all point towards the annulling of the alienation of man and God. Not surprisingly, then, for Hegel, Christianity appears as the Absolute Religion, or the religion in which this annulling is most completely effected. Indeed, the central representation of religion inevitably becomes the Incarnation: the Logos made flesh, the spiritual and the sensuous wed together in

for Hegel, the representational media of Christianity—its narratives, images, and practices—develop toward an expression of the intersubjective possibility of forgiveness, thus identifying the domain of human interaction—rather than, that is, some domain *beyond* the human—as that in which human finitude is most adequately reckoned with. In the final section, I explore one of Christianity's distinctive forms of religious self-critique. As Hegel shows, the affirmation of the freedom of self-consciousness intrinsic to Christianity reflects a vision of human freedom that coincides with the affirmation of rational subjectivity in modern politics, a coincidence that reveals—albeit in Christian terms—the implicit answerability of religion to the political norms affirmed and instituted explicitly by the state.

1. Religion as representation and self-critique

As the beholding of "absolute reality" religion is, for Hegel, in the first place the experience of one's own finitude in the presence of an ultimate object with which one does not identify. Consequently, there is, as we discussed in the previous chapter, a discrepancy within the heart of religious experience, insofar as what is of ultimate value in human experience—namely, the "absolute spirit" of conscientious mutual recognition— appears to human experience in the form of an absolute *object*, that is, something other than "spirit" itself. Hegel reflects this discrepancy by characterizing religion as *Vorstellung*, or representation,[5] claiming that in

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intimate union." Desmond, "Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 30 (1984): 14.

[5] Although *Vorstellung* can also be translated simply as "presentation," the equally available translation as "representation" is preferable for its expression of Hegel's use of the term in connection with religion. In the first place, "representation" obviously shares with "presentation" the reference to *presence*, and in this was captures the sense in which Hegel understands religious *Vorstellung* as an orientation toward what is sensuously present in reality. This supports the understanding of representation as a mode of cognition or thought that remains determined by what is immediately given, and thus differs from the self-determination of cognition that Hegel associates with the term *Begriff* (concept). Representation, as Thomas A. Lewis writes, "never achieves complete self-determination or freedom but remains decisively shaped by the given," in which case representational thinking "makes extensive use of metaphor and analogy, portraying objects and narratives." Thomas A. Lewis, "Religion and Demythologization in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit*: A Critical Guide*, eds. Dean Moyar and Michael Quante (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 194. In the act of religious *re*-presentation, though, given realities are made into the external objects through which the self-consciousness of spirit "posits" itself—that is, sets-itself-before-itself—and represents itself to itself according to the determinacies of a selected dimension of sensuous reality. Because *Vorstellung*, in contrast to *Begriff*, is essentially connected to sense-experience, explains Westphal, *Vorstellung* necessarily posits objects (that is, itself-as-object) as external, in which case "what is in fact an awareness of oneself [is] taken to be an awareness of something other than oneself" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 202). *Vorstellung* thus refers most generally to an engagement with worldly determinacies in such a way that certain aspects of finite reality are recognized as speaking for what is of infinite value. That the forming of pictures—or rather, images—has been one significant practice through which certain societies have used determinate reality to express an indeterminate absolute does not justify Miller's translation of *Vorstellung* as "picture-thinking," which has misleadingly portrayed Hegel's understanding of religion as solely an inferior mode of thinking. The difference between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* as forms of thought is certainly important

religion spirit "represents itself to itself" (in the form, typically, of images, symbols, and narratives), and thus portrays its own essence as an absolute object that calls for devotion and affirmation (497, M678). Religion is a form of absolute spirit whose cognitive mode—namely, consciousness—does not (yet) coincide with its truth:[6] though it possesses the true content (namely *itself* as absolute spirit), it projects this content beyond itself, resulting in an incomplete mediation of self and other insofar as its self-consciousness has yet to "raise its intuition of absolute substance into the concept" (496, M675).

Yet Hegel's analysis of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is more than just an analysis of the inadequacy of religious representations from the perspective of speculative philosophy; the very shift in focus from the nature of the absolute object to its mode of representation, rather, foregrounds the *orientation* of religion toward its object, that is, the practical forms through which religion expresses or otherwise carries out its devotion to its object. As Thomas A. Lewis writes, "in the discussion of earlier forms of consciousness, we (Hegel and his readers) have been reflecting upon the absolute essence, what is taken to be of ultimate value," but whereas "these previous stages had the absolute essence as an object… Chapter VII is the first to focus on our practices of reflecting on this essence."[7] Indeed, as Hegel explains at the beginning of his discussion of religion, while there have been plenty of opportunities prior to this chapter to consider religion in the form of the "consciousness of absolute essence," the consideration of religion on its own terms makes possible an understanding of religion as "self-consciousness of spirit" (495, M672). In turning to religion itself—as opposed, that is, to forms of consciousness that are "religious"—Hegel's phenomenology no longer restricts itself to the various appearances of an "absolute essence," but considers the ways in which the religious representation of this absolute object is reflective of spirit's self-knowledge—reflective, that is, of "who we are." "Religion," in the terms of Hegel's Chapter VII, no longer signifies simply an object that, from the standpoint of consciousness,

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for appreciating Hegel's understanding of religion; however, the practical significance of religion exceeds the narrowly cognitive lens through which Hegel's account of religion has sometimes been interpreted. More recent translations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* have translated *Vorstellung* as "representation" in the context of Hegel's discussion of religion, and I have followed this practice by modifying Miller's translation wherever applicable.

[6] Reflecting this "cognitive" interpretation of religion, Hyppolite writes that in religion "spirit knows itself as spirit, but consciousness, by means of which spirit represents itself to itself as object, is inadequate to this self-knowledge, and must move forward until this object has become the figure of spirit itself, knowing itself as spirit. This object, as world spirit, actual spirit, is not yet reconciled with its essence, infinite spirit" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 538).

[7] Lewis, "Religion and Demythologization," 193.

cannot be properly rendered as an object, but rather explores the various forms of human activity and self-expression that this experience of incapacity has generated.

To understand religion in its self-expressive dimension, though, we must set aside critical judgments about religious representations (as an inadequate mode of cognition) as well as analyses of the way those representations portray the absolute (as an otherworldly divine being, for example), and attend to what is practically involved in representational activity that emerges from out of the self-consciousness of spirit. With this shift in focus, then, we are able to recognize that, while religious representations indeed "project our own essence beyond us and, in viewing it as other, alienate us from the world around us,"[8] such projections are nevertheless projections *of our own essence*, that is, representations of our conception of our ultimate character as a human community. In this way, religious representations accomplish the most basic actual practice of what Hegel's account of mutual recognition demonstrates in principle regarding the nature of social life—namely, necessity of communication in the establishment of any stable social situation. According to this account, the conflict involving the separate claims of individual selves to embody the universal was resolved only where these individuals recognize and accept their participation in a shared universal self; whereas, though, this communal self is affirmed implicitly in any form of meaningful interaction among individuals, the representations of religion, in speaking for "who we are" most basically, constitute the most comprehensive and concrete performances of this self-affirmation of the community. The "utterances" of religion,[9] therefore, bear witness to a community's own communicative resources, and the function of those resources in stabilizing individual identities with respect to

[8] Ibid., 192. This interpretation of religion as projection should be qualified somewhat. I agree with Lewis that Hegel "offers a theory of religion as projection," since, as Lewis writes, "religious representations portray the absolute as other than both the consciousness of the human community and actuality proper. Rather than recognizing the community's reflective practices as themselves constituting the absolute essence, religion projects this absolute onto an object conceived as other than this consciousness" (Ibid., 195). However, Desmond cautions that the language of projection is too easily exploited by readings of Hegel as "reducing" religious representation to its origin in strictly human desires and capacities (Desmond, "Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation," 16). Here, Westphal offers a helpful discussion. For Westphal, a "projection theory" reading of Hegel's account of religion is appropriate so long as it is distinguished from the familiar Freudian understanding of the object of religion—"God," for example—as the illusory product of persons working through traumatic experiences. As Westphal explains, not only is religion for Hegel a *collective* self-projection (as opposed to the imaginings of an individual), but it is also clear that Hegel takes religion to be the projection of what we find desirable and acceptable, as opposed simply to that which is unacceptable (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 195). Moreover, for Hegel religious projection is *not* illusion. Although it is true that, for Hegel, "God" is most properly a concept, the *Vorstellung* of God in religion is more than simply an illusory imagining of this concept in another (i.e., imagistic) form. Rather, for Hegel, religion is a distinctive and essential dimension in the history of a society' self-articulation. "Spirit is only truly spirit, Westphal writes, if it knows itself in its gods." God is a human product, but is not a fiction, and the goal for a philosophy of religion is to understand, in the *right way*, why religion is "false."

[9] Cf. 482, M656, where Hegel defines religion as "the utterance of the community concerning *its own* spirit."

the community to which they belong. "Religious practices," as George DiGiovanni writes, "are essentially an expression of the practical judgment of a community defining how each member stands with respect to all the rest."[10] Hence, although all forms of meaningful expression involve a saying of "I" that is implicitly a saying of "We," religious practice is the most fundamental "I = We"-saying available to human beings, since it speaks for the most basic structures of recognition—of "We"—that make me who I am.

In characterizing religion as representation, though, Hegel accounts for the fact that the communally self-expressive significance of religion has not always been explicitly acknowledged in religious practice, and, hence, that one risks overlooking essential features of religion if one simply asserts at the outset that religion is simply a community's self-expression. An account of religion as representation, in other words, is both *historically* and *logically* necessary. It is historically necessary because the discrete awareness of religion as a "merely human" practice is, on Hegel's understanding, the characteristic of the relatively recent emergence of modern, secular and pluralistic societies, in which religion appears as a *specific*, and thereby largely optional, dimension of human experience.[11] For Hegel, accounts of religion premised on this particularly modern understanding put themselves at risk of underappreciating the significance of religion in human history more broadly. An account of religion as representation is logically necessary, moreover, because the development of religion as representation is not incidental to the emergence of modern societies—because, in other words, how we conceive of "who we are" in modernity is in large part the result of particular evolutions in religion (evolutions that Hegel tracks in his chapter on religion). Hegel thus resists the narrative of modernity wherein religion is simply "subtracted" from human self-consciousness,[12]

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[10] George di Giovanni, "Religion, History, and Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 227.

[11] Here I draw from Charles Taylor's understanding of the "shift to secularity" that has come to characterize the modern West, which "takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others." Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[12] Here I follow Taylor again, whose *A Secular Age* is intended to offer a "polemic" against "subtraction stories," that is, "stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22). As Desmond explains, "Hegel criticizes the form of religious representation, but not the content," in which case, for Hegel, the "perfection" of religion entails the development of religious forms of affirming the absolute rather than the "subtraction" of this absolute that is affirmed (see Desmond's criticism of the simple reduction of religion to the human by "Left-Hegelians" in "Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation," 16). See also Quentin Lauer's observation of the "two parallel developments" that occur the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As he explains, the "progress in self-consciousness" depicted in the text, as the human community develops its sense of what it is as "spirit," occurs in parallel with—and requires the fulfillment of—the development of religious consciousness, in which the object of religious

and instead conceives of religion as playing a logically necessary role in the development of this self-consciousness into the modern (Western) world. Hence, the developed awareness of religion's basic essence and function in a community's self-understanding is not a fact that can be simply taken for granted; indeed, we will not properly understand the exposure of religion's basic essence, Hegel thinks, unless we understand how it takes place in and for religion, as religion's gradual *self*-exposure.

The story of religion, for Hegel, is thus one of the becoming explicit for societies of the basically self-expressive essence of their religious representations. Hegel summaries this story, in terms of its significance for the representational function of religion, in an important passage from the introductory section of his chapter on religion:

> Since… in religion the determination of the consciousness proper of spirit does not have the form of free *otherness*, spirit's *existence* is distinct from its *self-consciousness*, and its reality proper falls outside of religion. There is indeed one spirit of both, but its consciousness does not embrace both together, and religion appears as a part of existence, of conduct and activity, whose other part is the life lived in its real world. As we now know that spirit in its own world and spirit conscious of itself as spirit, or spirit in religion, are the same, the perfection of religion consists in the two becoming identical with each other: not only that religion concerns itself with spirit's reality but, conversely, that spirit, as self-conscious spirit, becomes actual to itself and *object of its consciousness*. So far as spirit in religion *represents* [*vorstellt*] itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and the guise of its representation [*Vorstellung*]. But, in this representation, reality does not receive its perfect 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 ought to show forth, viz. spirit that is conscious of itself. If its shape is to express spirit itself, it must be nothing else than spirit, and spirit must appear to itself, or be in actuality, what it is in its essence. Only by so doing would that also be obtained which may seem to be the demand for the opposite, viz. that the *object* of its consciousness have at the same time the form of free actuality; but only spirit that is object to itself as absolute spirit is conscious of itself as a free actuality to the extent that it is and remains conscious of itself therein. (497-498, M678)

Let us explore the points raised in this passage in order. Hegel begins by reiterating the basic formal disjunction that prompts the phenomenology of religion: in religion, the self-consciousness of spirit has the form of consciousness, and the self-consciousness (of spirit) that properly speaking *is* religion appears as *distinct* from spirit that "exists." In other words, the true site of "religion" is understood here not to be spirit as it is actually lived—that is, in the particular and historical communities that practice religion—but rather as an object separated

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"progressively reveals itself as spirit." Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, *Second Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 259-60. For Desmond and Lauer alike, Hegel's account of the modern world certainly involves a "development story" of religion, but hardly a "subtraction story."

from actual spirit, to which the community orients itself in its religion.[13] As Hegel explains, although there is only "one spirit" under discussion here, the structure of consciousness that it adopts effects a separation within spirit in religion, such that, as a "conduct and activity," religion appears as a practice whose explicit function is to bear witness to the religious object in its "real world" apart from the living actuality of religion. But this is only a formal separation, not an ultimate one. Based on what we "now know" to be the identity of the religious object "in its own world" and the religious spirit that affirms this object, we can expect a "perfection" of religion whereby these two sides of spirit in religion become *explicitly* identical for one another. Not only, Hegel says, will religion come to "concern itself with spirit's reality," but also, in coming to understand the religious object as the projection of its own essence, spirit—the religious community—will become properly and actually conscious of itself.

What is "perfected" in this process, more specifically, is essentially religion's treatment of the actual world as the *symbol* of its own self-conception. Here the thematic difference between religion and conscience is instructive. In the passage previous to the one cited above, Hegel draws a contrast between conscience, as the "self-consciousness [of spirit] that communes with its own self,"[14] and religion, which, though structurally parallel to such "self-communing" spirit, is more precisely a "self-knowing," as spirit conscious of itself as "contain[ing] within itself all essence and all actuality" (497, M677).[15] The salient difference is that, whereas conscience is the self-affirming *enactment* of spirit—the living reality, as it were, of "absolute spirit"—religion is the explicit *positing* of the reality of spirit as absolute. Religion, in which spirit "conceives of itself as *object*," thus involves an explicit stance taken towards the absolute reality enacted in conscience, and, as Hegel writes, "the reality it contains is shut up in it and superseded in it in just the same way as when we speak of 'all reality'; it is universal reality as

[13] "By virtue of juxtaposing entities," writes Lewis, religious "representations portray what is absolute as an other to self-consciousness and as having an existence that is other than the consciousness of this absolute that is itself religion." In this way "religion cannot completely grasp the community's reflective practices as themselves constitutive of the absolute essence or the social world as expressive of this essence" (Lewis, "Religion and Demythologization," 194).

[14] The "self-knowing spirit," Hegel states here, "is, in religion, immediately its own pure self-consciousness." Hegel explains that his analysis of makes possible, for the first time in his study, an account of "a self-consciousness [of spirit] that communes with its own self," a form of spirit that is structurally parallel to religion (as "self-knowing spirit"), which in this way differs from the general form of spirit studied prior to conscience, which, "confronting its *world*, does not recognize itself therein." Conscience, to recall, is for Hegel the form of spirit that recognizes its own intersubjective resources—recognition, communication—to be the ultimate source of the significance of its "world;" it is the "absolute spirit" wherein the significance of any world or reality whatsoever is acknowledged as being a matter of sharing (496, M677).

[15] "In this [religion], spirit conceived as object, has for itself the significance of being the universal spirit that contains within itself all essence and all actuality" (497, M677).

thought" (497, M677). But because, in religion, this positing of "all reality" as the object of thought functions implicitly as the *self*-consciousness of spirit,[16] the significance of this "reality" is not reducible to its appearance as an object, but rather serves as a vehicle for the self-affirmation of the religious community. For this reason, as Hegel writes in the passage cited above, "the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and guise of its representation." That is to say, the reality "shut up" within religion's conception of the absolute is in fact the "guise" through which the religious spirit "represents itself to itself," and in this way expresses its sense of the ultimate nature of things. In more concrete terms, religion is the symbolic appropriation of finite reality in service of the expression of the infinite;[17] it is the setting apart of a particular aspect of determinate reality as expressive of the ultimate reality of things, and thus as a symbol in which it invests the ultimate significance it implicitly attributes to itself as spirit's self-knowing.

This symbolic "enclosure" of reality commits a double injustice, according to Hegel, misconstruing the nature of reality and misrepresenting the nature of spirit. In religious representation, he writes, not only does reality "not receive its perfect due," which is "to be not merely a guise but an independent free existence," but also, because this representational use of reality "lacks perfection within itself it is a *specific* shape which does not attain to what it ought to show forth, [namely] spirit that is conscious of itself" (498, M678). The significance of reality, in the first place, exceeds the symbolic function in which it is made to point beyond itself to a domain of ultimate significance in serving as the "guise" for a collective self-knowing.[18] Rather,

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[16] "True," writes Hegel, "it [spirit] has *'shape'* or the form of being, in that it is the *object* of its consciousness; but because in religion consciousness is posited essentially in the determination of *self*-consciousness, the shape is perfectly transparent to itself" (497, M677).

[17] For a discussion of Hegel's understanding of religion as the symbolic use of reality, see Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 537-539. Hegel's account of the symbolic function of religion has resonances with the account of religion as a "system of symbols" offered by Clifford Geertz, who defines symbols as conceptual representations both of a community's basic self-understanding and its basic view of the world. In general, Geertz writes, symbols are "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgments, longings, or beliefs." Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 91. When they perform a religious task, "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order" (Ibid., 89).

[18] As Hyppolite writes, over the course of the development of religion toward its reconciliation with actual spirit, the spirit of religion uses actual spirit to symbolize itself, treating the actual world as the object of its own self-affirmation. But this objectification or symbolification of actual spirit does not "respect the full rights" of actual spirit, which is here taken as the (inadequate) representation of something else. "Symbolic," Hyppolite explains, is roughly equivalent to "incomplete," and whereas the symbolic dimension of religion offers unique and significant material for phenomenological inquiry, the very trajectory of religion moves toward the affirmation of actual spirit

if religion is truly to accomplish spirit's self-knowledge, it must allow spirit to find itself at home in reality as such, and not simply to project its conception of a "real world" above and beyond the world of actual existence. It is not enough, in other words, for religion simply to *think* "all reality" through a particular symbol; rather, an *absolutely* self-knowing spirit must come to recognize itself "in *actuality*, what it is in its essence," and thus incorporate actual existence as such into the self-conception of spirit. In the second place, moreover, in no longer simply using existence—indeed, a specific part of it—to mediate its self-conception symbolically, spirit can be truly conscious of itself as "nothing else than spirit." Here, spirit no longer (mis)represents itself as "enclosed" in a determinate aspect of reality, but is aware of its "free actuality" as the real presence of the divine in and as the human community.

But since religion, as representational, characterizes the self-knowledge of spirit *prior* to the overcoming of this double injustice, in studying religion we should turn our attention precisely to the ways in which particular aspects of reality are made to speak for or symbolize a particular understanding of that which has ultimate value in human experience. And we should look, moreover, for the ways in which, *as particular*, these symbolizations "do not attain what they ought to show forth." On Hegel's account, then, to study religion is to study the form of human practice that identifies certain aspects of finite reality as absolute, and that, because of this appeal to finitude, reveal precisely their own inadequacy.

As the self-knowing of spirit that, pointing to a reality "beyond," separates itself from spirit as it is "actually" lived, religion is a form of human expression that does not "know" what it says. In terms of its ritual significance, as we saw in Chapter Two, religion is the form of human communication that says "We" most fundamentally. However, religion expresses "We" only implicitly, explicitly affirming instead the antecedence of that object on which human existence is understood to depend. Yet it is not as though the *self* of the self-knowledge of spirit that is religion is entirely absent from this picture. Religious practice, on Hegel's view, says in effect: "nothing that *we* could ever say or be could ever measure up to You; *You* are all reality, *we* are not." Religion is the affirmation of the infinite from the perspective of finitude, an affirmation that speaks for its own inadequacy as finite and actual practice as much as it speaks for the object whose infinite significance it aims to affirm. Religion is thus an inherently self-finitizing activity, which is to say an inherently self-*critical* activity: every affirmation of the

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as the domain of absolute spirit, and not simply a portrait or "suit of clothes" for something else (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 542).

infinite performed in religious practice performs an implicit critique of its own finitude, in being unable to capture that which it nevertheless ought to express. Hence, we need not have reached the "perfection" of religion in spirit's explicit knowledge of itself in order to notice the structure of religious expression whereby religious practices "do not attain what they ought to show forth." Religious practice, for Hegel, is constitutively the expression of the "inexpressible," the finite articulation of the infinite, whose most authentic performance is at the same time the admission of its constitutive failure.[19]

To understand Hegel's phenomenology of religion, it is essential not to treat this failure as a reason to look past the phenomenon of religion, but rather as *definitive* of the phenomenon that religion is. It is often observed that its "representational" form prevents religion from being knowledge properly speaking, that in treating reality as a "guise" religion fails to become aware of itself as spirit's self-knowing. The form of religion must therefore be "perfected," so that the object of its knowledge is explicitly itself as spirit, rather than itself as represented by means of some foreign material. However, in *not* appearing to itself as "it is in its essence"—by "showing forth" something *other* than itself as spirit—spirit in religion performs a unique role among the forms of human self-articulation, one that we risk overlooking if we proceed too hastily to religion's eventual "perfection." Divided within itself, spirit in religion identifies a particular part of reality—*not* itself—as the site of the infinite, and sets apart a particular set of practices as those through which we, as members of finite existence, bear witness to infinite reality. Religion is thus the basic expression of human finitude, indeed, of the finitude of all that falls within the human vantage point. Religion is the declaration of the basic non-identity of the human with the infinite source of all reality, an act that points not to the human source of meaning on which we depend, but rather "represents" this source in the form of a reality that exceeds the human sphere. The history of religion for Hegel is thus the history of the human expression of this basic finitude, and a survey of religion as representation offers an account of the various "guises" through which historical communities have borne witness to their absolute source. "In [the] genesis of religion," Hegel writes, "spirit itself… assumes *specific* 'shapes' which constitute the different moments of [its] movement," and in accounting for this genesis Hegel studies religion

[19] In this way, the criticism of religion's inadequacy as representational emerges in the first place from within religion, and the history of religion is in many ways the history of its self-critique. As Desmond writes, "the limits of representation become evident… from sources *immanent* within religion itself. *Geist* itself dismantles the claims to absoluteness of every form of religious representation, since no representation, given its form of sensuous externality, can be completely commensurate with *Geist* in its non-sensuous absoluteness" (Desmond, "Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation," 14).

as a development among the various forms of concrete reality that religious communities, in representing themselves to themselves, have pointed to in affirming the infinite object on which they depend (499-500, M680).

In this way, though, reality is for religion not *merely* a guise; or rather, it is a guise only from the point of view of "perfected" religion, whereas a study of religion as representation makes possible an account of the ways in which, in religion, reality is treated as *the site of the appearance of infinite reality*. Religion occupies a necessary step in Hegel's analysis insofar as it accounts for the unique ways in which reality is used to symbolize that which has absolute significance for human societies, the ways in which aspects of "actual" existence are made to speak for a reality that exceeds or transcends all actuality. Despite Hegel's use of the term "guise," therefore, religion constitutes an altogether non-instrumental approach to reality.[20] Cited as an "image" of the divine, as it were, the part of actual existence mobilized in religious practice speaks precisely against any "use" to which human intention would put it, declaring instead the relativity of all such human intentions to the source that gives them meaning.

2. The media of self-consciousness and the development of religion

In their religious practices, communities give expression to the sources of their fundamental self-understanding, typically by identifying some dimension or feature of perceptible reality as the site through which this absolute source is most appropriately and effectively affirmed. "All reality, the source and truth of all things," so the claim of religion goes, "is to be found *here*." This absolute source, however—the "absolute object" of religious affirmation—is in fact no "object" at all, but rather is the ritual sharing of meaning in which human experience most basically consists. In this way, the religious community, in its religious practice, represents *itself* to itself: as the affirmation of the antecedence of the sharing of meaning, religion is the affirmation of the most basic "We" within which human experience is lived (which functions, nevertheless, by pointing *beyond* all actually existing forms of "We" to the image of its own self-transcendence).

[20] Hence, what I have been calling the symbolic "use" of reality in representation is precisely not an *instrumental* use of reality, for, when treated as the symbol of what is absolute, the determinate realities set apart in religion are "saved," as Hegel says, from being mere objects of use. As he writes, "the shape which spirit assumes as object of its consciousness remains filled by the certainty of spirit as by its substance; through this content, the object is saved from being degraded to pure objectivity, to the form of negativity of self-consciousness" (502, M682).

Hegel accounts for the logic of this self-affirmation by describing religion as "the totality" or "ground" of spirit, and by arguing that this totality has no existence of its own apart from the individual "moments" through which it concretely appears. For Hegel, although religion encompasses the self-defining terms of human experience as such,[21] presupposed by and implicitly at work in all that we are and do, these terms are made manifest only in determinate enactments of this "totality." "If," Hegel writes, "religion is the perfection of spirit into which each of its individual moments—consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit—return and have returned as into their ground, [these moments] together constitute the *existent* actuality of the totality of spirit, which *is* only as the differentiating and self-returning movement of these aspects" (499, M680). In other words, the phenomenon of religion only ever manifests itself in the form of *particular religions*, according to the particular ways in which the "totality" of religion takes "shape," in making itself an object to itself, as self-knowledge.[22]

> From the 'shapes' belonging to each of its moments, the *specific* 'shape' of religion picks out the one appropriate to it for its actual spirit. The one distinctive feature which characterizes the religion penetrates every aspect of its actual existence and stamps them with this common character. (500, M680)

Each religion—each actual manifestation of the "totality of spirit"—is "stamped" with a particular "distinctive feature," a particular "imaging" of itself in which the basic terms of reality appear (as an object) for the actual religious community. The interpretive key to a particular religion, hence, is found in that aspect of determinate reality that defines the object that it makes of itself, that is the particular "medium" of its self-consciousness. As Hegel writes, "all forms [of religion] in general are certainly *in themselves* or *for us* contained in spirit and in each spirit, but as regards spirit's actuality, the main point is solely which determinateness is explicit for it in its *consciousness*, in which determinateness it has expressed its self, or in which 'shape' it knows its essence" (501, M681).

In the development of religion that Hegel traces, it becomes increasingly evident that the object of religious consciousness is in fact its own *self*-consciousness, and hence that the most adequate or effective "shape" of religion's self-imaging is precisely that of selfhood. Indeed, this

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[21] Cf. Westphal, *History and Truth*, 196.

[22] In this way, the various "shapes" of spirit that have been explored up to this point in Hegel's study become the specific "shapes" in which spirit, as religion, represents itself to itself, in which case, as Hyppolite says, "the development of religion reproduces as a whole the general movement of the *Phenomenology*" (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 544). As Hegel writes, "if consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit, belong to self-knowing spirit in general, similarly the specific 'shapes' which were specially developed within consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit, belong to the specific 'shapes' of self-knowing spirit" (500, M680).

convergence of consciousness and self-consciousness is precisely what drives the development of religion: "since spirit lives in the difference of its consciousness and its self-consciousness," Hegel writes, "the aim of the movement is to supersede this cardinal distinction and to give the form of self-consciousness to the 'shape' that is the object of consciousness" (500, M684). This "aim" accounts for the centrality of the theme of selfhood in Hegel's introductory review of the appearances of religion in previous stages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (495-496, M672-M676). Such appearances were incomplete manifestations of the religious phenomenon, in that they yielded a consciousness of the absolute that is "devoid of self," or a vision of selfhood that, remaining detached from one or more of the other features of religion as "absolute essence in and for itself, the self-consciousness of spirit," was not properly self-consciousness.[23] By contrast, "[t]he self-knowing spirit," Hegel says, "is, in *religion*, immediately its own pure self-consciousness" (496, M677; emphasis added). We are in the presence of religion, according to Hegel, when we address that aspect of human activity that, in presupposing no *other*, more basic dimension of experience, is the self-referential and self-defining context of shared significance within which all other more particular forms of experience are situated.[24] Although the dimension of a specifically *human* self-consciousness only appears at a specific stage in the development of religion, all religious practice, for Hegel, is thus (implicitly, at first) a matter of self-consciousness, destined, according to its own logic, to become aware of this self-affirmation as the feature common among all of its diverse forms. "The totality of spirit, the spirit of religion, is," Hegel writes, "the movement away from its immediacy towards the attainment of the *knowledge* of what it is *in itself* or immediately, the movement in which, finally, the *'shape'* in which it appears for its consciousness will be perfectly identical with its essence, and it will behold itself as it is" (499, M680).

Below, I analyze each of the three basic forms of religion that Hegel studies—"Natural Religion," "The Religion of Art," and "Revealed Religion"—as reflecting a particular "shape" of the self-consciousness of spirit. For Hegel, what we worship or affirm in our religious practices is essentially related to how we conceive of ourselves; hence, a (if not *the*) central question to be

[23] Up to this point, Hegel explains, we have seen the consciousness of "absolute essence" as object, but "absolute essence in itself," which would be the *self*-consciousness of spirit, "has not appeared." In these introductory paragraphs Hegel briefly explains why the previous appearances of religion are *not* "absolute essence in and for itself, the self-consciousness of spirit" (and so are not, properly speaking, religion).

[24] Speaking of religion Hegel writes, "spirit's immediate unity with itself is the basis, or pure consciousness, *within* which consciousness parts asunder" (502, M682). (Directly following this statement Hegel speaks of "pure *self*-consciousness," which is in fact closer to his meaning.)

posed to each form of religion is: what figure of selfhood—of "who we are"—is here on display? As we know, though, the object of religious practice is not always explicitly "us" (indeed, for many forms of religious practice, the express aim is precisely to point to a reality that is *not* "us"). Therefore, the question of how we ourselves are expressed or "imaged" in a particular religious practice must be accompanied by the question of how this particular religion expresses or "images" that object that, for it, more explicitly represents "all truth and reality."

Of course, these forms of "imaging" gradually converge, on Hegel's account, and indeed must be recognized as a single collective self-expression seeking its most adequate form. Hegel's account thus makes possible a three-pronged "hermeneutic of religion."[25] First, how is "absolute reality," the site of ultimate value and significance, construed in the particular form of religious practice under scrutiny? What is said here about this reality, and how, moreover, is it construed *as an object*? (What, in other words, is the "shape and guise" of the divine offered here?) Second, what particular expression of the human essence is accomplished in this imaging of the divine essence? What implicit self-understanding is communicated in our representation of "all reality and truth," of that on which we depend most basically? Third, because representations of "absolute reality" and expressions of the human essence do not always formally coincide, religious expression can neither pretend to have successfully rendered this absolute in any *one* of its declarations, nor, however, allow this failure to cause it to abandon its responsibility to make such declarations. We can thus interrogate a particular form of religion as to the self-critical self-transformation it generates as it seeks a more adequate expression of its object. How does religion show itself to be answerable to the demand continually to evolve, to subject itself to revision and reformation according to its own standards, insofar as its affirmation of the absolute is at the same time an affirmation of its own inadequacy?

This chapter focuses particularly on the third form of religion, "Revealed Religion" or Christianity, and in particular how Christianity makes known the identity of the divine object of religious affirmation and the human practice of affirming it. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the features of the religious forms that precede this stage, so as properly to appreciate what, for Hegel, precisely is accomplished in the Christian religion. Although I will not attempt an exhaustive summary of each form of religion according to Hegel's presentation, I will try to

[25] Here I follow Lewis who, in "Religion and Demythologization," offers an insightful and helpful reading of Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a hermeneutic of religion that resembles Rudolf Bultmann's "demythologization" of the New Testament, and that "shares with Bultmann's the goal of bringing forth the genuine significance of religious teachings" (193).

isolate their definitive features according to the three questions just listed,[26] in order to determine what form of the "self-consciousness of spirit" is at work in each stage.

2.1. Natural religion

Religion, for Hegel, which originally represents to itself, as an object, its own self as the self-consciousness of spirit, must be understood in the context of the eventual overcoming of the distinction between its consciousness and its self-consciousness. This distinction, Hegel says, is "superseded in the spirit that knows itself in its truth; its consciousness and its self-consciousness are on the same level" (501, M682). Since it is his goal, however, to demonstrate how this distinction is overcome *in and for religion*, Hegel begins in the same place that religion begins—namely, with "religion as immediate," or the form of religion that most "immediately" exemplifies what religion is.

> But, as religion here is, to begin with, *immediate*, this distinction has not yet returned into spirit. What is posited is only the *concept* of religion; in this the essence is self-consciousness, which is conscious of being all truth and contains all reality within that truth. This self-consciousness has, as consciousness, itself for object. (501, M682)

At this stage, the distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness so thoroughly characterizes this form of religion that it is in no way thematically posited; hence, this immediate form of religion exemplifies perfectly "the concept of religion"—that is, what religion is "in principle,"[27] the un-actualized idea of religion. It is, in other words, the most straightforward instantiation of religion as the envisioning of "all reality" as an object[28] to which it points, a reality that is *other* to the standpoint (of consciousness) that affirms it.

Hegel studies this immediate form of religion under the label "natural religion." He writes: "The first reality of spirit"—the "totality" of spirit as it is actually lived—"is the concept of religion itself, or religion as *immediate*, and therefore Natural Religion. In this, spirit knows itself as its object in a natural or immediate shape" (502, M683). In general, natural religion is

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[26] Indeed, in the discussion that follows, I in general single out just *one* representative feature of each form of religion (and in most cases the initial one that Hegel describes), rather than discuss in detail the development of each form of religion.

[27] "In principle," that is, apart from its development into more explicitly self-conscious forms: "Spirit as the essence that is *self-consciousness*—or the self-conscious being that is all truth and knows all reality as its own self—is, to begin with, only its *concept* in contrast to the actuality which it gives itself in the movement of its consciousness" (505, M685).

[28] As the "object" of *religious* consciousness, what is encountered here is nevertheless an absolute reality that exceeds the terms of objectivity (in the sense of the subject-object correlation). The *Lichtwesen* apprehended in natural religion thus marks the appearance, paradoxically, of the condition of all that appears, and in this way most straightforwardly exemplifies what we explored in Chapter Two as the appearance as a phenomenon of the very limits of appearance itself.

the form of religion in which human beings encounter images of their own basic essence in the shape of realities derived from their immediate—and in the first place "natural"—surroundings, that is, from what presents itself immediately in human experience, apart from any act of interpretation or discernment. In this way, Hegel's study of religion begins by reenacting the starting point of his phenomenology as a whole: just as his first chapter on sense-certainty analyzed the form of knowledge implicit in immediate experience, so too does his phenomenology of religion begin by discovering the form of *self*-knowledge implicit in our apprehension of what immediately appears. "Spirit which, to begin with," he writes, "has an *immediate* knowledge of itself is thus to itself spirit in the *form* of *immediacy*, and the determinateness of the form in which it appears to itself is that of [immediate] being" (501, M682). Of course, this "determinateness" does not refer to the "contingent determinations of sensation" under analysis at the beginning of his study. Although similar in *form* to sense-certainty, natural religion concerns an altogether different *content*—namely, the breadth and diversity of immediate being that is "filled with spirit."[29] As material for *religion*, immediate being serves here as the mediating image or symbol of absolute spirit's self-consciousness; "[t]his being," Hegel writes, "is *filled* neither with sensation nor a manifold material, nor with any other kind of one-sided moments, purposes, and determination: it is filled with spirit and is known by itself to be all truth and reality" (501, M682). Natural religion, then, is the standpoint for which the "contingent determinations of sensation" speak for the non-contingent, indeterminate source on which they depend; it is an attitude for which all that appears immediately—all that simply *is*—is the sign of what *truly* is.

Hegel's principal image for this form of absolute reality is thus that which, in nature, reveals its significance immediately and indiscriminately in and through all that simply "shows up"—namely light, the all-pervasive source of the appearance of all things.

> This being which is filled with the concept of spirit is… the *'shape'* of the *simple* relation of spirit to itself, or the 'shape' of 'shapelessness'. 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. (506, M686)

Whatever appears does so "in" light; light is not a *property* of any of the entities that appear to us in our experience, but rather is the condition, the source of illumination, through which any and

[29] "In the immediate, first diremption of self-knowing absolute spirit its 'shape' has the determination which belongs to *immediate consciousness* or to *sense*-certainty. Spirit beholds itself in the form of *being*, though not of the non-spiritual being that is filled with the contingent determinations of sensation, the being that belongs to sense-certainty; on the contrary, it is being that is filled with spirit" (505-506, M686).

all of these entities and their properties appear. To be sure, this source of light cannot be seen apart from the determinate appearances that it makes possible (that is, visible). As the "formless substantiality" of all appearing forms, light itself *does not appear*, but rather is that which all manifest reality invokes, immediately and without exception. The logic of the appearance—or rather, the *non*-appearance—of the absolute as light allows us to appreciate how natural religion accomplishes the prototypical religious claim. Absolute reality, which on the one hand is perceived everywhere through all that immediately appears, is on the other hand perceived *nowhere*, insofar as no immediate appearance has any privilege over any other with respect to its status as the site for the revelation of the absolute. In this way, all manifest reality, all that shows up, is equally finite with respect to the source of illumination to which it bears witness. Natural religion thus accomplishes the most exhaustive affirmation of the absolute source: asserting the finitude of all that appears within one's perspective, it performs a sort of negative affirmation of the conditions of all appearance as irreducible to and constitutive of any and all manifest reality.

However, although natural religion exemplifies the initial "concept" of religion, and to this extent fulfills the religious demand, Hegel shows that this immediate and straightforward manner of enacting the religious claim turns out to fall short of its own aims, thus propelling religious expression toward a more adequate form. There are (at least) two ways in which the inadequacy of this form of religious affirmation is evident, one that is extrinsic to natural religion's claim (thus posing less of a challenge), and one that, as intrinsic, exposes its inadequacy and need to transform.

In the first place, although it is an effective affirmation of the *all-pervasiveness* of the absolute, natural religion turns out to be rather ineffective in terms of its ability to affirm anything of significance about this absolute. Here we should recall Hegel's observation at the beginning of his study of experience that sense-certainty, which seems to offer "the *richest* kind of knowledge" in encompassing all that appears immediately, offers at the same time the "*poorest* truth," insofar as it is unable to say any more than that this immediacy *is*.[30] Natural religion, which, as a kind of "religious" sense-certainty, affirms the absolute significance of what immediately appears, can offer no truth about this reality beyond the fact that "it is." To say anything more specific is necessarily to speak of a particular determinacy—to speak, that is, no longer of "all reality" but of *this* reality, precisely the kind of determinate reality that the absolute

[30] Cf. 82, M91. "All that [sense-certainty] says about what it knows is just that it *is*; and its truth contains nothing but the sheer being of the thing."

is recognized as transcending. In this way, the religious vision of natural religion is limited by the very thing that defines its significance as a religious declaration: in affirming absolute reality indiscriminately through all immediate appearance, it can say no more about this absolute than that it is the all-transcending source of things, which evades all of our finite descriptions.

While this first criticism that natural religion is unable to say very much about the absolute reality it affirms is not necessarily fatal, what it does say turns out to be contradictory. Consider first what the adherent of natural religion might say in response to the criticism above that Natural Religion cannot say anything specific or of significance about its object: "Well that's just it! *We* cannot say anything truthful about 'the absolute,' since it is precisely that which exceeds any and every determinate reality, and hence any and every attempt of ours to capture it in a determinate expression." Such a response commits fully to the declaration of absolute finitude described above: all perceptible realities bear witness to an ultimate reality that *they are not*, in which case what demands to be said about this reality is that it is the indirectly perceptible source of all that with which we *are* in touch, in whose reality, therefore, we ourselves play no role. The "absolute" affirmed in natural religion is the "wholly other" on which we are wholly dependent, the only adequate expression of which being one that declares one's total lack of contact with it.[31]

But although this declaration answers sincerely to the particular "shape" of absolute reality apprehended here, it misrepresents itself *as an apprehension* of this absolute object. As we noticed above, the absolute object affirmed as the source of all immediate appearance appears only *through* such immediacy; this object is in fact not self-manifesting, but rather depends on a point of view that discerns in immediate appearance a source of appearance that exceeds it. In this way, we, as the point of view *to which* immediate being appears as the site of ultimate reality, play an essential role in defining this reality. The all-pervasive significance of light, for example, reveals itself only to that point of view that marvels at this source, disengaging from its practical immersion in determinate reality and turning its attention to the ways in which "all reality" is signaled in and through what appears. For the most part in our experience we are practically involved with determinate things and appearances, and do not typically "look past,"

[31] Hence, as Hegel says, this absolute lacks a self, and all perceptible realities (what *we* see) serve only to point *to* it, without themselves participating in this absolute: "The determinations of this substance are only attributes which do not attain to self-subsistence, but remain merely the names of the many-named One. This One is clothed with the manifold powers of existence and with the 'shapes' of reality as with an adornment that lacks a self; they are merely messengers, having no will of their own, messengers of its might, visions of its glory, voices in its praise" (506, M687).

as it were, these determinate realities to that source in or through which they are given to us. To take note of this source, to affirm the all-pervasive, "essential" nature of light, is therefore to adopt an altogether non-practical attitude. It is, rather, to marvel at the ultimate condition of all things, to notice that none of the determinate realities that populate our experience is the source of its own illumination, and that all such realities, therefore, bear witness to an ultimate reality beyond them. It is *we*, of course, who are responsible for this noticing; hence, the original religious standpoint, which sought to affirm absolute reality in contradistinction to all that appears to our finite perspective, involves an—implicit, at first—acknowledgment of the essential significance of perspective—that is, the standpoint of a "self."

2.2. The religion of art

Unlike natural religion, which envisions absolute reality in the shape of what is constitutively *other* than the self that envisions it (that is, as nature), the distinctive practice of the religion of art is the explicit affirmation of the essential significance of selfhood. This form of religion, Hegel writes, is "that in which spirit knows itself in the shape of a *superseded* natural existence, or of the self. This, therefore, is the Religion of Art; for the shape raises itself to the form of the self through the creative activity of consciousness whereby this beholds in its object its act or the self" (502, M683). This form of religion is no longer characterized by a passive marveling at the source of things; in the religion of art, rather, the absolute object is envisioned as having the form of consciousness, thus reflecting the insight that the standpoint of natural religion was in fact *never* simply a matter of passive marveling, but was essentially a matter of discernment. The religion of art thus marks a significant development in the revelation of religion as the *self*-knowing of spirit: here, Hegel says, "[s]pirit has raised the shape in which it is present to its own consciousness into the form of consciousness itself and it produces such a shape for itself… the shape has gained the form of self-conscious activity" (512, M699).

In describing the religion of art, Hegel returns to the "ethical spirit" of classical Greece that he explored in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As we saw in Chapter Two, this society is founded on the immediate force and validity of its laws and customs, according to which each member sees the terms of her self-expression reflected in the shared values of her society. "[T]his spirit," Hegel reminds us, "is the free nation in which hallowed custom constitutes the substance of all, whose actuality and existence each and everyone knows to be his own will and deed" (512-513, M700). This society, in other words, bases itself on the

coterminousness of "I" and "we," and in this way recognizes the laws and traditions that it has established as the conditions for human freedom and flourishing. Politically speaking, this is a self-consciously self-governing society; it is the originally democratic society that recognizes its collective political achievements—principally, the *polis*—as the human-made site of human freedom.[32] The religious practice of this society—the practice, that is, through which it has "consciousness of its absolute essence" (512, M700)—will thus be the celebration of human achievement and potential, of the capacity of human beings to produce the conditions of their freedom.

In pointing to ancient Greek society as the paradigmatic "actual spirit" of the religion of art, Hegel describes a form of community whose religious practices declare precisely that "*we* are the absolute reality," insofar as it is "we," the self-defining agents of political self-determination, who are responsible for producing the social conditions of human creativity and freedom. Indeed, the religious practices of the ethical society play an essential role in establishing the political system that it affirms as divine.[33] As Russon writes, the art-religion of Greek society "is integral to the original establishments of a political community,"[34] insofar as this religion expresses "the inclusion of human being-for-self in the divine"[35] and thus points to the sphere of human productivity—the (political) conditions of human freedom that *we* make—as the site of "all reality and truth." The religion of art is thus instrumental in founding the political domain and demonstrating its importance, as it is here that politics—the self-conscious self-governance of human beings—is explicitly identified as essential to human freedom and flourishing.

Insofar as "art-religion is the ethical spirit's self-knowledge,"[36] the religious *Vorstellung* of the ethical society will enact the harmony of human and the divine, presented the divine in distinctly human works (which was precisely not the case in the religions of nature). The

[32] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 548.
[33] In this way, for Hegel, the religion of art provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate the way in which the basic commitments of a society are reflected in both its political order and its religious practice, as here the political and religious self-affirmations of the community coincide (Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology*, 240). Still, other forms of religion correspond to different forms of political organization (although not always as explicitly as in the case of the religion of art); as Hegel says, a "specific religion likewise has a specific actual spirit" (M680). It its explicit affirmation of the political self-determination of human beings, the ethical society thus differs both from pre-democratic societies that are not centered on the free and collective self-determination of its members (cf. Hegel's association of natural religion with "subjection to a caste system" at M700) and from modern democracies that privilege the "infinite disquiet" of individual subjectivity over any divination of the collective (Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 548).
[34] Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology*, 240
[35] Ibid., 242
[36] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 547.

appearance of the religious object no longer coincides with the effacement of selfhood in response to the absolute significance of nature; here, rather, human beings produce for themselves the images of the absolute object, fashioning materials drawn from nature into an object—the work of art—that both express and accomplish the "perfect union of human and divine."[37] In the religion of art, the representation of absolute reality—its "image"—has the explicit "shape" of selfhood: what is celebrated in the religion of art is the capacity of human beings—of *us*—to devise and establish the (political) conditions of our own activity, and the products of this celebration—themselves the result of human creativity—are those works that put on display the realities of human achievement and excellence. The religion of art affirms the harmony of the divine and the human, insofar as the form and content of this religion have the significance of "what we have done." Works of art, when they perform a religious function, are the products of self-conscious human activity that bear witness precisely to human activity as the site of ultimate significance.

Self-consciously self-creating, the community of art-religion thus images itself in works of art that bear witness to the strength and ingenuity of human beings in overcoming their subservience to nature in establishing the political institutions on which all depend and trust. Works of art precisely do not occur "naturally," but rather are explicitly the *products* of human effort and creativity, and thus speak not only for the presence and activity of human perspective within nature, but also, in this case, for artistic productivity and creativity as the most distinctive of human capacities. Thus, Hegel says, "*absolute* art makes its appearance" (514, M702) in the context of the religion of art—that is, art that does not simply function symbolically in pointing to a truth beyond it (as it might for natural religion), nor serve merely as an external, material representation of an immaterial, "subjective" truth (as it is for revealed religion). Whereas in such cases art is relative to the truth of which it is the expressive *means*, in the *religion* of art artistic expression itself coincides with the absolute truth it expresses. Not only is artistic self-expression here the definitive human practice, but it is precisely this understanding of the human that is affirmed as the "absolute truth" of art. Art speaks for the coincidence of human creativity with the absolute reality affirmed in the products of such creativity.

As it is *we*—that is, what we have achieved together, in common—that is affirmed here, the ethical society represents itself—initially in the form of sculpture and architecture—as a god, the "lucid, ethical spirits of [the] self-conscious nation" (517, M707). The object of religious

[37] Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology*, 242.

affirmation thus takes on an explicitly human shape, but one that speaks, not for any one individual member of this society, but for the self-creative activity of the nation as a whole.[38] Here, as with natural religion above, the religious self-expression of the ethical society contains the seeds of its own transformation. As Hegel indicates, although the ethical society is that reality in which individuals are able to see the results of their collective self-determination, "the *religion* of the ethical spirit is, however, its elevation above its real world, the withdrawal from its truth into the pure knowledge of itself" (513, M701, my emphasis). In other words, whereas this form of community is founded on the immediate trust that its individual members have in it as "their own essence and their own work" (512, M700), the religious self-affirmation of the ethical society involves a stance of reflective self-consciousness that transcends the immediacy of trust that is known and affirmed. As Hegel writes, "[s]ince the ethical nation lives in immediate unity with its substance and lacks the principle of the pure individuality of self-consciousness, the complete form of its religion first appears as *divorced* from its existential shape" (513, M701).[39] To acknowledge and celebrate *as divine* the laws and customs of one's society is to go beyond simply enacting them; it is to abstract oneself from these political achievements in order to praise or revere them.

Such an abstraction, moreover, represents a form of self-consciousness—namely, subjective individuality—that these political realities could never wholly incorporate. The religion of ethical society, which in its artistic productions declares the ultimacy of the political achievements of the state, is itself the act of a creative subject that, as irreducible to its political context, reveals precisely the non-ultimacy of political norms. As Hyppolite writes, "[t]he dialectic of art-religion by itself leads us toward the revelation of subjectivity to which, through the knowledge of its substance, it has already raised itself in-itself."[40] In revealing subjectivity in this way, ethical society, through its religious creations, reveals its own relativity as a sphere of human significance, having produced a form of self-consciousness that, as *individual*, enacts its freedom precisely by transcending the norms and customs that make up the substance and

[38] In being represented in the form of an individual, Hegel explains, the nation retains some of its natural form and features: "the shape of the god in its own self strips off… the poverty of the natural conditions of animal existence… The *essential* being of the god is… the unity of the universal existence of nature and of self-conscious spirit which, in its actuality, confronts the former. At the same time, being in the first instance an *individual* shape, its existence is one of the elements of nature, just as its self-conscious actuality is an individual national spirit" (516, M707).
[39] As Hyppolite writes, "when Greek spirit becomes self-knowledge and reproduces itself in works of art, this remembering is the sign of [the] higher form" of "abstract individuality" (549).
[40] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 549.

essence of ethical society.[41] The acknowledgment of the creative insight of subjective individuality thus undercuts any assertion of the absolute significance of ethical society, "for the truth of the ethical spirit is," Hegel says, "still only this substantial essence and trust in it, in which the self does not know itself as a free individuality, and which, therefore, in this inwardness, or in the liberation of the self, perishes" (514, M701).[42]

This "liberation" of the inwardness of individuality thus necessitates the development of a new form of religious self-expression, insofar as there is here revealed a dimension of self-consciousness that the religion of art is unable to express. Indeed, even as he introduces the religion of art, Hegel writes: "Later on, spirit transcends art in order to gain a higher representation of itself, viz. to be not merely the *substance* born of the self, but to be, in its representation as object, *this self*, not only to give birth to itself from its notion, but to have its very concept for its shape, so that the concept and the work of art produced know each other as one and the same" (514, M702). The products of one's activity, however excellent they may be, and however powerfully they speak for one's creative potential as an individual, are not exactly one's own *self*. What I have made speaks of me only externally; neither the laws of my society nor the works that display their greatness—the statues of the gods, for example—reflect the precise "shape" of my own subjective inwardness, of who and what I am "on the inside." It is indeed the *inwardness* of the self, for Hegel, that artistic self-expression can only approximate,[43]

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[41] Cf. 513, M701: "The consummation of the ethical sphere in free self-consciousness, and the fate of the ethical world, are therefore the individuality that has withdrawn into itself, the absolute levity of the ethical spirit which has dissolved within itself all the firmly established distinctions of its stable existence and the spheres of its organically ordered world."

[42] Similar to Hegel's account, in the "Spirit" chapter, of the dissolution of the ethical society through the transgressive action of the singular self, here, in his discussion of religion, we see the appearance of individual selfhood pose a challenge to the equation of the divine and the human on which the ethical society rests, with this individual self displacing the divine figures through which this society envisions itself. As Hegel writes, "The *individual self* is the negative power through which and in which the gods, as also their moments, viz. existent nature and the thoughts of their specific characters, vanish. At the same time, the individual self is not the emptiness of this disappearance but, on the contrary, preserves itself in this very nothingness, abides with itself and is the sole actuality. In it, the religion of art is consummated and has completely returned into itself" (544, M747). Commenting on this passage, Lauer writes, "the culmination of the religion of art is the triumph of the 'singular self'… But this negation, this disappearance, has positive significance; the singular self is present to itself as the only reality which counts. Man is now the actor on life's stage; [h]e is also the spectator who finds himself in the role he sees portrayed. Religious consciousness has become consciousness of self; man must now find his true self within himself" (Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology, 273).

[43] Hegel's critique of the merely external representation of selfhood in the religion of art, we should note, applies to a particular form of artistic expression. Hegel's focus here, as Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, is "that age of Greek sculpture in which the Greek world of the gods and the divine as such manifested themselves in human form… and if after the decline of antiquity [Hegel] feels the loss of this harmonious coincidence of the human and the divine and so claims that art as such is a thing of the past, then it is the visual arts, as a sensuous appearance of the absolute, that serves as his criterion." Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 116. Of course, it is only art as *religion* that is "a thing of the

and that the political institutions—such as law and custom—celebrated in the religion of art cannot fully recognize. I am *more* than the external products of my creativity, *more* than the political realities to which I contribute and to which I am committed, and thus it falls to a "higher representation" of self-consciousness to express those aspects of human selfhood bypassed in the religion of art.

2.3. Revealed religion

In its religious self-affirmation, the religion of art performed by the ethical society gives expression to a form of subjective inwardness that this society, whose cohesiveness is premised on an "immediate confidence which harmoniously unite[s] the truth of a being with a certainty of a self,"[44] cannot accommodate. This dimension of selfhood thus calls for another form of religious utterance, a "higher representation" through which is affirmed not merely the artistic product of self-conscious self-idealization, but rather the very interiority of the standpoint of self-consciousness. The pursuit of an adequate expression of this interiority must look beyond the merely external products of human creativity and activity—beyond art, as "the substance born of the self"—and seek a representation of that creative activity itself—"this self" as a singular point of view.

For Hegel, this higher representation is provided by Christianity, the religion that envisions absolute reality in the shape of a self-conscious individual person. Christianity is the religion that announces the "incarnation" of absolute reality in the person of Jesus Christ, an "actual man" in whom the divinity of God appears directly to those in his presence:

> 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… The self of existent spirit has, as a result, the form of complete immediacy; it is posited neither as something thought or imagined, nor as something produced, as is the case with

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past," for Hegel, and the recognition of the inadequacy of aesthetic representation to express the inwardness of subjectivity corresponds to the emergence in modernity of romantic art, in which aesthetic expression puts itself in the service of a religious—that is, Christian—understanding of selfhood. Because "there dwells in the spirit the need to satisfy itself solely in its own inner self as the true form for truth to take," Hegel says in his *Aesthetics*, "the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit" and "mind and feeling, the inner subjective life in general, becomes the chief factor" in spirit's self-expression. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume I, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 103. As John Walker explains, Christianity reveals a subject that transcends the external expression of visual art: "hence the characteristic concern of the romantic art of Hegel's own time," he writes, "is to imagine aesthetically a transcendence which is known not to be adequately embodied in the form of its aesthetic representation." Walker, "Art, Religion, and the Modernity of Hegel," in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 275.

[44] Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure*, 548.

> the immediate self in natural religion, and also in the religion of art; on the contrary, this God is sensuously and directly beheld as a self, as an actual individual man; only so *is* this God self-consciousness. (551-552, M758)

Christianity goes beyond the recognition of the human contribution to the appearance of the absolute reality; as the religion of the "Word made flesh," the message of Christianity is not merely that the divine and human enjoy a mutually expressive relationship, but rather that the incarnation of God in the finite existence of a human being is in fact the truest representation of divine reality. In Christianity, Hegel writes, "the absolute being which exists as an actual self-consciousness seems to have come down from its eternal simplicity, but by thus *coming down* it has in fact attained for the first time to its own highest essence" (553, M760).[45] Or, as Karl Barth more polemically puts it, in its announcement of the incarnation Christianity declares the inadequacy of all representations of God as distinct from human experience: "It would be the false deity of a false God," he writes, "if in his deity his humanity did not also immediately encounter us."[46]

Although, according to Hegel, the representation of absolute reality in Christianity will develop beyond this orientation toward Jesus as an individual,[47] this initial sketch of the incarnation allows us to notice some of the basic features of the "absolute religion" as they pertain to the discussion so far.

First, in representing absolute reality in the shape of an individual self-consciousness, Christianity accomplishes a kind of affirmation of human subjectivity that was implied, but only approximated, in the forms of religion studied previously. In their own ways, both natural religion and the religion of art portrayed the absolute reality as opposed to or distinct from the human standpoint, with natural religion declaring the finite nature of human perspective as such, and the religion of art, although acknowledging the human shape of divine reality, doing so by worshipping external and perfected shapes of human activity. Both of these forms of religion, in other words, reinforce the distinction between absolute reality and the finite perspective by which it is affirmed, portraying the absolute as '*that* reality, *out there*' in one way or another. Christianity, by contrast, asserts that absolute reality is found precisely *within* finite human perspective; it declares the absolute significance of "this self," the individual subjectivity that is wholly relativized in natural religion and only externally represented in the religion of art. In

[45] Cf. Philippians 2: 5-8.
[46] Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1972), 50.
[47] As the quotation above from 551-552, M750 indicates, absolute spirit is still only *implicitly* conscious of itself in this immediate appearance of divine reality.

Christianity, the finitude of the human standpoint no longer marks a boundary between the human and the divine, but rather is the primary point of contact between them. In apprehending the incarnation of divine reality in the person of Christ, who embodies precisely the same finite, self-conscious individuality that I myself am, the "object [of consciousness] now is the self," Hegel writes, "but the self is *nothing alien*" (552, M759, emphasis added). The incarnation, thus, is not the denial of human finitude, but rather the declaration of its absolute significance. Hence, I can wholly identify with absolute reality, not despite my finitude but precisely with respect to it: I am, that is, *wholly finite*, just as is the absolute reality that is incarnate before me.

Second, in revealing that absolute reality coincides with the reality of human selfhood, Christianity fulfills the self-imposed task of religion—that is, no longer to posit absolute reality as an object of consciousness, but to recognize it in the very selfhood that "we" ourselves are. As Hegel writes: "This incarnation of the divine being, or the fact that it essentially and directly has the shape of self-consciousness, is the simple content of the absolute religion. In this religion the divine being is known as spirit, or this religion is the consciousness of the divine being that it is spirit" (552, M759). In Christianity, the divine or absolute reality is "known" to reside within the same intersubjective reality as do we ourselves who affirm it, and our affirmation of this mutual participation, insofar as in it we knowingly affirm something of *ourselves*, constitutes the "absolute" religious expression.

Third, in its "revelation" of the divine being as self-consciousness,[48] Christianity also reveals this task to be the task *of religion*—that is, it reveals the basic function of religion as such. Although, for Hegel, all forms of religion are in some way versions of the "self-consciousness of spirit," Christianity "overcomes the one-sidedness of the first two [forms of religion]" by incorporating the form of self-consciousness explicitly in its *Vorstellung*:

> If, in [its] first reality [as natural religion], spirit in general is in the form of consciousness, and in the second [as the religion of art], in that of self-consciousness, in the third it is in the form of the unity of both. It has the shape of being-in-and-for-itself; and when it is thus conceived as it is in and for itself, this is the revealed religion. (502, M683)

As the "unity" of the first two "realities" of spirit, Christianity is, as it were, the consciousness of self-consciousness, that is, the form of religious representation whose object is identical to the

[48] Cf. 459, M759: "Consequently, in this religion the divine being is *revealed*. Its being revealed obviously consists in this, that what it is, is known. But it is known precisely in its being known as spirit, as a being that is essentially a *self-conscious being*."

self that appends it.[49] In this form, religion is no longer the consciousness of an absolute object, therefore, nor merely the representation of itself in objects of its own production, but rather is *self-consciously and immediately* the apprehension of oneself in the object of one's affirmation. In this way again Christianity represents an advance beyond both natural religion, which (in many ways the paradigmatic expression of religious *Vorstellung*) points to an absolute reality that is constitutively "beyond" the standpoint that is conscious of it, and the religion of art, which, partially reconciling this discrepancy by envisioning absolute reality in the form of selfhood, nevertheless affirms a form of selfhood with which the subjective individual cannot wholly identify.

Like the other two forms, this form of religious expression exhibits certain inadequacies. In this case, though, these inadequacies pertain not simply to the particular representational media of Christianity, but to the representational form of religion in general. As Walter Jaeschke explains, Christianity exposes and displaces the representational structure of knowledge that keeps subject and object apart, and thus enables religious consciousness to be at home—that is, free—in its object in a way not possible in the other forms of religion. As he writes, "the reason why the Christian religion is for Hegel the consummate religion is that it sublates the mere relationship-of-consciousness, according to which God stands on the one side while the human worshipper stands on the other."[50] In overcoming this "relationship-of-consciousness," Christianity points not to the inadequacy of other forms of religious representation, but to the inadequacy of representational knowing itself—to, as John Walker says, "the end of a self-sufficiently religious mode of consciousness of the reality which the word 'religion' means."[51] In Christianity, the representational form of religious affirmation shows itself to be incidental to the truth—subjective inwardness—it affirms; it is the religion that relativizes religious representation, in which the "images" offered as expressions of absolute reality—including its own—gradually reveal their relative status.

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[49] As Martin J. De Nys point out, of course, all forms of religion are, if only implicitly, forms of the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness; however, it is only in Christianity, for Hegel, that this unity becomes the explicit theme of religious *Vorstellung*. See De Nys, "Mediation and Negativity in Hegel's Phenomenology of Christian Consciousness," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1986): 49.

[50] Walter Jaeschke, "Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion," in *New Perspectives on Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, ed. David Kolb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 12. As Jaeschke continues, "in religions that regard such a relationship-of-consciousness as the religious relationship properly speaking, the single self-consciousness does not know God as what he implicitly is, namely as its essence. In such religions self-consciousness is not at home with itself in the idea of God, is not free" (Ibid., 12).

[51] Walker, "Art, Religion, and the Modernity of Hegel," 280.

3. Christianity as the self-transcendence of religious representation

Through its definitive image of the incarnation, Christianity announces the presence of divine reality within human self-consciousness, and in this way "reveals" not only that absolute reality has a human shape, but also that human experience is the very site of this reality. In this way, the self-criticism implicit in Christianity does not simply point to another, more adequate representation of the religious object; that is, it does not simply reveal the relativity of its own particular representational media to the reality that they affirm, but rather reveals the relativity of religious representation as such. It is the form of religious expression, that is, that makes possible the understanding of religion *in general* as the basic self-expression of what is *human*—that is, of "who we are" most basically.

As Hegel shows, however, the revelation accomplished in Christianity remains "imperfect," insofar as in it "the representational structure is not totally dissolved."[52] Consequently, the recognition of the basically human significance of the divine reality is initially articulated idiomatically—namely, in the particularly *Christian* affirmation of the centrality of forgiveness as a redemptive or salvific possibility enabled by the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.[53] However, the significance of forgiveness is not reducible to its

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[52] Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundation of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 206. Hegel makes clear that Christianity accomplishes its exposure of religion nevertheless in "religious" terms. For Hegel, Christianity reveals the true, self-conscious "shape" of spirit (it could not have been properly self-conscious apart from this development of religion) while still itself employing the representational structure whose relative nature it exposes: "although in [revealed religion], spirit has indeed attained its true *shape*, yet the shape itself and the representation are still the un-vanquished aspect from which spirit must pass over into the concept, in order wholly to resolve therein the form of objectivity, in the concept which equally embraces within itself its own opposite. It is then that spirit has grasped the concept of itself, just as we now have first grasped it; and its shape or the element of its existence, being the concept, is spirit itself" (M683). As De Nys points out, though, this "grasping" of the implicit conceptual content of Christianity is not simply the shedding of an inessential representational ornamentation. Rather, according to De Nys, Hegel "shows religious consciousness to detect in its own self-assessment exigencies that call forth a speculative appropriation of itself" (De Nys, "Mediation and Negativity," 46-47). As De Nys argues, there is no (speculative) discourse that is altogether "beyond" religion, since, through its own "self-assessment," religion moves itself self-critically toward conceptual thought. Hence, conceptual discourse is not a denial or negation of representational thinking, but rather arises precisely out of representation, which provides the only context for its emergence.

[53] See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr's assertion that the doctrine of forgiveness is "the crown of Christian Ethics." Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1935), 137. For Niebuhr, as is clear, the experience of forgiveness has an overtly theological—if not specifically Christian—dimension. "Forgiving love," he writes, "is a possibility only for those who know that they are not good, who feel themselves in need of divine mercy, who live in a dimension deeper and higher than that of moral idealism, feel themselves as well as their fellow men convicted of sin by a holy God and know that the differences between the good man and the bad man are insignificant in his sight" (Ibid., 139). As I outlined in the introduction to this study, while the experience of forgiveness corresponds to the acknowledgment that the terms of a "moral idealism" do not speak for the "absolute" possibility of recognition between persons, this relative status of morality does not grant license to any one

centrality as a moral or theological doctrine within Christianity.[54] The "incarnational" insight of Christianity, culminating in the forgiving community, indeed represents—in Christian terms—the human "shape" of the divine; however, in revealing also the essence of religion as the basic self-defining self-expression of a human community, forgiveness undermines the privileging of any one *religious* expression of its intersubjective significance. It is not enough, in other words, to say that through Christianity we learn that religion is ultimately about forgiveness (if by this assertion we mean simply to locate the gesture of forgiveness *in a specifically Christian sense* at the heart of both Christianity and religion in general). Such a reading of Hegel's phenomenology of religion overlooks what Hegel has already established about forgiveness in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—namely, that forgiveness—the affirmation of the absolute significance of finitude—is not (or not only) a privileged theological category, but rather is the socio-ontological reality affirmed in theological or religious discourse.[55] To say that religion is ultimately about forgiveness is thus to say, according to the full implication of Hegel's account, that religion is ultimately about the *human*, insofar as the religion whose representational media points precisely to forgiveness as a human possibility points equally to the basically human significance of religious representation. In this way, the revelation of the human shape of the divine in Christianity works precisely against the privileging of any *one* religious idiom with respect to the communal self-expression that it accomplishes, in which case Christianity renounces any proprietary claim to the reality or meaning of forgiveness just as soon as it reveals the place of forgiveness at the heart of religious expression. According to its own (self-critical) logic, the affirmation of the Christian virtue of forgiveness must become the affirmation—forgiveness—of all authentically religious idioms.

In order to explore further the self-transcendence of religion in Christianity, let us begin by reminding ourselves what religion is, for Hegel, and why he thinks a phenomenology of religion is necessary for any phenomenological account of human experience. Hegel's

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religion's idiomatic interpretation of this absolute possibility. In various ways, religions *represent* "absolute spirit," but the experience of absolute spirit itself is the experience of conscientious mutual recognition.

[54] Compare Niehbur's interpretation of forgiveness, for example, to that of Arendt, who, as we saw in the introduction, attributes to Jesus of Nazareth the discovery of the possibility of forgiveness "in the realm of human affairs," but does not attribute to it any theological or religious significance.

[55] Cf. Williams' remarks on the "theological implications" of forgiveness, which derive from the "emergent common element" of the form of mutual recognition in which "the spirit of community express[es] itself as the power of forgiveness." For Williams, whether "God is the event of reciprocal forgiveness, or accompanies the event of forgiveness as it basis… phenomenologically, God is a mediating third, namely, the power of pardoning, forgiving, or the power of releasement and reconciliation itself that is grounded in love" (Williams, *Recognition*, 209-210).

phenomenology is a phenomenology of *spirit*—that is, of the shared systems of meaning that underlie and give shape to human experience as it is lived. Most basically, Hegel's procedure is first to show *that* our experience as a singular point of view in and on the world does indeed presuppose and depend on the reality of shared meaning (a reality that Hegel labels "spirit," and that is experienced and enacted in practices of mutual recognition and affirmation among individual selves). He then explores the various forms of this sharing that make up human experience according to how they reveal themselves. Hegel's analysis of spirit in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* culminates in an account of the experience of conscience, the recognition of which—enacted, according to Hegel, as confession and forgiveness—amounts to "*absolute* spirit."

"Absolute spirit" is the most basic substance of our self-conscious identities and experience of the shared world. However, the *enactment* of this absolute form of spirit is not necessarily identical to the affirmation of it *as absolute*. Although Hegel's analysis of conscience allows him to show that what is absolute in human experience is indeed a form of spirit, it is the project of another analysis—the phenomenology of religion—to explore the various ways in which human beings (and in particular, human *communities*) have given voice to their sense of "the absolute." It is thus crucial not to regard Hegel's phenomenology of religion in Chapter VII as a mere "supplement"[56] or superficial addition to the argument of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although it concerns the same content—namely, "absolute spirit"—as the analysis of conscience, the phenomenology of religion is necessary insofar as what we *say* about who we are most basically—through, in the first place, what we say about "the absolute" as an *object*—is not incidental to who we in fact are.[57] For Hegel, we cannot arrive at an adequate sense of who we

[56] Cf. Jameson, for example, who misleadingly portrays Hegel's chapter on religion as an "enormous supplement" to the *Phenomenology of* Spirit, although Jameson's actual discussion works to mitigate this characterization (*The Hegel Variations*, 116). For an alternate view, see again Lauer's reading of Hegel's discussion of religion as one of "two parallel developments" at work in Hegel's text (and thus in no way "supplementary"), the first being the development of the self-consciousness of spirit, in which the human community develops its sense of what it truly is, and the second being the development of the community's religious consciousness, wherein its object "progressively reveals itself as spirit." As Lauer (and I) read Hegel, the fulfillment of the first development—the "progress in self-consciousness"—requires the fulfillment of the second; the development of religion is in no way supplementary or incidental to development of human self-understanding (Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, 259-60).

[57] Here we might note—in anticipation of the final section of this chapter—Hegel's account of the coincidence of religious and political self-expressions of the community in his discussion of the religion of art, as well as his general point that (as exemplified in the religion of art) different forms of religion correspond to different forms of political organization in history. Indeed, religion is of interest to Hegel precisely because of the way in which a society's religious self-understanding is the basic substance out of which it articulates its understanding of human freedom, and Christianity in particular stands out to him in affirming the freedom of self-conscious individuality to which modern political institutions are answerable. "The only reason why Christianity is of systematic interest to

are without taking into account the various religious objects through which we, throughout human history, have represented this self-understanding.

In the context of Hegel's phenomenology, then, the affirmation of the incarnation in Christianity effects a revolution in human self-understanding as much as in religion.[58] Whereas the forms of religion that precede Christianity, each represent the reality of human experience as in some way distinct from absolute reality, the incarnation announces instead the coincidence of absolute reality with precisely those aspects of human experience—individuality, subjectivity, finitude—that previously demanded exclusion.[59] The incarnation is thus the central image of Christianity, not only in being the religious event from which develop all of the other doctrinal elements of Christianity,[60] but also in assuring the status of Christianity as the religion that facilitates the fullest vision of human experience. Only in Christianity, as Lauer explains, does religious representation correspond to "what consciousness *truly* is, the paradigm of developing self-consciousness."[61] He continues:

> Central to [Christianity], for rather obvious reasons, is the Incarnation. The inadequacy of all previous forms of religious consciousness was that they represented to themselves either a god (gods) not recognizable as spirit, i.e., in nature, or gods who indeed had some of the attributes of spirit but were not present in their man-made representations. In none was the abstract divine-human relationship concretized into a relationship of God and man. In Christian theology, on the other hand, the Incarnation—however it be interpreted—presents to religious consciousness a uniquely concrete union of the divine and the human in the God-man, thus revealing to human consciousness that to be totally

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[Hegel]," Jaeschke writes, is that "he finds performed in it what is, according to his philosophy, the highest idea, that of the freedom of self-consciousness" (Jaeschke, "Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion," 13).

[58] Or rather, for Hegel, these amount to the same revolution.

[59] In this way, these previous forms of religious expression, and especially the inadequacies that propel their self-critique, prefigure precisely the discovery, in Christianity, of finite individual selfhood as the site of absolute reality. As De Nys writes, **"**these discoveries [in natural religion and the religion of art] prepare religious consciousness for an understanding of the divine as that which, precisely as other than the human, reveals itself in human selfhood. It is this understanding, of course, that the Incarnation represents. Christian consciousness is just that form of religious consciousness that centers its understanding of the divine upon a belief in the Incarnation" (De Nys, "Mediation and Negativity," 50-1).

[60] The basic order of Hegel's discussion is the following: after addressing the event of the incarnation itself (M754-761) and then the incarnational community (M762-768), Hegel explores several of the central doctrinal elements of the Christian narrative (M769-780) in order to show how they, as ways in which the Christian community continues to employ the logic of representation, point not only to the human shape of the divine (in Christianity) but also to the self-expressive significance of representation (in religion in general).

[61] Despite the privilege that Hegel here assigns to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, the implication of Hegel's view (as I am arguing here) is that the representation of self-consciousness is, via the incarnation, extended to other forms of religious expression. Commenting on the self-transformative nature of religious representation, Desmond argues that while "for Hegel it is the Christian consciousness which attains the acme of this transformation… we can see the possibility of this transformation present in all religious representation" (Desmond, "Hegel and the Problem of Religious Representation," 20). The point here is expressly not that all forms of religion are "incarnational" in a Christian sense, but rather that the Christian idea of the incarnation de-centers religious representation in such a way that, in the terms of Taylor's understanding of secularity, one recognizes one's religious conviction as one among many available possibilities (see Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3).

> human is to be divine. Jesus Christ is for Hegel the unique self, who is at once 'absolute' and human, who reveals to man the utmost in human potentialities and makes of Christianity the religion which manifests "the infinite value of the individual." In Jesus Christ he finds a God who is self-conscious spirit and a man who is conscious of himself as divine. This is the ultimate in religious consciousness; its implications will carry human consciousness to the ultimate in self-consciousness.[62]

This affirmation of "the infinite value of the individual" in the incarnation, though not altogether opposed to those aspects of human experience (for example, collective self-determination) affirmed in other forms of religion, nevertheless points to the relativity of such aspects with respect to the absolute significance of individual subjectivity. Christianity is thus unique, for Hegel, in affirming as absolute the same reality that sets into motion his account of absolute spirit in his analysis of conscience—namely, the irreducibility of subjective insight, or the basically *interpretive* (i.e., finite and perspectival) nature of human experience. For Hegel, the union of the divine and the human in individual self-consciousness represented by the incarnation, in revealing the absolute significance of individuality as the site of this union, points definitively to the absolute significance of human perspective not simply in recognizing divine reality but in realizing it.[63]

Moreover, like conscience, the centrality of subjectivity represented in the incarnation is fully realized in the communicative context in which any singular standpoint is confirmed and made meaningful. But, since Hegel's analysis of religion deals not with the abstract nature of subjectivity but rather with how it is "imaged" in religious self-expression, this realization occurs in the gradual expansion and resignification of the original image of the incarnated divine. In this process, the standpoint of selfhood affirmed as absolute comes to include not just the individual self-consciousness in which absolute reality is apprehended, but also the community of those

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[62] Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit*,* 275.

[63] For example, as Hegel explains, all the things we are led to say about the divine reality—the attributes of God—are shown, via the incarnation, to have meaning and substance only in the fact that they are *attributes*, that is, predications made about that divine reality by the *subject* that beholds it: "The good, the righteous, the holy, creator of heaven and earth, and so on, are predicates of a subject—universal moments which have their support on this point and only *are* when consciousness withdraws into thought" (553, M759). As Lauer confirms, "thus is the divine 'substance' subject; thus too does the divine Being *reveal* itself as what it is; it is 'object of consciousness as spirit,' and all the 'attributes' of God—good, holy, just, creator, etc.—are 'predicates' of a subject, a self, a source of activity" (Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, 277). We should note, though, that this understanding of the attributes of the divine is not the *reduction* of what is said about the divine to the human. As Jeaschke confirms, for Hegel "the principle determining the structure of the history of religion lies in the dialectic of consciousness and self-consciousness—not in the gradual taking-back of the object of consciousness into the self, but in the transition from the epoch of consciousness to that of self-consciousness and to the unity of the two modes of consciousness, in which, however, the element of 'shapedness' continues to be operative." To be sure, Jaeschke continues, this transition "necessitates spirit's ultimate passing beyond religion," but not its reduction of religion to something else (Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion*, 196).

who apprehend and bear witness to this appearance. Restricted to its initial appearance in the individual self-consciousness of Christ, Hegel says, the "concept of spirit that knows itself as spirit is itself the immediate concept and is not yet developed," since "spirit as an individual self is not yet equally the universal self, the self of everyone" (555, M762).[64]

We can consider the development of the incarnational image as having two basic stages. In the first stage, the incarnation of the divine in an immediately present human being becomes the object of collective remembrance, a process in which the community achieves partial recognition of its own essentiality as the site for the realization of divine reality. The "individual man," Hegel writes, "which absolute being has revealed itself to be, accomplishes in himself as an individual the movement of sensuous being," and, consequently, "his *'being'* passes over into *'having been*,'" (555, M763). As a result, the apprehension of absolute reality can no longer take the form of an immediate awareness, but must now organize itself around the *memory* of that immediacy, that is, the preservation of the "spiritual" reality of the incarnation in the domain of (collective) thought:

> Consciousness, for which God is thus sensuously present, ceases to see and to hear him; it *has* seen and heard him; and it is because it only *has* seen and heard him that it first becomes itself spiritual consciousness. Or, in other words, just as formerly he rose up for consciousness as a *sensuous existence*, now he has arisen *in the spirit*. For a consciousness that sensuously sees and hears him is itself a merely immediate consciousness, which has not overcome the disparity of objectivity, has not taken it back into pure thought: it knows this objective individual, but not itself, as spirit. In the vanishing of the immediate existence known to be absolute being the immediacy receives its negative moment; spirit remains the immediate self of actuality, but as the *universal self-consciousness* of the community… (555-556, M763)

The "vanishing"[65] of the immediate presence of the divine as a self-conscious individual—the fact that "this" man, as mortal, dies a human death—thus makes possible a new attitude toward

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[64] As with any immediate sensuous "this," the appearance of God in the form of "this" individual is a sensuous reality that misleadingly presents itself as self-sufficient, and that, according to its own logic, ends up revealing its own non-self-sufficiency.

[65] Jean-Luc Nancy explores this theme of the "vanishing" of immediate presence and its "rising up" in the universality of community in his work *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*. With reference especially to the Gospel of John and various depictions in art of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Christ, Nancy explores the categories of resurrection and ascension as instances of "the *kenosis* continued," which extend Christ's function as the "imaging" of human experience from the affirmation of individual subjectivity to that of human community as the "presence" of divine reality. Significant here is Nancy's portrayal of resurrection and ascension as developments precisely of incarnation—that is, of the distinctly embodied shape of the divine in the person of Christ. As Nancy argues, Christ's reluctance to be touched by Mary ("Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father," John 20:17), his resistance to Mary's fixation on his immediate bodily presence, is a revelation of the more proper significance of the body as the immediate site of a non-immediate "sense"—that is, of meaning and communication. As Nancy writes, "Christ does not want to be held back, for he is leaving. He says it immediately: he has not yet returned to the Father, and he is going toward him. To touch him or to hold him back would be to

the absolute reality affirmed in the incarnation. What is acknowledged here is that, as Lauer writes, "incarnation is not limited to one individual,"[66] that the truth of the incarnation is not reducible to the immediate presence of God but includes also the participation in the presence of God of those "in whom his Spirit dwells."[67] For those within the community of the faithful, "not just He but *we* are essential to the reality of the divine," insofar as the absolute status of subjectivity cannot be restricted to the perspective of *one* subject. The finite subjectivity inhabited by God in Christ is the finite subjectivity of any and every individual: absolute reality has appeared, not just *to* us, but *as one of us*, and we must bear witness to this reality, not by pointing to it but by "living it out." What matters, therefore, is thus no longer the particular way in which the divine appears (as an object or a reality), but rather *our* contribution to the shape of divine reality, the ways in which *we* (as subjects, in our acting and thinking) comport ourselves to it.[68] The disappearance of the immediate presence of the divine and its resurrection "in the spirit" thus offer an initial expression of the properly *universal* character of self-consciousness—namely, that the self affirmed as absolute in God incarnate is no different, in fact, than "the self of everyone."

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adhere to immediate presence, and just as this would be to believe in touching (to believe in the presence of the present), it would be to miss the departing according to which the touch and presence come to us. Only thus does the 'resurrection' find its nonreligious meaning. What for religion is the renewal of a presence that bears the phantasmatic assurance of immortality is revealed here to be nothing other than the departing into which presence actually withdraws, bearing its sense in accordance with this parting." Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 15. Developing on the incarnational message that the divine resides "here, among us," Christ's resurrection reveals further that essential to "us" are the shared practices through which we have "raised" our bodies in response to the task of communicating. (Note here that the "vanishing" of immediate presence is crucial to the lesson learned in the life-and-death struggle, in which opposing selves "raise" the terms of their interaction—and thus the significance of their bodies—from physical combat to gestural communication. Only in "staking one's life," Hegel writes in his initial account of recognition, "is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not being, not the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*" (149, M187)).

[66] Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, 278.

[67] Cf. Romans 8:11

[68] To be sure, this conclusion resembles the self-criticisms implicit in natural religion and in the religion of art, although here, in Christianity, the affirmation of the union of the divine and the human results not simply in a refined—that is, humanized—understanding of the divine *object* but rather in the acknowledgment that the divine has no reality outside of its being "here, in our midst." This resemblance is especially evident in the self-destruction of the religion of art, which Hegel describes as a kind of secular humanism in which all divine reality has been evacuated to reveal the solely human core of religious expression. This *reduction* of the divine to the human, however, is one-sided; it is a "loss of substance as well as of the self" (M752), in which "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 the divine." Having only a "veiled recollection of that actual world," those living in the dissolution of the ethical spirit can only "erect an intricate scaffolding of [the divine elements'] outward existence… not in order to enter into their very life but only to possess an idea of them in our imagination." It is thus the task of Christianity to enter into this spiritual vacuum and recover this lost substance in an entirely new form, since the relocation the divine within human recollection imagination is, on the other side, "the *inwardizing* in us of the spirit which in [ethical life] was only *outwardly* manifested" (548, M753).

However, this affirmation of the universal nature of the divine self-consciousness stops short of being an explicit affirmation of the essential significance of the community itself, to the extent that the religious community understands its essential contribution to the reality of the divine in terms of a *departed* God-man, whose presence it remembers or whose return it awaits. The "remoteness in time and space" of the once immediate divine self-consciousness is, Hegel writes, "only the imperfect form in which the immediate mode is given a mediated or universal character," a form that, as the "synthetic combination of sensuous immediacy and its universality or thought… constitutes the specific mode in which spirit, in this community, becomes aware of itself" (556, M764-5). In other words, although the "object" through which this community understands itself is a finite human individual no different than any of the members of this community, in its concentration of its self-understanding on this one individual the community continues to employ the representational form of religious self-knowing, whereby the self-expression of the community is "still burdened with an unreconciled split into a Here and a Beyond" (556, M765). While this community recognizes that the incarnation represented in Christ is applicable to all individuals—that is, every self—it does not yet recognize the shared nature of selfhood—the community itself—as the reality imaged in the incarnation.

In its collective remembrance of the departed incarnation of absolute reality, this religious community thus effects a partial recognition of the essential significance of community for the realization of the absolute. That is, the religious community still orients itself toward absolute reality as something *other*; however, the "split" within religious self-understanding here pertains not to the alienness of the "object" of religious consciousness (again, the "object" of the incarnation is as much "self" as the community it represents), but rather to the *form* in which this community affirms its own significance. Hegel thus articulates the uniqueness of Christian *Vorstellung* in terms of the relation of form and content:

> The *content* is the true content, but all its moments, when placed in the medium of [representation], have the character of being uncomprehended, of appearing as completely independent sides which are externally connected with each other. Before the true content can also receive its true form for consciousness, a higher formative development of consciousness is necessary; it must raise its intuition of absolute substance into the concept, and equate its consciousness with its self-consciousness *for itself*, just as this has happened for us, or *in itself*. (556-557, M765)

Although Christianity grasps the "true content" of religious affirmation, as Hegel says, it organizes the elements of this content "externally," by treating as contingently related that which ought to comprehended as necessarily related. More specifically, although it is more adequately

self-knowledge than any other form of religious knowing, Christian representation constructs a *narrative* regarding absolute spirit (i.e., as something that unfolds historically and accidentally), rather than directly and explicitly knowing spirit *necessarily* as absolute, according to the concept of spirit. Of course, the story of Christianity is one of the becoming-subjective and becoming-intersubjective of the divine essence, and so the narrative constructed here points precisely to "the life of the community" that is the "true content" of the religious standpoint (557, M766). And yet, in treating its own incarnational significance in terms of something that "has happened,"[69] the religious community maintains a formal distinction between itself and what it affirms. God is "among us" and "with us" but is not wholly *within* us, and what matters for the religious community at this stage is not its activity as the realization of God in the world but its orientation toward the story of God becoming human.

There is, therefore, need for a second stage in the development—that is, self-relativization—of the incarnational image, one that pertains to the doctrinal content of Christian representation. The point here, for Hegel, is that the significance of the incarnation is not fully developed if absolute reality—"God"—remains an *idea* for the community that is devoted to it, however much that community recognizes its own necessity for the reception of this idea. Hegel thus provides an interpretive survey of several key doctrinal themes of Christianity in order to show how they too, according to the very narrative they comprise together, demonstrate the self-transcendence of religious representation. Both at the level of practice (e.g., recollection) and thought (e.g., doctrine), religion remains "imagistic" insofar as it fails to recognize its own self-affirmation in its affirmation of its vision of the absolute.

To attempt only the briefest sketches of this doctrinal self-unfolding, we can note first that spirit, for Hegel, which conceptually ought to be understood as "the being that is the movement of retaining its self-identity in its otherness" (552, M759), is envisioned by representational thinking as a relation among several distinct beings,[70] that is, as God in the shape of the Trinity. Hence, "the representation of the religious community is not… speculative thinking," and, in its affirmation of absolute spirit, "instead of the form of the concept it brings

[69] "Since representation interprets and expresses as a *happening* what has just been expressed as the *necessity* of the concept, it is said that the eternal being *begets* for itself an 'other'" (559, M769).
[70] Hegel describes "the form of representation and of those relationships derived from nature [that] must be transcended" as "the standpoint which takes the moments of the movement which spirit is, as isolated immovable substances or subjects, instead of transient moments" (560, M771).

into the realm of pure consciousness the natural relationships of father and son" (560, M771).[71] Crucially, though, this imaging of the "immanent movement" between God the Father and Christ the Son in the Trinity "proclaims the absolute being as *spirit*" (559, M771); that is, the image of the Trinity gets something right about the nature of the absolute, insofar as the relation between father and son captures the self-identity-in-otherness that is absolute spirit. Hence, for Hegel, this Trinitarian conception of absolute being marks the first step in a process in which this being reveals its true reality as the spirit of the community. In the unfolding of this process, God, conceived initially as "simple and self-identical, eternal essence," shows himself in fact to be precisely self-*othering*, insofar as he is essentially spirit (558, M769). As self-othering, however, God is essentially self-externalizing, and hence, self-actualizing; accordingly, for representational thinking, God necessarily "*creates* a world" as an "other" to which he is essentially related (561, M774). This world, though it is the finite creation of God, is, as the necessary site of God's self-expression, at the same time wholly redeemed in its finitude, a redemption that, imaged in the incarnation of God in Christ, is expanded to all humanity and finitude in the doctrine of the forgiveness of evil.

According to its own representational categories, then, Christianity is the story of the self-dispersion or self-emptying of divine reality in and among the human community, in which the affirmation that God has the *form* of spirit develops toward the affirmation that God *is spirit*. In this process, what is represented, in fact, is the gradual self-relativization or self-effacement of any imaging of the divine that differs from human community[72]—that is to say, any imaging whatsoever. Christianity, then, is the religion that reveals the relative status of religious representation as such, insofar as in it the work of images, narrative, and doctrines—projections through which absolute reality is envisioned—are shown to be relative to the absolute reality that

[71] More generally, representation separates (cf. Lewis' language of "juxtaposition" in footnote 13) into distinct entities what for conceptual thinking are in fact self-relations: "Since this consciousness, even in its thinking, remains at the level of [representation], absolute being is indeed revealed to it, but the moments of this being, on account of this synthetic presentation, partly themselves fall asunder so that they are not related to one another through their own concept, and partly this consciousness retreats from this its pure object, relating itself to it only in an external manner. The object is revealed to it by something alien, and it does not recognize itself in this thought of spirit, does not recognize the nature of pure self-consciousness" (560, M771).

[72] In tracing the self-effacement of the figure of God, Hegel's account of Christianity is highly resonant with Nancy's recent work on the theme of the "deconstruction of Christianity," which, like Hegel, attends not only to the "self-abandonment" of God but also to the renewed self-understanding of human community as the site of "absolute" significance. As Nancy writes in *Adoration*, "I am therefore calling 'Christianity' the posture of thought whereby 'God' demands to be effaced or to efface himself… God who effaces himself is not only God who takes his leave, as he did of Job, or God who constantly refuses any analogy in this world, as for Mohammed. It is God who becomes man, abandoning his divinity to the point of plunging it into the mortal condition." Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*, trans. John McKeane (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 29-30.

is in fact affirmed. In Christianity, for Hegel, the self-representation of absolute spirit through some medium exposes itself as a self-knowing, as the self-conception of the community with respect to its own absolute significance as "absolute spirit."[73]

Although it is true, as Lauer points out, that much of Hegel's account of Christianity is occupied with showing the "inadequacy of 'representation' or the language proper to it to capture the dynamic reality to which only the concept is adequate,"[74] Hegel's view is not that representation is simply a mistake. That is to say, representation is not simply the imagistic or metaphorical ornamentation of realities already known conceptually, which, when stripped away, clears access to the truth of these realities unaffected by representational embellishment. Rather, religious representation is "metaphorical" for Hegel in Ricoeur's sense of the term, according to which metaphor is "not an ornament of language nor a stylistic decoration, but a semantic innovation, an emergence of meaning."[75] Hence, although representation is necessarily subject to a certain formal development, this self-critical evolution of religious representation makes available a new truth about the nature of human experience. Religious images such as that of the incarnation are not "just metaphors," therefore, if by this we mean a kind of symbolic tool that expresses an idea or truth with which it has no essential contact. They *are* metaphors, however, in the sense that they offer an initial, imagistic expression of an essential dimension of human experience that is not (yet) conceptually incorporated within wider cultural self-understanding.[76] Thus, there is for Hegel a sense in which the incarnation must "really" happen;[77] the self-

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[73] This self-exposure is thus the "positive" effect of God's self-effacement, which, as Nancy writes further, is not the divinization of humanity, but the human community's self-recognition as "the effacement of [God's] Name, of Sense fulfilled": "But the man into whom God 'descends' and 'empties himself' (Paul's *kenosis*) is not rendered divine by this. On the contrary. God effaces himself in that man: he is this effacement, [the] vestige of the emptied and abandoned divine… Not effacement alone, however. Christianity wants more: not to dwell in the absence of God, in his infinite distance, but to affirm it 'among us.' That is to say, he is 'himself' the *among*: he is the *with* or the *between* of us, this *with* or *between* that we are insofar as *we* are in the proximity that defines the world" (Ibid., 30).

[74] Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, 280.

[75] Paul Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language: Word, Polysemy, Metaphor," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1973), 97. One of Ricoeur's main arguments in this essay is that the understanding of metaphor simply as linguistic ornamentation—that is, the replacement of a concept with more rhetorically pleasing words that offer no additional significance—presupposes that the function of metaphor is, like ordinary descriptive language, simply to make reference to reality in rhetorically compelling ways. This presupposition, Ricoeur argues, misses the power of metaphor, as a semantically innovative use of language, to "redescribe reality." "My conclusion," he writes, "is that the strategy of discourse implied in metaphorical language is neither to improve communication nor to insure univocity in argumentation, but to shatter and to increase our sense of reality by shattering and increasing our language… With metaphor we experience the metamorphosis of both language and reality" (Ibid., 111).

[76] I explore this specifically with respect to the reality of human freedom in Section 4 below.

[77] What I mean here is that the "event" of the incarnation signifies a genuine conceptual innovation available in Christianity, that it, like other religious categories associated with the figure of Christ, represents a real evolution in human self-understanding not available independently of their Christian origin. For a discussion of the Christian

effacement of the divine figure "imaged" through the incarnation does not leave human self-understanding untouched, but rather extends and disseminates this imaging of human community as the site of absolute significance, in such a way that, while the particular religious form remains relative (but not eliminated), the truth signaled in religious language can be recognized according to its "secular" value. For Hegel, then, it is neither desirable nor even possible simply and immediately to discard the form of representational thinking in order to access the "truth" that it portrays—not desirable, since conceptual thinking would have no content if it overlooked its inner continuity with religion,[78] and not possible, since thought has no other aim but to grasp conceptually this content that religious representation makes available.[79]

Christianity, therefore, combines the semantically innovative and self-relativizing aspects of religious representation in an "image" precisely of those who—in the act of forgiveness, as we shall shortly see—do the work of realizing the presence of "God" in the world. For the community that "ceas[es] to think in images," the "God" that others or empties itself is not altogether evacuated, but rather is no longer "imaged" as a being distinct from this community itself (568, M780). Thus, while the self-othering of God remains operative for the community that overcomes representational thinking, this community no longer simply remembers the departed presence of God in Christ or contemplates an idea of God as the self-relating, self-explicating spiritual unity of the three persons of the Trinity. Rather, this community recognizes

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idea of charity as such a conceptual innovation, see Jean-Luc Marion, "Christian Philosophy: Hermeneutic or Heuristic?" in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 66-79. For Hegel, what is pictured in the *Vorstellung* of the incarnation we ourselves underwent (at the level of religious media); this event "realizes" something, insofar as human self-understanding no longer refers itself to an otherworldly beyond. Thus, while Hegel would discourage us from taking the events of the Christian narrative "literally," his account is not a reduction of religious language to some other order, as the development of religious *Vorstellung* reflects a necessary development in human self-understanding.

[78] In a rather striking passage, Hegel says that, while it is necessary that representational thinking be transcended, we must be cautious against too hastily forcing this transcendence: "[T]he transcending of this standpoint [i.e., representation] is to be regarded as a compulsion on the part of the concept… But since this compulsion is instinctive, self-consciousness misunderstands its own nature, rejects the content as well as the form and, what amounts to the same thing, degrades the content into a historical pictorial idea and to an heirloom handed down by tradition. In this way, it is only the purely external element in belief that is retained and as something therefore that is dead and cannot be known; but the *inner* element in faith has vanished, because this would be the concept that knows itself as concept" (560, M771).

[79] Thought that would remain *distinct from* the actual—sensuous, "natural," temporal—content of representational thinking would be all-too "pure," and any progress in knowing would require that thinking depart from this purity and engage in the domain of real being. "The element of pure thought," Hegel writes, "because it is an abstract element, is itself rather the '*other*' of its simple, unitary nature, and therefore passes over into the element proper to [representation]—the element in which the moments of the pure concept obtain a *substantial* existence relatively to one another" (561, M773).

its own spirit—itself as a community—as the reality that is expressed in its (representational[80]) apprehension of God's self-othering.

What act of self-othering does the community recognize in itself such that, in its religious affirmation of the self-othering of absolute reality, it affirms something about itself? Having considered the conclusion to the "Spirit" chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we know already the communicative experience of forgiveness to be the "immanent movement" of a community that has, for Hegel, divine or theophanic significance. To see the *representational* expression of this equation, consider the following characterization of the self-othering of the divine essence that Hegel offers relatively early in his account of the Christian narrative:

> There are thus three distinct moments: essence, being-for-self which is the otherness of essence and for which essence is, and being-for-self, or the knowledge of itself *in the 'other'*. Essence beholds only its own self in its being-for-self; in this externalization of itself its stays only with itself: the being-for-self that shuts itself out from essence is *essence's knowledge of its own self.* It is the word which, when uttered, leaves behind, externalized and emptied, him who uttered it, but which is as immediately heard, and only this hearing of its own self is the existence of the Word. (559, M770)

Here, the divine essence is imaged as "the word": it is the Trinitarian God, the essence that, in its self-externalization, "stays only with itself." The theological significance of the Trinitarian conception is its declaration that "God" is essentially a *relation*—that is, not a static entity or a metaphysical being but an infinite self-relation whose "essence" is the perpetual destabilization of any settled identity.[81] Those familiar with Christian terms will recognize the reference to "the word" as an allusion to the Gospel of John, which opens with the declaration, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and goes on to identity this "Word" as that which "became flesh and lived among us" in the becoming-incarnate of the divine *logos*. Words (or language in general), Hegel says, are the "self" externalized;[82] they are the expression of our own very identities in objective and existential shape, which, while preserving our identities, do so only by exposing them—us—to the world of others through

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[80] However, this self-recognition is not "perfected," Hegel says, so long as the community continues to organize itself according to a representation of its own absolute significance. (cf. 573, M787). As Hegel says in his initial statement about revealed religion, religion can necessitate, but not altogether accomplish, its own "passing over" into conceptual knowledge (503, M683).

[81] The Trinity, Nancy writes, makes clear that in Christianity it "is a question neither of three Gods, nor of a three-headed god. It is exclusively a question of this: God is relation. He is his own relation—which is not a reflexive relation, neither an aseity nor an ipseity, one that does not relate itself but relates *absolutely*" (Nancy, *Adoration*, 30).

[82] Language, Hegel writes, "is the self that separates itself from itself [and] becomes objective to itself, which in this objectivity equally preserves itself as this self, just as it coalesces directly with other selves and is their self-consciousness" (478-479, M652).

whose recognition our identities are affirmed and sustained. Similarly, the imaging of God as word is not successful if, as "word," God is not *really* externalized, that is, in and of its own selfhood "emptied" into the sphere of (human) existence in which God's "essence" is properly realized. To understand God as "the Word," therefore, is not simply to assert that God is *like* a word;[83] such an understanding, rather, is a denial of the image of the incarnation whereby God, as "the Word," is emptied and dispersed into that dimension of human community that is charged with absolute significance—namely, (forgiving) words.

Thus, as Merleau-Ponty writes, while the idea that the reality named "God" is most properly reached in the interior contemplation of faith or thought, "the Incarnation changes everything."[84] That is, the incarnation renders indefensible any notion that God is solely and most properly a matter of thinking, and asserts rather that—indeed, like thought itself—the essence of God is properly fulfilled only when externalized and expressed in the determinate world in which meaning is realized. When the incarnation is recognized as the legitimate image of the divine, Merleau-Ponty continues, it is "as if the infinite God were no longer sufficient, as if something moved in Him, as if the world and man became the necessary moments of a greater perfection instead of being a useless decline from the originating perfection."[85] Consequently, to look for God is not to look outside of the sphere of human life, but rather to attend to those aspects of human experience that speak of our contact with an "absolute reality," both in our words and in the matter—our bodies—that produces them. In the wake of the incarnation, "it is no longer a matter of rediscovering the transcendence of God outside the world but a matter of entering body and soul into an enigmatic life, the obscurities of which cannot be dissipated but can only be concentrated in a few mysteries where man contemplates the enlarged image of his own condition."[86]

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[83] This would be an example of the merely ornamental use of metaphor that Ricoeur is concerned to overcome. See footnote 75 above.

[84] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 174. In a chapter entitled "Faith and Good Faith," Merleau-Ponty argues that Christianity (he focuses on Catholicism) is afflicted with certain "contradictions," which derive from the fact that it "posits a belief in an interior and an exterior God." According to the idea of an interior God, "one finds God by turning away from things. Whether God is the model according to which my spirit was created or whether I experience and, so to speak, touch God when I become conscious of myself as spirit, God is on the side of the subject rather than on the side of the world" (Ibid., 173-174). This wholly internalized understanding of God, Merleau-Ponty writes, is the source of the political conservatism and apathy that is one of the main objects of his criticism in this essay: "There is always an element of Stoicism in the idea of God: if God exists, then perfection has already been achieved outside this world; since perfection cannot be increased, there is, strictly speaking, nothing to do" (Ibid., 174).

[85] Ibid., 175.

[86] Ibid., 175.

Principal among such "mysteries," moreover, is that of human communication,[87] the "enigmatic" comingling and coextension of body and soul wherein what is corporeal and material is revealed to have "sacramental" significance:

> the dogmas of the Incarnation and Original Sin are not clear but are valuable because they reflect man's contradiction of body and soul… Sacramental words and gestures are not simply the embodiment of some thought. Like tangible things, they are themselves the carriers of their meaning, which is inseparable from its material form. They do not evoke the idea of God: they are the vehicle of His presence and action. In the last analysis the soul is so little to be separated from the body that it will carry a radiant double of its temporal body into eternity.[88]

The ultimate significance of the "Word made flesh," for Merleau-Ponty, is its revelation that *flesh is made word*,[89] that, if God is here, among us, then our very words and gestures—indeed, our bodies—are the ultimate site for the creation of meaning. Although Hegel's analysis of the incarnation does not explore the theme of embodiment as deeply as Merleau-Ponty's, it is nevertheless clear that for Hegel any religious imaging that keeps "God" out of the world—that is, does not acknowledge the full externalization of "God" in the affirmation of finite, human communication, of which our bodies are the primary vehicle—offers nothing but "empty words."[90] "God" is not simply an idea, but, as externalized, is the infinitely self-emptying reality of communication—of *words*—that defines human community, and hence to speak of God in terms of an ideal, divine essence is in fact to overlook or disavow the significance of the very medium of speech that one uses.[91] To recognize the true *fullness* of words, for Hegel, is no longer to locate the terms of ultimate meaning beyond the domain of human communication, but to recognize human communication—the making into sense of our bodies—as the only avenue

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[87] "The meaning of the Pentecost is that the religion of both the Father and the Son are to be fulfilled in the religion of the Spirit, that God is no longer in Heaven but in human society and communication, wherever men come together in His name" (Ibid., 358).

[88] Ibid., 175. Emphasis mine.

[89] "Incarnation," Nancy confirms, "is not the provisional sojourn of god in flesh but the 'word made flesh,' or *flesh itself as sense*. It is the body as the visible image of the invisible, the manifestation of what is not manifest" (Nancy, *Adoration*, 52).

[90] "Simple, eternal essence," he writes, "would be spirit only as a form of empty words, if we went no further than the *idea* expressed in the phrase 'simple, eternal essence'" (M769, emphasis mine).

[91] Notable here is Merleau-Ponty's observation that, especially in certain of its institutionalized forms, "the Incarnation is not followed out in all its consequences" (Merleau-Ponty, "Faith and Good Faith," 176). Here, Merleau-Ponty criticizes forms of Christian practice that reinstate the "religion of the Father"—that is, the treatment of God solely as an idea, metaphysically superior to the external world—and that indicate, thereby, that "God is not completely with us:" In this situation, "Behind the incarnate Spirit there remains that infinite gaze which strips us of all secrets, but also of our liberty, our desire, and our future, reducing us to *visible objects*… For a second time men are alienated by this second gaze which weighs upon them and which has more than once found a *secular arm* to serve it" (Ibid., 177). Again, Merleau-Ponty's observations of this "incomplete" incarnation have a political target: "God will not fully have come to earth until the Church feels the same obligation toward other men as it does toward its own ministers, toward the houses of Guernica as toward its own temples" (Ibid., 178).

to the "absolute." "Absolute being that is not grasped as spirit," he writes, "is merely the abstract void, just as spirit that that is not grasped as this movement is only an empty word" (559, M771).

Thus, to grasp absolute being as "spirit" is to recognize that whatever "absolute" there is available in human experience has its existence not beyond but *between* us, in what Nancy identifies as the "indefinite production" of the world of sense:

> Incarnation and resurrection therefore say nothing other than this: the task of making sense falls to us humans, mortals, who have no gods or nature, who are technicians engaged in the indefinite production of "our" world. But since sense is not "made"—is not produced—it falls to us to recognize how it can take place. It can do so only in the relation that opens at once between us… and in us, which addresses us simultaneously to one another and—singly and severally—to an opening in us whereby is signaled an infinite referring and a referring to the infinite.[92]

The infinite referred to here is neither an abstract "essence" beyond the world of mortals nor the "infinite" of thought residing within subjective contemplations. Like Hegel, rather, Nancy associates this infinite with the possibility of forgiveness, which he defines as an infinite receptivity to the possibilities of sense-making, which no individual alone could ever produce or master ("pardon means that the possibility of sense always remains open"[93]). In forgiveness, for Nancy, we acknowledge that what transpires between us—communication—rests on a source of renewal that, although not "other" to us, is irreducible to what we as individuals can manipulate or govern. As he writes, "absolution can come only from the opening of another, in another order, which is precisely the order of relation, of sense, of referring within the world to what exceeds the world in itself."[94]

Here, our discussion of the incarnation reconnects us with what we have noted in previous chapters about forgiveness as the communicative gesture whose reconciliatory significance "exceeds" the relation between speakers that it sustains and restores. Forgiveness is the finite "word" that opens human communication to the infinite "Word"; it is, as a word, the "objectively existent spirit" that performs "a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* spirit" (493, M670). To follow through with the implications of the incarnation is to recognize the infinite possibility of meaning-making that "we" activate in our gestures of confession and forgiveness; it is to recognize, beyond the idea that "God, as spirit, dwells among us," that the "divine" significance we attribute to God is in our words, in our hands, in our bodies. For the community that knows itself as *absolute* spirit, the "object" of its self-knowledge is thus that

[92] Nancy, *Adoration*, 52.
[93] Ibid., 54.
[94] Ibid., 53.

form of communication that accomplishes an "absolute" self-emptying, the act of self-externalization in which we are exposed absolutely to the recognition of others.

As Hegel says at the end of his discussion of religion, the spirit that wholly and adequately knows itself (and no longer "intuitively apprehends" its own basic essence in the form of an "absolute being") is the spirit that knows itself as the site of the absolute communicative act of forgiving. "In this way," Hegel writes,

> spirit is *self-knowing* spirit; it knows *itself*; that which is object for it, *is*, or its [representation] is the true, absolute *content*; as we saw, it expressed spirit itself. It is at the same time not merely the content of self-consciousness, and not merely object *for it*, but it is also *actual spirit*…The concept of spirit which had emerged for us as we entered the sphere of religion, namely, as the movement of a self-certain spirit which forgives evil and in so doing abandons its own simple unitary nature and rigid unchangeableness; or as the movement in which what is an absolute antithesis recognizes itself as the same as its opposite, this recognition bursting forth as the *affirmative* between these extremes—this concept is *intuitively apprehended* by the religious consciousness to which the absolute being is revealed, and which overcomes the difference between its self and what it intuitively apprehends; just as it is subject, so also it is substance, and hence it *is* itself spirit just because and in so far as it is this movement. (572-573, M786)

Hence, Hegel's account of spirit in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his account of religion in Chapter VII conclude with the achievement of the same self-knowing absolute spirit, although from different directions (and to different levels of completion[95]). Whereas the community of the mutual recognition of conscience (that is, the community of forgiveness) is the site of an unanticipated manifestation of God, the religious community that organizes itself around the appearance of God comes to know (or at least "intuitively apprehend") itself, according to the development of religion Hegel tracks, as the site of the "bursting forth" of the affirmative word of forgiveness.

That the development of religion concludes in the experience of conscientious mutual recognition does not mean, however, that it is supplementary or superfluous. As Robert Bernasconi writes, "the discussion at the end of the chapter on Spirit provides in the shape of form, what in the chapter on Religion appears as content."[96] That is, whereas the account of

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[95] Although, as we have noted already and as the quotation above indicates, so long as it remains oriented by the representation, or "intuitive apprehension," of absolute reality as an object of some sort—and not, that is, a possibility of its own "spirit"—the religious community does not fully achieve the self-knowledge of absolute spirit to which religion implicitly points. In Merleau-Pontyan terms, absolute reality is "not completely with" the religious community that remains committed to the ultimacy of its own *Vorstellungen*—its own practices and idioms—over and against the communicative possibilities—forgiving mutual recognition—that they announce.

[96] Bernasconi, "Hegel and Levinas," 62. Here, Bernasconi also confirms what we noted just above about the residual self-alienation of the religious orientation toward absolute spirit: "In "Revealed Religion" God's knowledge of himself and man's knowledge of God are reconciled through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and founding

conscientious mutual recognition at the end of Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* offers a sketch, in abstract terms, of "absolute spirit" as the giving and receiving of forgiveness, Chapter VII traces the development of the concrete and historical forms of human community whose self-expressions, which Hegel identifies as "religion," in various ways affirm the communicative situation of conscience. Hegel's phenomenology of religion, therefore, is not simply a repetition of conclusions achieved at previous points in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: although there are clear parallels between the development of religion and other forms of experience studied (abstractly) elsewhere in Hegel's work, his account of religion is unique in detailing the broad historical conditions under which certain dimensions of human experience are explicitly foregrounded.

In the final section of this chapter, I want to consider a particular case of such foregrounding in Hegel's account of the understanding of freedom made available in the revolution of human self-understanding that is Christian religion. There is, as we shall see, a political corollary to the vision of humanity achieved in Christianity, insofar as the affirmation of the singularity of subjectivity implicit in the incarnation intersects in many ways with the affirmation of individual freedom achieved in modern, especially Western, political thinking. Of course, these religious and political affirmations remain significantly different: as we will explore in more detail in the next chapter, the intersection of religion and politics is complicated by the "comprehensive" nature of religious self-understanding, which tends to outstrip the political in often conflictual ways. However, we must nevertheless attend to their intersection, given the possibilities for resolutions to interreligious and religio-political conflicts available in religion's own political—that is, *public*—orientation.

4. Freedom, religion, and politics

Religion, especially in the particular form of Christianity, recognizes about the human something parallel to politics—namely, that as singular agents we possess a capacity for self-determination that exceeds the familial and cultural (and even religious, in a sense) communities to which we belong. To be sure, religion and politics accomplish this recognition in different

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of the community of the faithful. But the reconciliation is postponed to a beyond, a distant future. It is still regarded as alien and the union of man and God is denied by the religious consciousness. The thought of this reconciliation is the content for a community, a universal self-consciousness, but one that does not yet know itself as such. Absolute knowing is spirit that knows itself as spirit and Hegel presents "absolute knowing" as the drawing of the content of religion, which as religion is still in the form of *Vorstellung*, into the form of absolute spirit" (Ibid., 62-63)

ways. In the first place, whereas politics tends (or aspires) to acknowledge the human capacity for rational self-determination by remaining indifferent to our specific socio-cultural environments, religion calls us to our capacity for creative insight—(conscience) in a way that reflects precisely the socio-cultural specificity—that is, *difference*—of the "absolute idiom" of our most basic ritual-linguistic "home." In the second place, whereas politics recognizes persons in terms of their rational *self*-determination, in religion our conscientious singularity is typically expressed in terms of our response to an "other" by which we are determined and that solicits our devotion. In this way, while politics and religion intersect at the site of individual responsibility, their differing visions of the nature of human freedom require careful consideration. Religion, for its part, must acknowledge its answerability to the norms of political life, insofar as it shapes and defines human action in politically non-neutral ways. And politics must recognize that religion, which it often portrays as "merely private" and "irrational" (especially in liberal political thinking), does not simply offer an initial—and thus dispensable—expression of political norms, but in fact offers insights about the nature of reason that outstrip the domain of politics.

A full treatment of Hegel's understanding of the relation between religion and politics would take us beyond the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to works (such as the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*) in which Hegel explicitly treats the nature of political institutions. What Hegel does offer in the *Phenomenology* that is instructive in this context is his discussion, in the introductory paragraphs of the "Religion" chapter, of the relation between the "totality of spirit" that is religion and "actual spirit." As we have seen, Hegel understands religion as the most basic "ground" of experience—the "totality" of experience within which all finite "moments" of experience are situated[97]—represented and affirmed in the form of an *object*, that is, according to the terms of a particular stance (as subject) assumed *within* this absolute ground. Religion, hence, is thus equally an affirmation of "all reality and truth" and an expression of the particular standpoint from which this affirmation is made; it is the definitive *self*-expression of the "actual" community that answers to the religious imperative to express its understanding of the self-justifying, absolute terms of human experience. Religion therefore assumes various specific "shapes," Hegel argues, which differentiate themselves according to the particular character of the "actual spirit" that expresses itself in religion, as well

[97] Cf. M680: "Religion is the perfection of spirit into which its individual moments—consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit—return and have returned as into their ground." Westphal writes that religion, for Hegel, is "as essential element of the social experience which is its foundation; so essential, in fact, that Hegel reverses the order and finds it to be the ground of all human experience" (Westphal, *History and Truth*, 196).

as the determinate aspect of its "actual existence" that this community designates as expressive of the absolute.[98] In Hegel's terms, religion, which is the "simple totality" of spirit's self-knowing, takes determinate shape in history only in the form of "particular totalities," which together "constitute the *existent* actuality of the totality of spirit," insofar as the affirmation of "absolute reality" is always at the same time the definitive self-expression of an "actual spirit" (498-499, M679-680; emphasis added).

Significant here is that the "actual" expression of the "totality of spirit" in religion is no merely contingent feature. Indeed, there is no non-actual "totality of spirit": religion is the recognition that "the absolute" must *actually* be affirmed; it is essentially a *practice*—a "conduct and activity"—through which a society answers the religious imperative. Accordingly, as Hegel writes, "the specific religion has likewise a specific actual spirit," that is, a determinate, social reality whose consciousness of itself in religion defines the particular form and character of its religious expression. In its religion, for Hegel, a society declares its understanding of its own basic essence, and it is crucial that we not allow our characteristically "modern" assumptions of the inessentiality of religion to cause us to overlook this function of religion. What for "us" may appear to be an outdated and optional affirmation of some understanding of "the divine" should be understood, Hegel insists, as the definitive self-actualization of a society, the concrete realization and expression of "who we are" most basically. In its religious practices, a society establishes the determinate and objective structures that enable its self-expression; religion "institutionalizes" at the most basic level the terms through which a society's members express and enact their most basic sense of belonging.[99]

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[98] As Hegel discusses in M679-680, in religion each of the finite "moments" of consciousness that exist within the "totality" of experience "runs its course as a totality within itself" (499, M680), and thus constitutes a specific "shape" of religion—as *consciousness*—within the overall development toward the making explicit of religion as the self-consciousness of spirit. On the way in which, for Hegel, each of the "shapes" of religion is reflective of a particular "actual spirit," compare the following passage: "Thus, if consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit, belong to self-knowing spirit in general, similarly the specific 'shapes' which were specially developed within consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit, belong to the specific 'shapes' of self-knowing spirit. From the 'shapes' belonging to each of its moments, the *specific* 'shape' of religion picks out the one appropriate to it for its actual spirit. The one distinctive feature which characterizes the religion penetrates every aspect of its actual existence and stamps them with this common character" (500, M680).

[99] Such a characterization obviously pertains most directly to so-called pre-modern societies that govern themselves with explicit reference to a particular religious code or tradition. What Hegel's understanding of Christianity allows us to notice, however, is that modern, pluralistic societies, which claim to govern themselves without reference to any religion, have nevertheless been enabled by developments through which religion itself points the "freedom of self-consciousness" to which modern political institutions answer. This understanding of Christianity is a major theme of Walter Jaeschke's "Christianity and Secularity in Hegel's Concept of the State," in which he points out that "it is a part of Christianity, both as a religion and as a world-historical form, that freedom be attributed to humans as such, not merely in some limited respect, but as persons. This concept of a person constitutes the foundation of

It is not surprising, then, that religion would intersect with the domain of politics, the domain in which a society establishes the objective conditions for the activity and existence of its members. For Hegel, religion and politics alike accomplish the self-actualization of a society[100]—that is, the concrete realization of its own basic essence in the form of determinate practices, institutions, and norms. Indeed, for Hegel, the *difference* between religious and political actualizations of a society is in fact premised on a particular religious "shape," a particular form of the "totality of spirit" whose distinctive enactment is to point to the essential significance of the "actual life" of its own political institutions. In the art-religion of classical Greece, according to Hegel, religious expression and political order coincide in reflecting the basic commitments of society: the religious art of this society, which recognizes and celebrates the human shape of the divine, expresses the same vision of humanity as does its political system, which, as "ethical life," locates the freedom of human beings in the immediacy of their belonging to the social whole.[101]

Of course, the coincidence of religion and politics reflected in the art-religion of Greek society is merely the condition for their differentiation, which becomes explicit on the basis of a further development in the understanding of the essence of human freedom. The crucial point here is that this new conception of the nature of human freedom is expressed originally in religious terms—specifically, in terms of the Christian assertion of the freedom of individuality beyond one's socio-cultural and political belonging.[102] Consequently, for Hegel, the understanding of human freedom affirmed in modernity is to a decisive extent premised on

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Hegel's scheme for a state built on the principle of Christianity." As Jaeschke cautions, though, this foundation is to be sharply distinguished from any theologically-founded "Christian state": "It is not some representation of 'Christian faith' but [the] concept of the subject as the speculative identity of subjectivity and objectivity… that lies at the basis of Hegel's talk of freedom as the principle of the Christian world and therefore as the principle of the true state in distinction from the ancient state." Jaeschke, "Christianity and Secularity in Hegel's Concept of the State," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 61, No. 2, (1981): 134-135.

[100] See Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 234-9.

[101] "If we ask, which is the *actual* spirit which has the consciousness of its absolute essence in the religion of art, we find that it is the *ethical* or the *true* spirit… this spirit is the free nation in which hallowed custom constitutes the substance of all, whose actuality and existence each and everyone knows to be his own will and deed." (512, M700)

[102] See Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which, as Russon writes, "gave voice to a view of the person that became pivotal for the development of Christianity and, indeed, of modern culture in general." Russon, *Sites of Exposure: Art, Politics, and the Nature of Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 81. Citing statements of Paul's such as "the kingdom of God is not a matter of [the ritual practices of] eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17), Russon observes that "whereas the religions of the Greeks and the Jews were religions into which one was born, and therefore were coextensive with the cultures of those people… Paul preached an inherently personal religion, into which one *cannot* be born but that, on the contrary, one must choose" (Ibid., 81). One consequence of Paul's view of religion, Russon argues, is the understanding that "our true nature happens beyond and outside of our cultural identity; this is the nature of *anyone*. What Paul presents, therefore, is not a religion of a particular society, but is instead a call to a universal humanity beyond the domain of what we would otherwise recognize as particular religions" (Ibid., 82).

religion, such that the assertion of this sense of freedom in opposition to or abstraction from religion is a serious misrepresentation of the conditions of human self-understanding in the modern world. Hegel argues that the modern conception of freedom differs significantly from that of the classical world. For moderns, freedom is premised not on the coincidence of our individuality with our social context, but rather precisely on our ability, as individuals, to distinguish ourselves from the institutions that enable our activity, not necessarily in rejection of those institutions but as possible critics of them.[103] (Hence, the understanding of freedom offered in Christianity better matches our—typically modern—interpretation of religion as "encroaching" on the sphere of politics.) Unlike the classical world, then, in which political institutions were themselves coextensive with the possibilities for the free agency of human beings, the political institutions of the modern world *answer to* the rational-critical capacities of human individuals who are never reducible to their social station. In the terms we have been exploring, the "actual spirit" of the modern world expresses a vision of the human as rational, self-determining, and individual, and again, the key to Hegel's account is his recognition that this vision, when instantiated politically, is the actualization of a vision of humanity that is first and foremost articulated in religious terms. The actual establishment of institutions that enable freedom in the form of the rational self-determination of individuals is the "actual spirit"—the actualization—of the Christian insight regarding the universality of freedom as freedom of individuality.

I want to conclude by making a few more observations about the Christian origins of this understanding of freedom, in order to show how Hegel's account of the intersection of religion and politics characterizes what he has to offer to discussions about political liberalism. According to Hegel, as we have seen, in its particular "shape" as Christianity (the "religion of revelation"), religion overcomes the difference between its representation of "absolute essence" as an object and the intuition of its own absolute significance as a community within which the infinite reconciliatory power of forgiveness is made possible. In Christianity, the representational

[103] Kant expresses this understanding of freedom—namely, freedom to think as an autonomous individual—in his 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?", although this understanding of freedom is not original to Kant. See Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-22. Hegel's understanding of freedom certainly incorporates this Enlightenment insight, but he does not equate freedom with an autonomous detachment from all externality. As Jaeschke explains, "Hegel categorized [his] idea of freedom [of self-consciousness] in much more concrete terms than the Enlightenment, from which he inherited it. For 'freedom of self-consciousness' means not only the rejection of all heteronomy, but also not solely the autonomy of the subject thrown back on itself, but self-consciousness's being-at-home-with-itself in the concept of spirit from which everything alien is expunged" (Jaeschke, "Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion," 13).

media through which absolute spirit accomplishes its determinate self-expression affirm the absolute significance both of singular, interpretive insight—of *self*—and of those communicative practices through which interpretive singularity is recognized (that is, forgiven). In Christianity, that is, the "absolute essence"—the divine—explicitly assumes the shape of finite, human singularity, in which case those who affirm this essence bear witness to what is absolute in themselves, the ultimate terms of *human* experience. For Hegel, the *Vorstellungen* of Christianity reveal as essential the fact that "we" in the religious community are those to and within whom "the divine" is revealed, and, consequently, that our practices of discerning and expressing the divine are essential to its appearance. For Hegel, Christianity marks a decisive socio-ontological achievement in the history of Western modernity: here, the terms of religion, which for most of human history characterized "ultimate reality" as in some way beyond human community, pronounce the same conclusion that Hegel reaches in his study of "spirit"—namely, that the ultimate meaning of things resides in our discernment of and communication about them, in the infinite negotiation of diverse perspectives reflected in the acts of confession and forgiveness.

In plainer and perhaps more familiar terms, Christianity is the religion that assigns decisive significance to the experience of conversion.[104] In conversion, I encounter ultimate truth in such a way that makes explicit the essential contribution of *my* perspective—that is, my own discernment and assent—to the reality of this truth, as evidenced by my change of behaviour—my "turning around"—in response to it. Probably the best-known account of conversion associated with Christianity is that of Saint Paul, who, as reported in the New Testament, was witness to a revelation of Jesus Christ on his way to the city of Damascus that prompted an immediate change of identity and behavior.[105] Significant here is Paul's account of having been singled out as an individual—"called"—by God in this experience, as well as his insistence that his conversion was not the result of his being taught anything by anyone, nor did he seek the confirmation of anyone else.[106] In Christianity, according to its Pauline legacy, one has access to ultimate truth simply in being receptive to it and living faithfully in response to it; truth, in other words, is available to anyone and everyone, and for it one depends on nothing other than one's own discernment and receptivity.

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[104] "Participation in the truth to which Paul summons one," writes Russon, "can only come from *recognizing the insufficiency* of what would normally appear as religion… and *recognizing* the higher truth to which one is inherently called. This higher calling that Paul identifies is inherent to each and every person: it is a calling to which anyone, and everyone, is singularly answerable. Paul thus calls for *conversion*" (Russon, *Sites of Exposure*, 81).

[105] Acts 9:3-9; 22:6-21

[106] Galatians 1:11-16

For this reason, Hegel credits Christianity with the initial expression of the true nature and breadth of human freedom. As he writes in *The Philosophy of History*, "the German nations,[107] under the influence of Christianity, were the first to attain the consciousness, that man, as man, is free: that it is the *freedom* of spirit which constitutes [human] essence."[108] Freedom, for Hegel, is essentially self-consciousness; to be free is to recognize the world as the domain of one's own activity, to perceive in the enabling conditions of one's activity not an alien reality, but rather the reality of one's own selfhood.[109] The *Vorstellungen* of Christianity articulate this understanding of freedom implicitly in revealing that finite subjectivity constitutes an essential moment in the reality of "the absolute." In the incarnation of divine reality in the person of Jesus Christ, the shape of the divine is revealed to be identical to one's own finite selfhood; otherwise put, this revelation enables one to intuit something of one's own self in the nature of the absolute, in which case finite subjectivity as such has absolute significance and need not appeal to any source above or beyond it in apprehending the terms of its freedom. Crucially, the identification of selfhood and absolute reality in Christianity differs decisively from that in the art-religion of ancient Greek society, for which, according to Hegel, "self-consciousness has not yet withdrawn into itself from its contended acceptance of custom and its firm trust therein" (513, M701). As a result of the Christian religious insight, Hegel says, "*we* know that *all* [humans] absolutely… are free,"[110] that is, free *qua* human, and not *qua* "Greek" or according to any other qualification. For Christianity, one is free simply by virtue of one's self-conscious individuality—which means, in the first place, one's capacity to recognize the truth of one's identity "in Christ," beyond all other (e.g., social, cultural, political) forms of identification. As Paul insists, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."[111]

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[107] By which Hegel means Western nations. The term here is *Germanisch*, not *Deutsch*, and Sibree's translation is thus incorrect, as C. J. Freidrich points out in the introduction to the Dover Edition of *The Philosophy of History*.
[108] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 18. See also G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), §270, *Addition*, 254.
[109] Freedom, for Hegel, does not entail the absence of dependence—i.e., the absolute independence of selfhood—but rather dependence on oneself. Hence, freedom is not the evacuation of the otherness, but the perception in otherness of what is essential to oneself. As he writes, "if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself. This self-contained existence of spirit is none other than self-consciousness—consciousness of one's own being" (Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 17).
[110] Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 19.
[111] Galatians 3:28

Modern political institutions, therefore, in answering to the inherent freedom of individual self-determination, give expression to an originally religious insight. For Hegel, there is an intimate relation between religion and politics as forms of the "actual" expression of freedom, although this difference in form has significant consequences for the way in which this relation is conceived, especially in the modern world. We should first of all take care to notice that, for Hegel, this difference is indeed one of *form*, and not content. As Hegel explains, Christianity, in offering only the *initial* expression of individual freedom in "principle," does not immediately produce the conditions necessary for its realization. The awareness that *all* are free,[112] he writes, "arose first in religion, in the inmost region of spirit; but to introduce the principle into the various relations of the actual world, involves a more extensive problem than its simple implantation; a problem whose solution and application require a severe and lengthened process of culture."[113] That is, "the moulding and interpenetration of the constitution of society" by this principle of freedom requires a history, specifically a *political* history wherein the freedom of self-consciousness establishes the real conditions for its actualization—that is, in the "state"—rather than simply representing them as a particular image.[114] As Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of Right*, whereas "in *religion*" self-consciousness "finds the feeling and the representation of this its own truth as an ideal essence," in "the *state*, self-consciousness finds in an organic development the actuality of its substantial knowing and willing."[115] The formal difference between religion and politics as self-expressions of freedom is therefore decisive: "the content of religion is and remains shrouded, and consequently religion's place is in the field of the heart, feeling, and representation. In this field everything has the form of *subjectivity*. The state, on the other hand, actualizes itself and gives its determinations a stable existence."[116] Yet it is equally clear, for Hegel, that the content of religion and politics is identical: what the state "objectivizes" is nothing other than the self-consciousness that, in religion, remains "shrouded" by its as yet too "inward" shape. "In religion," Hegel writes, "the idea is spirit in the inwardness of the heart, but it is this same idea which gives itself worldly form as the state and fashions for

[112] In contrast to "the Eastern nations [who] knew only that *one* is free [and] the Greek and Roman world [for which] *some* are free" (Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 19).
[113] Ibid., 18. "In proof of this," Hegel continues, "we may note that slavery did not cease immediately on the reception of Christianity. Still less did liberty predominate in states; or governments and constitutions adopt a rational organization, or recognize freedom as their basis."
[114] Ibid., 18.
[115] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §360, 323.
[116] Ibid., §270, Addition, 255.

itself an existence and an actuality in knowing and willing."[117] For Hegel, religion occupies the domain of the basic views and attitudes that shape persons' political activity: "religion," he writes, "is the moment that integrates the state at the deepest level of [the] disposition" of its citizens.[118] According to their specific character as self-expressions of "who we are" most basically, religions enable specific political realities that reflect the understanding of freedom implicit in their religious grounding. As the "totality" of society's self-understanding, religion forges and shapes the basic dispositions about who "we" are that are given objective reality in "our" political institutions.

Hence, it is not unreasonable to think that religion is the necessary foundation of the state (the hypothesis to which Hegel responds in §270 of the *Philosophy of Right*, from which the above quotations are taken). As Thomas A. Lewis writes, Hegel's view permits the conclusion that "[b]ecause religion expresses our consciousness of spirit, and that consciousness is actualized in the state, religion can be said to be the foundation of the state."[119] However, it would be incorrect to attribute to Hegel the view that politics alone accomplishes the "actual" expression of a collective self-consciousness that, in religion, remains wholly "inward" and "ideal." Religion, Hegel writes, "has a position and an external organization of its own," insofar, for example, as the "practice of its worship consists in ritual and doctrinal instruction, and for this purpose possessions and property are required, as well as individuals dedicated to the service of the flock."[120] Religion too, according to Hegel, accomplishes an actual expression of the principle of freedom that characterizes a society's basic self-consciousness, as much as this society's political institutions actualize more directly the conditions for the free activity of its members. Hence the tension that so often characterizes the relation between religion and politics in the modern world: as differing forms of the self-actualization of the same collective self-consciousness, religion and politics are bound to conflict with one another insofar as each asserts its own privilege as the actual expression of human freedom.

[117] Ibid., §270, Addition, 254. Emphasis added.
[118] Ibid., §270, 246.
[119] Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 237.
[120] *PR*, §270 Addition

CHAPTER FIVE: THE "INTELLIGENCE" OF RELIGION: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS A POLITICS OF FORGIVENESS

In Chapter Two we considered Hegel's understanding of religion as the basic interpretive and communicative framework of our experience. Religion, for Hegel, is the basic ritual context of human activity,[1] which, when enacted, affirms who "we" are as members of a community who share an interpretive framework on the world. It is, moreover, always a particular "we" from and of which we speak, since this ritual context—the terms of communication as such, as far as they appear to us—is nevertheless an *idiom*, a way of experiencing and sharing the world specific to "our" implicit agreements about the nature of "ultimate reality". Religion, as a kind of basic idiom, therefore represents an "absolute particularity"; it is the "linguistic home" that houses those terms through which we, as a particular community, grapple with our sense of what is "absolute."

In this final chapter, I explore the implications of this conception of religion as absolute particularity for thinking about encounters between diverse religious idioms in the domain of the public sphere, especially in connection with the idea of "public reason" as a discursive tool for mediating such encounters. I argue that the appeal to public reason as an independently grounded, neutral dialogical territory on which to stage interreligious encounters is not politically feasible. Because the neutrality achieved by public reason is always superficial in comparison to the religious and cultural specificities whose contact it is meant to facilitate, public reason runs the risk of preserving, or even further entrenching, animosity and rivalry between religious idioms. It remains doubtful, therefore, whether the terms of such purported neutrality are ever in fact neutral, and not the terms of a particular religious idiom that has attained political hegemony. Insofar as religious idioms are *basic* idioms, so too are the differences between them; interreligious dialogue, therefore, is a matter of *achieving* recognition between irreducibly diverse standpoints, and discursive openness must similarly be achieved in the process of mutual recognition, rather than presupposed or invoked from some pre-established, alien domain of linguistic neutrality.

This chapter continues our exploration of the intersection of religion and forgiveness in the following way: insofar as there is no pre-given, neutral dialogical territory for the negotiation of religious difference, encounters among diverse religious idioms should be modeled on the

[1] It is our "absolute habitat," to borrow Derrida's term (*Monolingualism of the* Other, 1).

practice of "forgiving religion." This refers in the first place to the practicing of religion as a practicing of forgiveness, in which the religious expression of "the absolute" coincides with the expression of who "we" are as a community and what we are capable of recognizing and rendering intelligible within our shared perspective. In the second place, however, because of the idiomatic nature of religious expression, the gesture of forgiveness offered by religion must *itself* be forgiven—that is, recognized as the necessarily finite and particular enactment of an "absolute" standard. Religious idioms, which set the terms of forgiveness (absolute recognition) for those who belong to them, must be prepared to extend forgiveness to their religious "others" in order to remain consistently animated by the standard (of forgiveness) that defines them. Thus, mutual forgiveness between diverse religious idioms is not accomplished by appeal to an external or neutral order of arbitration, but rather is rooted in the acknowledgment by each particular religion of its part in the common failure to articulate adequately the absolute. In this way, religious differences are not ultimately *resolved* in dialogue; or rather, attempts to resolve them—by translating them into the neutral language of "public reason," for example—will always remain superficial, leaving untouched the idiomatic differences among persons' most basic communicative habits, histories, and persuasions. Properly to attend to this difference—that is, to forgive—requires that one acknowledge the basic difference that resides within one's own self-identity as responsible to a "source" that exceeds one's finite capacities, and thus that one be willing to acknowledge the same such finitude in others.

In the first section of this chapter, I return to the relation between religion and conscience, in order to show that conscience represents the dialogical standard—the "universal"—to which religious practice answers. We saw in Chapter Three that the determinate practices of religion are essentially conscientious in nature, in that they are self-critically responsive to the absolute significance of interpretive singularity. Here, I develop this point by showing that, as inherently "confessional," religion is in principle forgivingly open to dialogue with its religious other. Applying this discussion to the political domain, I then consider Hegel's understanding of religion and law as representing two different ways of actualizing the freedom of self-conscious individuality. As the tradition of political liberalism has rightly asserted, law offers a universal medium of human interaction that responds to the human capacity for rational self-determination, and thus expresses, in highly emancipatory ways, the inability of certain value-systems—religious ones included—to actualize human freedom. As Hegel shows, however, religious communities ought also to be counted among those educative social

environments that engender and cultivate persons' relation to law, and thus are relevant to any account of the conditions of human freedom.[2] On the basis of this intrinsic connection between religious and political expressions of human freedom, I argue, we ought to understand religion as inherently answerable to certain political norms, and therefore also as a potential participant in the project of resisting oppressive and self-destructive forms of law and value.

However, Hegel's approach to these issues differs from that of many liberal theorists who similarly seek to establish the compatibility of religion with the political ideals of democratic societies. In order to frame my reading of Hegel, then, the second section of the chapter considers the public significance of religion from the perspective of two influential liberal thinkers, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. I discuss first Rawls' account of "public reason" as a key component in the fair and proper functioning of political institutions, and his subsequent confidence in the "reasonable" nature of religious views (which he subsumes under the label "comprehensive doctrines"). I then consider Habermas' attempt to mitigate some of the potentially restrictive ambiguities in Rawls' account, arguing that Habermas' insistence on the continued value of religion to the flourishing of democratic polities in fact reinforces a narrowly "rationalist" understanding of religion as the "other" of reason. Although our "secular age"[3] calls for the acknowledgment of the discursive normativity of reason in public spaces, the question to be asked in this context is not "To what extent and in what way should reason permit the entry of religious voices and views into the public arena?", but rather "In what way are religious convictions and idioms themselves implicitly answerable to the norms of public reason?" Only so do we unhinge ourselves from the assumption of the mutual "otherness" of reason and religion, and look instead for the communicative possibilities shared by both "sides" of the reason and religion debate.

In the third section of the chapter, I return to Hegel for an alternative elaboration of Rawls' treatment of religion in public dialogue, looking in particular to Hegel's account of the dialogue between faith and pure insight in the "Culture" section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. My goal here is to provide phenomenological support for Rawls' idea of "reasonable

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[2] Indeed, Hegel's account encourages us to notice that systems of political recognition such as law, as premised on the educative support of religious communities and practices, become self-undermining and/or oppressive when they take themselves to be wholly independent of these educative environments. Although it is not the central concern of this study, I discuss the possibility of a Hegelian critique of certain one-sided liberal political theories below.

[3] In the context of secular modernity, according to Charles Taylor, one's religion is but one existential and epistemological "option" among others, necessarily exposed to questioning and scrutiny—that is, rational critique—from beyond its discursive limits (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3).

comprehensive doctrines" by showing how religion, which represents a value-system not immediately compatible with the norms of public dialogue, nevertheless can affirm the political values of publicity and plurality on its own terms when enacted conscientiously (in Hegel's terms, as "faith"). I show that the standpoint of faith undergoes a transformation parallel to that of the conscientious self, which (as we saw in Chapter One) learns to discern, within the terms of its absolute independence, an implicit, but no less absolute, dependence on the confirmation of others. Originally a self-renouncing devotion to an "absolute essence" (i.e., God), faith discovers in this process both its interpretive contribution to the meaning of this object and its responsibility to account for this interpretation to others. In its fully developed form, I argue, faith is the conscientious expression of one's religious idiom, an act of "confession" (in Hegel's precise sense) in which we assume and take responsibility for our religious standpoint in dialogue with others. This act of faith, I argue, constitutes a form of communicative rationality that is neither the "higher reason" of those who advocate for the unencumbered privilege of religion in political matters,[4] nor the (somewhat condescending) assertions of the political "value" of religious arguments for a nevertheless secularist[5] rationality. Religious idioms are in their own way inherently "public" and thus are on their own—albeit idiomatic—terms answerable to the standard of rational dialogue.

1. Mutual recognition, religion, and politics

1.1. Religion, conscience, and the "universal"

Hegel's account of mutual recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* demonstrates that the experience we have of being a distinct and stable "self" is premised on the acknowledgment we receive from others. As Hegel shows, we experience our own selfhood in a world populated by perspectives other than our own, and are thus compelled to solicit the confirmation of these other perspectives in accomplishing our own "self-possessed" grasp on who we are. Crucially, for Hegel, the communicative process of recognition is not simply a matter of *confirming* my

[4] For an account of religious faith as offering a "higher" rationality, which heuristically recuperates reason from its instrumentalist and narrowly scientistic tendencies, see Jean-Luc Marion, "Faith and Reason," in *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 145-154.

[5] By "secularist" I here intend the principled opposition to religious forms of belief and practice. I distinguish this term from "secular" and "secularity," which denote the empirical or epistemological decentralization of religion, and which are important themes for the present study. For a discussion of "secularism" as an ideology, as opposed to "secular" and "secularization" as descriptive terms, see José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54-74.

stance toward a reality outside me, as if the acknowledgment I seek were only a matter of confirming what I *think* about the world. Hegel's point, rather, is that there is no "I" or "me" prior to the experience of recognition. One's stable self-identity presupposes those acts of communication where in "you" and "I" negotiate our distinct places as selves in the world that we share.

The formative work of recognition in shaping our self-identity is not difficult to detect in many of our familiar interpersonal experiences with others. For the most part we appear to live our lives independent of others' recognition; we may communicate with others, but they do not get "inside" our sense of who we are. Certain experiences, however, such as that of profound embarrassment or shame, reveal to us the extent to which we are nevertheless constantly subject to the scrutiny of others, in ways that have the power to subvert our own self-assessment. Experiences of embarrassment, especially those that we carry with us for years, are not simply unpleasant exceptions to our otherwise preferable and comfortable sense of self-identity. Rather, before the belittling gaze of the other this comfortable sense of selfhood is rendered altogether questionable; we find ourselves wholly exposed and vulnerable to what *they* think of us, and compelled to recover the sense of self-possession we experienced prior to this moment.[6] Such unsettling experiences may be infrequent; however, their disruptive potential reminds us that the "normal" circumstances of our lives, in which others tend unthreateningly to confirm our self-identity, are sustained by processes of recognition in which we have derived, in interaction with others, our sense of individual identity and self-worth.

The significance of recognition in cultivating and sustaining individual self-identity exceeds, however, these (typically interpersonal) encounters in which it is explicitly noticed. Indeed, the possibility for "you" and "I" to mutually affirm one another's distinct self-identities rests on the shared sense of selfhood that defines who "we"—both together and as individual "I"s—are. Indeed Hegel presents his account of mutual recognition as an initial exposition of the

[6] Hegel's discussion of the interaction between the "lord" and "bondsman" in his initial account of mutual recognition represents two extreme and insufficient attempts to recover one's "self-certainty," insufficient because each denies the essentiality of recognition—that is, communicative engagement with the other—for the experience of stable self-identity. In the face of the uncontrollable presence of another perspective, the slave relinquishes her claim to self-identity in wholly submitting (in fear) to the authority of this other perspective, whereas the master tries oppressively to overcome this other perspective, either by eliminating it or denying it. Despite the obvious injustice of the institution of slavery, Hegel's account of the insufficiency of both standpoints is not a moral argument. His concern, rather, is to highlight the one-sidedness of both the slave and the master's response to otherness, as both fail to acknowledge the desire for recognition that resides at the heart of their own claim to self-identity. For a discussion of these responses—especially the slave's—as evasions of the inherently educative significance of reckoning with other perspectives, see Kym Maclaren, "The Role of Emotion in an Existential Education: Insights from Hegel and Plato," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2008): 471-492, especially 477-484.

reality of "spirit"—the "'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'" (145, M177)—as the broader social context presupposed by any explicit interpersonal exchange or act of recognition. Thus, while Hegel's account of recognition demonstrates in principle the collaboratively-achieved nature of the experience of self-consciousness, his study of spirit looks to the more basic and concrete terms of shared meaning that we enact—implicitly, for the most part—in our conscious engagement with others and the world around us. As Hegel says, the isolation of any particular dimension of human experience—of "self-consciousness," say—"*presupposes* spirit itself and subsists therein; in other words, the isolation exists only in spirit which is a concrete existence" (325, M440). The "self" that I am and enact is thus the product of negotiation and interaction with others not just "in theory," but also concretely—that is, according to the specific socio-cultural environments in which this negotiation takes place and which reflect my history as a particular individual.

One of the first observations that Hegel makes regarding the reality of "spirit" is of the specificity and contingency of its most immediate form. He writes, "spirit is the *ethical life* of a nation in so far as it is the *immediate truth*—the individual that is a world" (326, M441). Hegel's term "ethicality" (*Sittlichkeit*) refers to the immediate, and for the most part invisible, shared norms that contextualize human experience, govern our most familiar dealings with the world, and give shape to our sense of selfhood. We enact this "ethical life"—our shared sense of being "at home"—in the habits that reflect the particularity of our upbringing and development, which range from the private and most intimate forms of interpersonal behaviour that make us part of our particular family, to the more broadly shared set of habits through which we are part of a particular culture. The distinctive feature of the norms of ethical life is indeed their immediacy: they are forms of shared meaning that structure the world as it is simply "given" to us, which we enact as it were "without thinking"—that is, without any reflective discernment. As immediate, these norms are necessarily specific—they reflect the collective identity of "*a* nation," in Hegel's terms—and reflect the inherent sociality of our selfhood—the formative work of recognition—in merely partial ways. Yet, again as immediate, the influence of these norms on us is not a matter of our assent or choice. Rather, "ethical life" names those bonds of mutual recognition—our "ethical" communities—in which our capacity for self-conscious choice originally develops. As Hegel's account demonstrates, each of us belongs to an original "family unit" of one sort or

another, a particular system of values, customs, habits, and affective behaviours that we never leave behind, even as we learn to adopt a reflective and critical stance toward them.[7]

As norms for the *sharing* of meaning, though, the forms of recognition that characterize ethical life are not reducible to their immediacy.[8] On the one hand, then, we are never *not* a member of the particular family and cultural sphere that provided our most immediate interpersonal development; ethical life dictates precisely what it means to be a member of "this" family or "this" culture, educative experiences that we can never evade, whatever judgments we come to make about them.[9] On the other hand, though, the function of such experiences is to educate individuals toward their detachment from their familial belonging in order to engage in broader contexts of public life. As Hegel writes, "the ethical principle is intrinsically universal" (330, M451); that is, the forms of interpersonal interaction given and practiced in ethical life serve—often despite themselves, as *particular* habits and customs—as the preparatory context in which individuals learn to interact with others in contexts beyond their family and home culture.[10] Otherwise put, ethical life, as a system of the sharing of meaning—that is, of communication—cannot prevent itself from instilling in its members an answerability to the norms of communicability *as such*.[11] Indeed, particular, "ethical" communities are themselves

[7] Commenting on the immediacy of ethical life, Hoff writes, "we do not emerge in the human world as already fully functioning adult human beings independent of any particular community, but are characterized fundamentally and substantially by our *belonging* to a particular world with a particular self-understanding, one that we can never completely leave behind" (Hoff, *The Laws of the Spirit*, 25).

[8] "It is precisely our need to establish a sharedness of experience," writes John Russon, "that is the motivation for our commitment to determinate forms of cultural life. For this reason, then, those determinate forms have the accomplishing of community as their intrinsic norm. The 'truth' of our exclusive cultural forms is thus that they are precisely *for* overcoming exclusivity: our cultural particularity, that is, is precisely *for* establishing a human universality." Russon, "Conscience, Religion, and Multiculturalism: A Canadian Hegel," in *Hegel and Canada: Unity of Opposites?* eds. Susan M. Dodd and Neil G. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 93.

[9] The family, David Ciavatta explains, is for Hegel the most immediate and elemental form of intersubjectivity. Unlike the public or political domain, which is governed by the law of universal recognition, the function of the family is to recognize its members according to their non-substitutable "singularity" as a specific family member with a specific role. Ciavatta, *Spirit, the Family, and the Unconscious in Hegel's Philosophy* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2009), 61. (I should note that Ciavatta's use of the term "singularity" here differs from my use of the term in connection with conscience.)

[10] As Ciavatta notes further, the family is a kind of "limited" universal; it is "an intersubjective whole whose agency underwrites and empowers the particular actions of its individual members," and is in this sense no less a community and system of recognition than the public world (Ibid., 65). However, the particular intersubjectivity reflected in one's family is not typically recognized, but rather is experienced through what appears as natural. "Ethical practice," Ciavatta continues, "involves the performative generation of a spiritual world, a world that already reflects us, as intersubjective agents, in its very givenness" (Ibid., 62).

[11] As Ciavatta observes, it is precisely our ethical particularity that becomes the vehicle for "universal" communicative practices. It is still "my" voice with which I speak in public, Ciavatta notes; but here my voice, as reflective of my non-substitutable particularity, serves as the "self-effacing" medium for a universal, publicly intelligible meaning (Ibid., 64).

for "the universal."[12] To cultivate a person's adherence to "this" community is simultaneously to determine their orientation toward interaction and communication with anyone, and the self that we enact in the company of "anyone"—that is, in "public"—is nothing other than a modification of the pre-public, "private" self we have become in our particular "ethical" worlds.

A similar tension between normative particularity and communicative universality is at work in the system of sharing that Hegel understands as religion. In Chapter Two we saw that "religion," for Hegel, signifies that form of ritual—prescribed and self-expressive action—through which we enact the system of shared norms that governs our sense of being a singular self *beyond* any particular "we." Religion, in this sense, is the ritual expression of the absolute standard of conscience. In contrast with the simple immediacy of ethical normativity, therefore, the norms that characterize the sharing of meaning in religion are "absolute." As a ritual practice, religion is a community's way of expressing that which for it has ultimate value and significance; it is the collective articulation of the self-justifying, "absolute" reality in terms that, as themselves "absolute," serve also as the most fundamental expression of who "we" are. But as Hegel explains, the *self*-expressive dimension of religion is typically only implicit; for the most part, the expression of absolute reality in religion takes the form of an affirmation of an absolute *object*, that is, something *other* than we who perform this affirmation.[13] Religion constitutes the form of concrete spirit that is commensurate with "all essence and actuality," but whose enactment takes the form of an expression of "all essence and actuality" as *beyond* spirit. As the self-consciousness of spirit in the form of consciousness (i.e., of an object), religion is essentially the bifurcation of concrete spirit, therefore; it is a "conduct and activity," which, having a determinate "existence" as a particular cultural practice, functions to bear witness to the excessiveness and absoluteness of the religious object "in *its* real world."[14] In religion, a society reveals a basic internal tension, employing terms necessarily reflective of its own cultural particularity that seem best suited to give voice to the absolute human situation.

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[12] As Russon writes, "the norm of universality is intrinsic to our cultural particularity," because "it is in the very nature of our rational self-consciousness that we inhabit these particularities *as* answerable to a norm of universality" (Russon, "Conscience, Religion, and Multiculturalism," 93).

[13] As he writes, in religion, "spirit *represented as object*, has for itself the significance of being the universal spirit that contains within itself all essence and actuality" (497, M677, my emphasis).

[14] "Spirit's *existence*," Hegel writes, "is distinct from its *self-consciousness*, and its reality proper falls outside of religion. There is indeed one spirit of both, but its consciousness does not embrace both together, and religion appears as a part of existence, of conduct and activity, whose other part is the life lived in its real world" (497, M678).

Because of this structural tension, Hegel explains, the inherent specificity of a society's religious practice—the particular *Vorstellungen* through which it achieves its (self-)expression of "the absolute"—is inherently self-transformative, insofar as it fails adequately to capture the absolute reality that it nevertheless must express.

> So far as spirit in religion *represents* itself to itself, it is indeed consciousness, and the reality enclosed within religion is the shape and the guise of its representation. But, in this representation, reality does not receive its perfect due, [namely] 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 ought to show forth, [namely] spirit that is conscious of itself. (497-498, M678)

To be sure, Hegel does not use the language of religion's "self-transformation" here. However, as we explored in more detail in Chapter Four, he does discuss in this context the "perfection" of religion, wherein, propelled by the imperative to express the absolute, religion is practiced as the ongoing critique and revision of its determinate forms in search of an appropriate expression of the absolute essence.[15] The "spirit of religion," Hegel writes, is "the movement away from its immediacy towards the attainment of the knowledge of what it is *in itself* or immediately" in which "the *'shape'* in which it appears for its consciousness will be perfectly identical with its essence, and it will behold itself as it is" (494, M680).[16]

Similar to ethical life, then, religion too is according to its own logic compelled to transcend the "immediacy"—that is, the determinacy—of its particular expression of the absolute in response to a universal standard. However, whereas the universal implicit in ethical life is experiences as a demand to communicate "beyond" the ethical sphere—for example, when we find the customs of "our" family to be in tension with the norms of our broader, political context—the universal standard in response to which religion transforms itself does not issue from such a "beyond." Indeed, insofar as religion provides the terms for a society's expression of the absolute, there could be no domain "beyond religion"—in the sense of an external, alternative communicative register from which religion would derive the terms of its self-transformation. Rather, the demand to self-transcend in response to the universal, in religion,

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[15] As we saw in the previous chapter, of course, this "essence" is spirit itself, and this process of self-critique (what Hegel calls "perfection"; see M678, M680) will eventually necessitate that religion itself—that is, the form of representation—be dispensed with.

[16] Commenting on this and the previous passage from Hegel, Russon writes: "Religion is enacted in *Vorstellungen*, in specific, established determinacies. All these determinacies, qua religious determinacies, point to the need that *they be transcended*: it is precisely the imperative of a *religious* determinacy that *its very determinacy* is 'to be transcended'… It is therefore the inherent trajectory of religion to enact itself in a form in which its *Vorstellungen* are 'vanishing moments,' practices that perform the effacement of their own essentiality in their showing forth of reality" (Russon, *Infinite Phenomenology*, 232).

issues from *within* the terms of society's absolute expression; it is religion's own, *internal* standard[17] to which it answers in the transcendence of its own specificity.

In this way, religion allows for a more precise understanding of the universal than is offered in Hegel's account of ethical life. In pointing to its own contingency, the inherent specificity of ethical life reveals, as it were, the nature of universality in general. The way in which the world is given to me according to the specific habitual ways of interaction native to "our" culture distinguishes me immediately from "them," the members of an "other" culture. And yet this difference—the moment of intercultural encounter—exposes "us" and "them" to an occasion for communication across our respective cultural particularities.[18] Even to notice the difference between one's own and another culture *as cultures* is to have adopted a "universal" standpoint, one that, though it could never be altogether "outside" of my cultural particularity, nevertheless reflects my orientation (to communication) beyond this particularity. Religion, I am proposing here, presents us with a special instance of this orientation toward universality. Since it reckons precisely with the *absolute* standpoint, religion makes possible the acknowledgment of the fact that the transcendence of cultural specificity is never ultimate, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, even in answering to a universal standard.[19] Religions are, for Hegel, the determinate *Vorstellungen* through which a community gives voice to the antecedence of "the absolute"; they respond to the acknowledgment that "we," in our finite cultural situation, must give expression to this absolute, and hence are structurally disposed both to acknowledge the

[17] This communicative standard is, of course, internal also to ethical life; indeed, ethical life and religion are not wholly distinct forms of spirit, but reflect differing levels of proximity to "absolute" spirit. My claim here is that the proximity of religion to the absolute allows it to exemplify the internality of the universal better than other forms of spirit. My intention, therefore, is not to insist on a strict division between religion and ethical life in terms of actual ritual practice. In many ways, rather, the culturally determinate practices through which a society enacts its religious commitments are drawn precisely from this society's ethical life, which religion, in its "movement away from its immediacy," will subject to criticism and transformation (499, M680).

[18] For a discussion of the way in which cultural difference presents itself as an occasion for communication, see Hoff, "Hegel and the Possibility of Intercultural Criticism," in *Hegel and Canada: Unity of Opposites?* eds. Susan M. Dodd and Neil G. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 342-67. On this point, note also Burbidge's observation that it is only in such moments of intercultural recognition that the specificity of one's own cultural home becomes explicitly evident: "Only when [particular cultures] recognize that others have used the common sign-producing ability to create distinct words and grammatical structures, and that therefore specific linguistic conventions are but species of a generic human capacity do they become explicitly conscious of the distinctive and defining characteristics of their own language" (Burbidge, "Language and Recognition," 92).

[19] Hence "universality," according to this distinctively Hegelian view, is *relative* to the particular communicative situation in which it is established. According to Hegel's account of recognition, Russon writes, "our identities are formed by participation in determinate cultures whose particular forms permanently shape our capacities for engaging meaningfully in the world." Hence, he continues, "whatever universality there is in human experience is something that must be accomplished and realized on the basis of these non-universal terms. Indeed, this view that universality must emerge as the 'self-transcendence' of particularity is what is perhaps most distinctive of Hegel's philosophical position in general: the notion of *Aufhebung*" (Russon, "Conscience, Religion, and Multiculturalism," 92-3).

inherent finitude of its own articulation of the religious object and to forgive the finitude of other cultural expressions of the absolute. In noticing, therefore, the inevitable determinacy of all forms of religious practice, religion is the recognition of the universality of *finitude*.[20] Hence, if ethical communities are self-transcending in the sense that their particularity shows itself to be "for" the universal in general, religion is self-transcending in its expression of the fact that this tension between itself as a specific cultural-linguistic "home" and the universality of communication is an absolute situation.

To conclude this discussion, let us clarify this particular trait of religion as a response to the universal in terms of the relation between religion and conscience. Hegel understands conscience as that norm or universal standard that reveals the finitude, and thus the necessary self-transcendence, of all forms of spirit.[21] The experience of conscience is the awareness of the absolute significance of my discernment of my concrete situation[22]; it is the acknowledgment of my irreducibility as a singular agent to the social realities that nevertheless shape and define me. Conscience, when recognized as a universal,[23] is the realization of "absolute" spirit: it is the form of mutual recognition that acknowledges the absolute significance both of human singularity and of the recognition—communication—wherein this singularity is realized. As we have said, the form of recognition characteristic of an ethical community answers to the reality of conscience in being self-transformatively open to communication "in public," in response to the irreducibility of its members (as singular selves) to the immediacy and particularity of its interpersonal bonds. Religion too answers to the standard of universal communicability; however, since religion functions precisely to unveil the reality of conscientious agency,[24] the universal to which it

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[20] Religion contradicts itself, therefore, when it declares the finitude of its own idiom in relation to this absolute while simultaneously declaring the superiority of its idiom over that of another culture; hence, the most honest expression of religious conviction is the one that acknowledges, to others and within the terms of its own "confession," its own finitude as a practice with respect to the "ultimate source" it is called to affirm. Of course, religion always harbours the tendency to "appropriate" the source of its affirmation and devotion, invoking the absolute authority of God, as it were, in favour of its own idiom. However, while such appropriation does indeed characterize many historical instances of religious self-expression, Hegel's view is that religions are nevertheless responsible to the standard of conscience, and thus possess within themselves the source of their own criticism.

[21] Or rather, conscience is the norm with respect to which all forms of spirit are finite.

[22] Hegel offers this account of conscience at M633-4.

[23] That is, when it is recognized that singular agency is a *shared* reality. Hegel describes this recognition at 480, M654: "In calling itself *conscience*, [the acting self] calls itself pure knowledge of itself and pure abstract willing, i.e., it calls itself a universal knowing and willing which recognizes and acknowledges others, is the same as them—for they are just this self-knowing and willing—and which for that reason is also recognized and acknowledged by *them*."

[24] Of course, the forms of this "pointing" in religion vary, and for the most part do not employ the philosophical language of "conscience" itself. Yet here Christianity stands out, for Hegel: the fact that there is no standard beyond

points is different. In pointing precisely to conscience, in other words, religion does not simply say, "you must step beyond your particular cultural sphere," but rather says, "you yourself *are* this stepping-beyond, and the only 'universal' to be established between you and others is in terms of this shared self-transcendence-of-cultural-particularity." Thus, whereas we can offer criticisms of ethical life on the basis of conscience (as its implicit standard), the conscientious criticisms of religion are, in a way unlike any other form of spirit, *self*-criticisms. Conscience, then, is *religion's own standard*, not simply in the sense that religious practices are answerable to the reality of singular insight (which is true of ethical), but also because it is this reality to which religion—albeit in various forms—points.

1.2. Law, value, and the tradition of political liberalism

There are two ways, therefore, in which cultural particularity reveals an intrinsic "universality," that is, a *rational* orientation towards communication with the cultural "other"—namely, ethical life, which engenders in culturally particular ways the universality of communication in general, and religion, which, as a kind of "absolute ethos," provides the culturally specific terms through which one expresses one's irreducibility to any particular culture. On this view, then, not only would it be impossible to establish universal standards of communication independently of ethical life and religion, but also, as we saw in Chapter Four, the "universality" to which we have appealed above in discussing the self-transcendence of cultural particularity represents a kind of *religious* achievement.

In exploring this theme of universality further, I want to return to the relation between religion and politics explored above in Chapter Four, focusing in particular on the mechanisms of human interaction—namely, value and law (or right)—that typify religion and politics and forms of mutual recognition. I will be especially concerned in this subsection with the political mechanism of law as an expression of the universal form of recognition to which we are answerable. Whereas other spheres of mutual recognition are intrinsically oriented toward universal standards of communication, the political domain maintains a unique relation to this universality, insofar as the institutions of law and right that are its principal accomplishments set themselves up precisely and explicitly in answer to our need for universal recognition.[25] The

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conscientious action and the community in which it is forgiven is reflected most effectively, in religious terms, in the Christian image of the incarnation.

[25] In speaking for the human being as "a being that operates in relation to principles and in relation to others," Hoff writes, "law institutionalizes the need for recognition." "The political accomplishment of law," she continues, "is

aspiration of institutions such as law and right, therefore, is to enable human freedom by providing universal terms of interaction through which persons can engage with one another according to capacities that all share equally.

Because of their unique relation to universality, though, political institutions are often understood to establish themselves in distinction from other forms of recognition that, by reflecting interpersonal and cultural specificities, are unable to support or be integrated with the institution of universal values. Such an understanding of political institutions tends to coincide with attitudes toward religion wherein, if it is to be made politically salutary and relevant, religion must be translated into the public language through which these institutions operate—for example, into the language "public reason," that is, into the form of "public arguments" that are "*equally accessible* to *all* persons"[26] Below, I intend to make two points in response to this attitude toward religion. First, following Hegel's understanding of religion in cultivating persons' most basic dispositions and attitudes toward the public world, I will conclude this subsection by suggesting that politics alienates itself from one of its most central conditions when, in the name of "public reason," it encourages suspicion or exclusivity towards religion. In Hegel's view, the terms of universal recognition could never speak for us absolutely, and so any political regime or ideology that fails to appreciate the significance of the specifically *non*-political spheres that shape human activity and identity will end up undermining its own goal—namely, to enable the freedom of human beings.

However, the arguments that political institutions must acknowledge and engage the formative and educational work of—and hence their own debt to—"ethical" and religious communities,[27] and that such institutions work best when they are open to the public contribution

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that through it the individual person can assume her inherent universality and be recognized as inherently universal—that is, as ultimately irreducible to any one of her particular characteristics and, given her capacity to determine herself, fundamentally free from external determination" (Hoff, *Laws of the Spirit*, 5).

[26] Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the 'Public Use of Reason' by Religious and Secular Citizens," in *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 120. It is in these terms that Habermas describes the "self-understanding of the constitutional state," which, in response to the "fact of pluralism," requires that all citizens, regardless of their particular and diverse worldviews, subscribe to a secularized public sphere for the sake of a stable social body, and that the state remain neutral to all parties in terms of their pre-political convictions. See also Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*. Ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 330. No matter what particular belief system, worldview, or doctrine forms the convictions and ways of life of a given community or individual, what counts in the public sphere of politics is the proffering of good reasons toward the goal of "rationally motivated agreement" (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 121).

[27] Thomas A. Lewis makes this point specifically in connection with Hegel, arguing that "Hegel's analysis of religion and the state stresses that the background views contained in our basic attitudes and dispositions matter to the health of a political body." Because these "background views" inform persons' (largely unconscious) attitudes and intuitions toward the state and public institutions, engaging these background convictions properly is crucial if

of their religious members,[28] have been made persuasively already. While affirming these arguments, I intend to shift the focus onto the political responsibility of religion. I making my second point, I will argue that while it is understandable that religious persons and communities would encounters "secular" norms such as "public reason" as challenges to their religious self-expression, I want to argue that, in exhibiting disinterest, suspicion, or antipathy toward public—and indeed secular—goods, religions in fact fail in a significant way to answer to their own ideal as an expression of the absolute. Thus, while it is true that certain political affirmations of the universal terms—especially in the tradition of liberalism—often fail to appreciate the significance and nature of seemingly non-universal religious convictions (as I argue in this subsection), it is also true that such convictions are, according to their own logic, responsible to the very universal norms of rational discourse that the institutions of politics claim to represent (what I argue in the next subsection and in Section Three).

In the remainder of this subsection, I want to briefly clarify the contrast between law and value that I have been invoking, signaling one of the central tensions that emerges between them. Let us first consider the form of political recognition to which our ideas of law and right answer. Unlike the terms of interaction characteristic of our *particular* family unit or culture, as well as

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citizens are to understand themselves as free and thus exercise support of state institutions. Consequently, Lewis writes, "Hegel eschews views that would have our most essential debates take place in terms of a 'public reason' that does not require appealing to our most comprehensive views" (Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 244-5). In this context Lewis refers also to the "Hegelian background" of Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*, which, as Stout summarizes, is driven by "the thought that democracy is a 'social idea' as well as a system of government," and offers an account of the role of religion in shaping such social ideas in a way that avoids the extremes of religious traditionalism and secular liberalism. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Pointing out this "debt" more forcefully, Hoff argues that since individual, self-determining agents are essentially and meaningfully shaped (that is, determined) by "extra-individual worlds of value," it is in the very interest of this individuality and the political institutions that answer to it to acknowledge and protect these worlds. "If human life is sustained by such worlds," she writes, "then we are made vulnerable through their vulnerability, and we protect our vulnerability not simply by invoking our non-transgressible rights but by empowering these worlds and asserting *their* non-transgressibility." Such worlds include, in addition to familial, social, economic, artistic, and others, "the religious organizations and spiritual practices that can remind us of our status as recipients of value." Hoff, "Rights and Worlds: On the Political Significance of Belonging," *The Philosophical Forum* (2014): 370.

[28] Habermas is one influential proponent of this view, arguing that the state "must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves *as such* in the political arena, for it cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity" (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 131). For a consideration of Habermas' view that religion makes a "positive and substantive contribution to public debate," see Simone Chambers, "How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion," *Constellations*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2007): 210-223. I address Habermas' views about the presence of religious voices in political discussion in more detail below, showing that, despite the openness to the "key resources" of religion evident in statements such as the above, Habermas fails to distinguish his view from the expectation that religious expression be made to accord with the terms of secular rationality before it can be granted political legitimacy. Thus, I argue, Habermas falls short of noticing the place of religion among the *conditions* of political rationality exposed in the Hegelian account.

the terms of our *singularity* as conscientious agents, we typically think of the political sphere as the domain of *universal* recognition,[29] in which each of us as members are treated as an individual site of significance equal to all other individuals.[30] Politically speaking, each of us is a *person*, and ought to be recognized as such; in answering to this universal form of recognition, the political sphere enables the acknowledgment of an essential feature of human experience—namely, our capacity for rational self-determination—that the domains of ethical life and religion cannot adequately accommodate. On this understanding, the domain of politics transcends the partial and preferential recognition of the ethical and cultural communities in which we are more immediately embedded, and remains largely indifferent to the conscientious agency in which we confront our own most basic uniqueness. Politics recognizes that our identities are irreducible to the forms of ritual community that contribute to our sense of selfhood. As political subjects—as citizens, for example—we are more than the unreflective and specific habits into which we are immersed, more than the inner voice of conscience that singles us out beyond all "worldly" forms of acknowledgment.

In his studies of ethical life and religion, Hegel accounts for the powerful and undeniable ways in which our senses of ourselves and of what matters preexist us in the form of those formative contexts that determine our identities and manners of engaging with the world. For both ethical life and religion, "what ought to be done" is less a matter of conscious decision than it is a matter of answering to a given or felt sense of obligation.[31] In this way, ethical life and

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[29] This demarcation of politics from these other spheres is admittedly an artificial one; the overall aim of my discussion is in fact to challenge such clear separations of "the political" from other forms of human interaction. (Indeed, the distinction I draw here pertains more directly to law and right as political institutions, rather than "the political" as such). I align politics with universality here in order to account for the way in which liberalism affirms the universal character of those political institutions that it regards as necessary for human freedom.

[30] In employing this threefold breakdown of human interaction according to the principles of particularity, singularity, and universality, I am following the general task of Hoff's *Laws of the Spirit*, which explores Hegel's account of the way in which various social forms respond to the demands of justice. Hoff's text, she explains, is organized around a "trio of primary dimensions that define our intersubjective reality," to which social realities must respond in doing justice to the nature of human identity: "first, our formation by particular communities; second, our organization of a stable social reality differentiated in terms of universal laws, norms, and institutions; and third, our necessarily singular perspective on and outworking of those communities and universals—a singularity that is irreducible to both law and community" (Hoff, *Laws of the Spirit*, 3, 4).

[31] I argued in Chapter Two that all meaningful human action is ritualistic, in the sense that action *means something* in relation to the context of shared norms that an action answers to and implicitly expresses. I argued further that ethical life and religion satisfy our common understanding of ritual action, in that the definitive enactment of both is in some sense unreflective. Of course, as I asserted in there, there remain significant differences between ethical life and religion in regards to their unreflective character. In ethical life, this sense of obligation is immediate: in acting "ethically," I respond to the normative sense of "what we do" by doing what appears simply to be the obvious thing to do, what appears not to be a matter of answering to a norm at all. Similarly, in ethical life, the normative context that I express in acting remains invisible. I reflect "we" simply in doing "my thing." In the case of religion, although the normative dimension of my activity often appears more explicitly, here too the absolute character of the religious

religion can be understood as spheres of *value*: in both cases, one acts in response to an established standard that, though integral to one's sense of selfhood, is not a product of one's critical or reflective deliberation.[32] By contrast, political recognition answers to the fact that we nonetheless *are* critics, that, in addition to being members of value systems we are also rational agents, capable of reflecting on our formative surroundings and the values that we hold, and of endorsing or criticizing these values according to our capacity for reflective and individual self-determination. Politics, in this sense, is the project of accommodating this capacity for individual self-determination and choice, and while politics does not simply or necessarily oppose itself to spheres of value, it does make possible a distinct attitude toward value—one, namely, that recognizes their relative authority in comparison to processes of rational deliberation, which are performed independently of any authoritative "given."

In the context of Western modernity, the tradition of liberalism (in connection with the philosophical movement of the Enlightenment) has sought most influentially to acknowledge the priority of rational and individual self-determination and to develop the political systems that protect and support one's capacity to live according to one's own terms.[33] The "notion of a discrete and self-defined rational individual" on which liberalism is premised has been "highly politically liberatory," John Russon writes, "specifically through recognizing the rights of individuals to define themselves beyond the oppressive terms of predetermined political and cultural situations."[34] Indeed, the discourse of rights has been the principal mechanism through which liberalism has promoted the recognition of self-determining individuals, both at the conceptual (in conceiving of persons as "rights-bearing individuals") and the historical (in producing the political institutions that protect the rights of individuals) levels. In addition to rights-discourse (or rather, developing out of it), we owe to liberalism the understanding of politics as that domain in which our self-determination is protected by systems of law, and whose

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demand tends to discourage reflective deliberation, just as the sense of "who we are" in religion remains implicit, concealed behind my explicit ritual act of expressing "the absolute."

[32] As Hoff writes, "to truly operate toward something valuable as valuable is explicitly *not* to be the origin of its status as valuable, integrating it into a system of values one fashions oneself, but to be passive to *its* compelling force—to find oneself turned in its direction, commanded by it, converted to it" (Hoff, "Rights and Worlds," 364).

[33] Tracing the history of liberalism to its origin in the thought of John Locke, John Dewey writes that "the outstanding points of Locke's version of liberalism are that governments are instituted to protect the rights that belong to individuals prior to political organization of social relations," and that "since governments are instituted to protect the natural rights of individuals, they lose claim to obedience when they invade and destroy these rights instead of safeguarding them." John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 4.

[34] Russon, "On Secrets and Sharing: Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida on the Economics of the Public Sphere," in *The Public Sphere From Outside the West*, eds. Divya Dwivedi and Sanil V (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 41.

institutions, through which right and law are realized, are legitimated solely by our freely-given consent.

In answering to our capacity for rational *self*-determination, political institutions establish themselves "beyond" the spheres of influence and cultivation in which we are determined by external forces. In this way, political mechanisms—such as that of law—function because of their independence from domains of pre-established value. We can understand this independence in two ways. First, politics sets itself apart from domains of predetermined value in order to protect individual freedom. In this way, politics is the space in or through which we are free *from* other forms of influence, such as cultural and religious norms, whose modes of prescription do not (or rather do not obviously) appeal to our rational self-determination. In this way, politics provides a space in which each one of us has an equal claim to freedom—unlike the comparatively exclusive and particularized spheres of family or culture, or the singularizing interiority of conscientious selfhood—insofar as we are, politically speaking, self-defining individuals no different from anyone else. Second, though, the independence of politics from value works to enable certain aspects of freedom that, though original to spheres outside of the political, cannot be fulfilled there. Politics provides a space of freedom *for* cultural and conscientious self-expression; it offers a public context in which differences that exist at the level of ethical life and conscience can be negotiated and accommodated, and provides protective conditions—such as the right to private property[35]—for the self-enactment we answer to in these other spheres. Politics, then, serves as an enabling mechanism for other domains of value that are too particular to speak wholly for who we are, or whose expression requires external support in order to be realized.

Because the independence of politics from value corresponds to *our* independence from the spheres of value that shape us, it is essential that political mechanisms do not *themselves* function in the way that values do, but in all cases remain answerable to the rational consent of the individuals they govern. In response to this answerability, liberalism has asserted that the institutions of political life must remain public. "As Locke-inspired liberalism has insisted," Russon writes, "legitimating appeal must be made to the comprehension and consent of self-conscious individuals: politics must be 'transparent' and political power must rest on *reasons*

[35] "Among the 'natural' rights especially emphasized by Locke is that of property, originating, according to him, in the fact that the individual has 'mixed' himself, though his labor, with some natural hitherto unappropriated object" (Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 4). See also John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), §§25-51.

that in principle any individual could grasp and to which and individual could agree: justice must be public."[36] In this way, the publicity of politics requires more than that its processes and institutions are the concern of a large number of people. "Publicity," for liberalism, refers rather to the explicit and accessible nature of the processes and institutions of political life, which, because of this transparent accessibility *in principle*, are open to the rational consideration of everyone, "in common."[37] Here political action again sets itself apart from that of the value-systems of ritual: whereas ritual action in the case of ethical life and religion involves the implicit affirmation of the systems of recognition that support it, political recognition, as inherently public, functions with explicit reference to the institutions that enable it, institutions that must remain visible and objective—that is, accessible and applicable to all persons, equally, regardless of cultural difference and conscientious self-identity. Likewise, whereas the normative force of ethical life and religion is typically unconscious, governing our action as it were "behind the scenes," in politics our relation to and engagement with others is governed neither by affection nor conviction, but by self-conscious deliberation and the visible medium of law.

One of the most powerful contributions made by the tradition of liberalism is the assertion that these political systems function according to a logic independent from that of value, and that, by virtue of our right to self-definition (that is, our right to freedom, understood as rational self-determination), an essential aspect of our self-expression is enabled by systems of law that make explicit and regulate the terms of human behaviour in the public domain.[38] And

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[36] Russon, "On Secrets and Sharing," 48.

[37] Cf. Arendt, who argues that "the public" signifies not only "that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity," but also "the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us as distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50, 52). Maclure and Taylor distinguish between "the public" as the common interest and "public" as referring to the qualities of transparency and visibility, arguing that, whereas the former understanding is inherited from Roman antiquity, the latter understanding refers to the emergence of the "public sphere" in the eighteenth century. See Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 36-40.

[38] Dewey writes (somewhat disapprovingly) that early forms of liberalism, expressed most definitively by Locke, "bequeathed to later social thought a rigid doctrine of natural rights inherent in individuals independent of social organization" (Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, 4-5). The emphasis on the regulative significance of law derives from the "individualism" of traditional liberalism, according to which mechanisms such as law and the state function to protect the capacity for rational self-determination that persons possess "inherently," prior to and independently of their social experience. As Dewey writes further, liberalism "defined the individual in terms of liberties of thought and action already possessed by him in some mysterious ready-made fashion, and which it was the sole business of the state to safeguard. Reason was also made an inherent endowment of the individual, expressed in men's moral relations to one another, but not sustained and developed because of these relations" (Ibid., 5). Although contemporary forms of liberal thinking often demonstrate a higher appreciation for the significance of social relations for individual self-determination and rational activity, they nevertheless carry the Lockean tradition forward by continuing to emphasize the independence of political self-determination from the social contexts in which persons' values are cultivated. As Rawls writes, for example, "the problem of political liberalism is to work out a political conception of political justice for a constitutional democratic regime that a

yet, the strength of liberalism's assertion of the independence of law from value can—and has—become its weakness, to the extent that it fails to acknowledge that there are dimensions of human action and self-expression that could never be matters of law. The contribution of political liberalism remains one-sided, in other words, if, in affirming the rational self-determination of individuals, it overlooks other spheres of value in which we are shaped and cultivated by external forces and in which we are more members than we are individuals, but which are no less essential to our freedom and sense of selfhood.

We can observe the one-sidedness of the understanding of freedom solely in terms of law in connection both with ethical life and religion. In discussing ethical life above we observed already that the absolute independence of law and value is phenomenologically untenable insofar as persons become political agents within specific familial and cultural contexts. Political systems—that is, systems of *universal* recognition—are achieved by persons shaped by systems of interpersonal *particularity*. Lest our political systems become insensitive to an essential dimension of human selfhood, therefore, the independence of law from value must *serve*, and not overlook, the autonomy of the domains of particularity that are most immediately responsible for shaping who we are. This is not to say, moreover, that such domains of partial value represent *independent* social realities to which law and right must attend; rather, since value is the very substance of law, for Hegel, systems of law and right become precisely *self*-undermining in overlooking or failing to protect domains of value. Despite their differentiated institutionalized forms, law and value are answerable, both to each other and to the reality of freedom of which they are both the actualization; hence, any political system or theory that affirms either law (universality) or value (particularity) against the other fails to acknowledge an essential dimension of human freedom.[39]

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plurality of reasonable [comprehensive] doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, liberal and nonliberal, may freely endorse, and so freely live by and come to understand its [*sic*] virtues. Emphatically it does not aim to replace comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, but intends to be *equally distinct from both* and, it hopes, acceptable to both" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxxviii, emphasis mine).

[39] In the terms of a longstanding debate in political theory, Hegel's view surpasses the false dichotomy of the "liberal-communitarian debate." More obvious here is Hegel's challenge to the liberal vision, which, as Neera K. Badhwar explains, "presupposes a moral theory according to which the ability to assess and choose conceptions of the good from a universal and impartial moral standpoint is central to the individual's moral identity," and hence as a political philosophy "obligates the state to enforce, and the individual qua citizen to respect, primarily (or only)… "negative" rights and other principles of justice." Badhwar's "Moral Agency, Commitment, and Impartiality," in *The Communitarian Challenge to Liberalism*, eds. Ellen Frankel Paul, Fred D. Miller, Jr., Jeffrey Paul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1. Neither, though, can Hegel accurately be considered a communitarian (although he is often taken to be one), since the communitarian affirmation of the moral authority of ethical particularity against the impartiality of universal moral norms can be as one-sided as the liberal affirmation of this impartiality in terms of the universal rights of individuals. Communitarians, who rightly acknowledge that "moral

The presumed self-sufficiency and independence of law is likewise a source of potential blindness in connection with religious value. Religion, as we also saw above, correlates with the form of human selfhood affirmed in conscience, the domain of recognition in which distinct parties acknowledge the absolute dependence of one another's absolute independence. For religion—especially in the developed form in which it points specifically to conscience—we as individuals are irreducible to our cultural heritage and political answerability; the "call" of religion singles us out and points to the absolute nature of *our discernment* of our situation, our status as singular selves that can be recognized to be constitutively "beyond" any and all social reality. The relevant point here is that, for religious recognition, there is more to my activity, more to who I am, that what the law is able to recognize. Law, as a political institution, functions because it is objective: it can serve as a universal medium of recognition that regulates public behavior impartially and equally precisely because it concerns itself with that part of us, of our action, that can be seen and judged by others. Law works because it overlooks the subjective dimension of action in order to be able to arbitrate conduct indifferently, in the same way for everyone.

Because, though, for law our finite, observable actions are adequate for the recognition of self, the terms of law could never exhaust the significance of human action. As much as I acknowledge my answerability to standards for action that I share with others, I nevertheless understand myself to be irreducible to the terms of objectivity, to be a singular "subject" who, as conscientious, is irreducible to the determinate actions that I perform. As the domain of the recognition of the "whole self," conscience—and by extension religion—enables an awareness of the "inside" of action (subjectivity), the internal dimension of motivation that law must disregard. Conscience and religion, hence, represent the standpoint that recognizes the necessity, but insufficiency, of law—that is, of any account of human selfhood that is strictly universal. Conscience and religion declare, that is, that universality could never be absolute; they affirm the irreducibility of human selfhood to the universal structures of politics.

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agents in the real world neither choose their conceptions of the good nor occupy a universalistically impartial moral standpoint," often fail to appreciate the intrinsic universality of partial communities; hence, they argue, because "moral agency is thus 'situated' and 'particularistic,'" an "impartial reflection on the conception of the good that constitutes it is undesirable, if not impossible" (Ibid., 1). For Hegel, as we have seen, while a reflective stance on one's values or sense of the good is always "situated," the orientation toward universality (that is, communication) of such a stance is neither impossible nor undesirable. For a challenge to communitarianism in Hegelian terms, see Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 192-198.

2. Religion and public reason

We have been exploring the fact that human life is shaped and enabled by interrelated, but distinct, spheres of recognition: in addition to being political subjects, whose activities are enabled and protected by universal structures of law, we are also members of particular ethical communities and answerable to the "call" of our own singular individuality. When political systems ignore or fail to appreciate these other dimensions of human selfhood—thematized above as spheres of value—they not only fail to acknowledge certain essential aspects of persons, but they also risk intruding on these other value-spheres in asserting their own, opposed systems of values. The political insight represented by liberalism, that all persons deserve equal recognition as rational self-determining agents, can, in certain applications, have precisely illiberal—that is, oppressive or unfair—consequences, to the extent that it portrays as non-rational those domains of non-self-determination (i.e., domains of value) that contribute to our sense of self-identity. In order properly to support human freedom, then, the domain of politics must recognize the essential contribution to human freedom of those systems of value that define human agency prior to and beyond individual self-determination.[40]

I want now to move beyond the rather abstract discussion of the previous subsection and apply what we have been noticing about politics, law, and value to the question of the public significance of religion. Religion is especially illuminating of the tensions signaled above, as liberal theory often explicitly portrays religion as "other" to reason, that is, as a domain of heteronomy or external determination whose terms do not immediately satisfy the norms of rational self-determination recognized by politics. Conversely, and often from the perspective of religious persons, the supposedly neutral rational paradigms invoked in liberalism appear in fact to serve particular interests and values in precisely *non*-neutral ways. What political liberalism asserts as a neutral matter of law is often experienced by citizens as a charged matter of value, a challenge to the terms of my self-determined freedom rather than a mechanism that enables it.

In light of such tensions, modern political thought has been preoccupied with the question of the place of religion among autonomous political institutions. Especially for theorists who recognize the persistence of religious beliefs and practices in modernity, the issue of "religion in public" is a major concern, to the extent that it poses a challenge to the narrative of

[40] Similarly, systems of value must recognize that, in making this contribution, they are answerable to the same standard as politics. Hence, religion too becomes self-destructive and/or oppressive when it fails to acknowledge its entry into the sphere of the political, that politics is the actualization of its own principle. I will return to this theme in the third section below.

modernization according to which the presence and influence of religion fades in the wake of processes of rationalization and secularization. The question for such theorists is: how to uphold the liberal commitment to inclusivity with respect to religion while also preserving the rational—in the sense of "public" and "accessible"—nature of the political institutions that govern modern democratic societies. In this section of the chapter, I want to consider the views of two such philosophers—Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls—whose ongoing debate regarding the place of religion in public is in many ways exemplary of the approach to religion taken by liberal theorists. Rawls, who advances the norm of "public reason" as the deliberative duty assumed by citizens of democratic states, argues that public discussion can remain open to the contribution of religious voices on the condition that arguments made from a religious perspective be supplemented by "proper political reasons." Habermas, whose appreciation of the political relevance of religion is stronger than that of Rawls, worries about the potential restrictiveness of Rawls' framework and proposes certain clarifications and adjustments to Rawls' vision of public reason. However, as I show, despite Habermas' intent to encourage the inclusivity toward religion of political liberalism, his own proposed framework rests on presuppositions that in fact work against this inclusivity and conceal a deeper interrelation of the religious and the political that liberalism tends to overlook. By contrast, the Hegelian-phenomenological approach advanced in the present study exposes the presuppositions of the liberal framework, the short-sightedness of which inaccurately portrays the relation of religion and politics as one between two distinct forms of discourse—that of "faith" and "reason," for example—in which *one* has privilege.

2.1. Habermas and the rational foundation of the liberal democratic state

Habermas' essay "Religion in the Public Sphere" addresses the following basic question: "How does the constitutional separation of state and church influence the role which religious traditions, communities and organizations are allowed to play in civil society and the political public sphere, above all in the political opinion and will formation of citizens themselves?"[41] From one angle, it should not surprise that Habermas, whom Eduardo Mendieta calls a "consummate Enlightenment figure,"[42] is concerned with what role the secular, democratic state "allows" religion to play. For Habermas, as Westphal explains, the modernization of society

[41] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 119.
[42] Eduardo Mendieta, "Religion as Critique" in *The Frankfurt School on Religion*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.

corresponds to an increase in the reliance on reason, which "defines itself through its refusal to allow tradition to be self-validating," a refusal represented vividly by religious traditions that organize themselves around the authority of some transcendent, self-validating, "rationally impenetrable given."[43] While the question of religion remains a live one in modernity, it is nevertheless obvious, for Habermas, that all sides—the democratic state especially—must "get along without" God.[44] From another angle, however, the privilege of reason in modernity does not prevent Habermas from appreciating the ethical and political significance of certain religious traditions, nor from recognizing those instances in which reason has been enriched and pushed to self-transformation by the influence of religious notions. For example, the "biblical vision of salvation," he explains, contains a "political element" of collective liberation that marks its common cause with "those impulses towards freedom which have characterized modern European history." Hence, "without [the] subversion of Greek metaphysics by notions of authentically Jewish and Christian origin, we could not have developed that network of specifically modern notions which come together in the thought of a reason which is both communicative and historically situated."[45]

Thus, Habermas thinks, the public political sphere ought to welcome the contribution of religious traditions and communities insofar as they make an important, *sui generis* contribution to the moral fabric of political life. Yet this welcome is nevertheless offered in a context of cultural and religious pluralism, one in which the democratic state must legitimize itself as neutrally inclusive of all non-political worldviews in the absence of any appeal to divine authority. In the absence of God, Habermas explains, "the assumption of a common human reason provides the epistemic basis for justifying a secular state that no longer depends on religious legitimation.[46] In this context of secular pluralism, all citizens ought to be able to

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[43] Merold Westphal, "Commanded Love and Moral Autonomy: The Kierkegaard-Habermas Debate," *Ethical Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1998): 268.

[44] While Habermas is hardly guilty of promoting a triumphalist secularism *against* religion, his way of framing the question above reminds us that he is never far from his insistence, against Max Horkheimer, that "the idea that it is vain to strive for unconditional meaning without God... [is] an instance of the metaphysics that not only philosophers but even theologians themselves must today get along without." Jürgen Habermas, "'To Seek to Salvage an Unconditional Meaning Without God is a Futile Undertaking': Reflections on a Remark of Max Horkheimer," in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 96.

[45] Jürgen Habermas, "Israel or Athens: Where does Anamnestic Reason Belong?" in *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 130, 132.

[46] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 120.

participate equally in the political arena, and the epistemic orientation of such participation is toward "rationally acceptable outcomes."[47]

But does this requirement to employ "common human reason" place religious communities and individuals at an unequal distance from the secular arena of public arguments? In response to such a question Habermas cites the intrinsic openness to religious views within the tradition of political liberalism. Indeed, the demand all citizens have "equal access" to the public sphere of political argument requires that the attitude toward religion exceed that of mere tolerance. Habermas writes:

> It is not enough to rely on the condescending indulgence of a secularized authority that comes to tolerate minorities who previously suffered discrimination. The parties *themselves* must come to an agreement on the precarious demarcations between the positive liberty to practice a religion of one's own and the negative liberty to remain unencumbered by the religious practices of others. If the principle of tolerance is to be above the suspicion of defining the *limits* of tolerance in an oppressive manner, then compelling reasons must be found for the definition of what can still be tolerated and what cannot, reasons equally acceptable to all sides. Fair arrangements can be found only if the parties involved also learn to adopt the perspectives of the others.[48]

Thus, if liberal democracy, whose basic character is the "successful participation in the shared practice of democratic self-determination," is to be accessible to all participants, then citizens must agree to adopt perspectives different from their own and express their positions in the language of universally acceptable reasons. These demands are to be felt by all participants equally, religious or not: "In a secular state, only those political decisions can count as legitimate that can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words, that can be justified equally toward religious and nonreligious citizens and citizens of different confessions."[49]

2.2. Rawls' political liberalism: Reciprocity, public reason, and the proviso

In offering this account of democratic legitimacy, Habermas claims to be articulating a view consistent with the conceptual foundations of "well-ordered," democratic societies articulated in Rawls' *Political Liberalism*. One of the central tenets of Rawls' work, as indicated by its title, is that the conceptions of justice that found and stabilize democratic societies—for example, Rawls' own "justice as fairness"—are themselves the product of a strictly *political* consensus among citizens, and not a consensus at the level of citizens' deeper beliefs and

[47] Ibid., 121.
[48] Ibid., 120-121.
[49] Ibid., 122.

convictions. As he explains in the original introduction to *Political Liberalism*, Rawls' earlier work *A Theory of Justice* failed to distinguish between "a moral doctrine of justice general in scope" and "a strictly political conception of justice," and, in requiring a consensus among citizens' basic moral, philosophical, and religious views, offered an "unrealistic idea of a well-ordered society."[50] For Rawls, the multiplication of "reasonable"[51] views about the fundamental human good in democratic societies renders this sort of consensus impossible, in which case the foundations for a well-ordered democratic society must be sought elsewhere. The goal of *Political Liberalism*, therefore, is to offer a theoretical model for a well-ordered society that is "adjusted to the fact of reasonable pluralism,"[52] and hence that does not assume that all citizens of a democratic society will endorse the same conception of justice at the level of their deepest beliefs and views about the nature of the good and how they ought to live.

Rawls insists that the essential conception of "justice as fairness" itself does not differ between the two texts. The problem that *Political Liberalism* is meant to correct, rather, is the requirement, implicit in *A Theory of Justice*, that "all… citizens endorse [the same] conception on the basis of what I now call a comprehensive philosophical doctrine."[53] Between the two texts, then, the conception of justice that is intended to be the theoretical object of consensus for a well-ordered society is transformed from a comprehensive doctrine into "a *political* conception of justice that applies to the basic structure of society."[54] By "political" here Rawls means "freestanding," that is, endorsed and legitimized by citizens independently of the various and diverse comprehensive doctrines to which they are committed. As Rawls writes, "while we want a political conception to have a justification by reference to one or more comprehensive doctrines, it is neither presented as, nor as derived from, such a doctrine applied to the basic

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[50] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xv-xvi.

[51] The term "reasonable pluralism" refers not only to the evident diversity of comprehensive doctrines about the good, but also to the fact that the majority of these doctrines are *reasonable*, that is, Rawls explains, compatible with "the essentials of a democratic regime" (Ibid., xvi). I explore Rawls' designation of comprehensive doctrines as reasonable below.

[52] Ibid., xxxi. As Charles Larmore explains, "reasonable pluralism is the condition we should expect to thrive under free institutions, where in the absence of state power enforcing any particular doctrine the burdens of judgment drive people's thinking in different directions." Charles Larmore, "Public Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 378.

[53] Ibid., xvi. As Sebastiano Maffettone writes, "the critical revision of the theory of stability of *A Theory of Justice*, leading to the formulation of the concept of a comprehensive doctrine in *Political Liberalism*, … derives from an attempt to partially separate the political acceptability of an institutional arrangement from the particular ethical or religious doctrine on which it is usually based." Sebastiano Maffettone, *Rawls: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 221. "Comprehensive doctrines" are the moral, philosophical, and religious conceptions that determine at the broadest and most basic level the ideas of truth and the good to which individuals subscribe. I discuss Rawls' definition of comprehensive doctrines in more detail above, Chapter Two, Section 3.

[54] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xli. Emphasis mine.

structure of society, as if this structure were simply another subject to which that doctrine applied."[55] In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls no longer assumes, on the basis of a rational agreement in the original position, that "over time the senses of justice and the views of the good of the citizens of a well-ordered society are to coincide."[56] Rather, consensus is sought in such a way that political institutions can gain the support of all (reasonable) citizens without interfering in their inevitably diverse "deeper" (that is, ethical or metaphysical) views of the true and the good.[57]

As Rawls explains, whereas "publicity" was always a key feature of any consensus about principles of justice in *A Theory of Justice*, the adjustment of his theory of justice to the fact of pluralism and the political limitations of consensus among citizens elevates publicity into a political ideal in its own right. Since citizens' endorsement of principles of justice cannot be derived from their more basic view about the good, citizens must endorse publicity *itself* as an essential dimension of a well-ordered institutional structure. Whereas previously, for Rawls, "publicity" referred more or less to the visibility or accessibility of political decision-making, "now [in *Political Liberalism*] the virtue which principles of justice have in being affirmable from a common point of view is made part of the very idea of publicity. Principles public in this strong sense should be our goal [Rawls] argues because a well-ordered society rests upon fair terms of cooperation to which free and equal persons could agree."[58] Citizens who offer each other "fair terms of cooperation" thus value publicity—in the "strong sense"—for its own sake, independently of their comprehensive views; they are, in this way, receptive to what Rawls calls the "criterion of reciprocity,"[59] according to which citizens with differing basic moral outlooks

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[55] Ibid., 12.
[56] Ibid., 219.
[57] Ibid., 212. Rawls describes this as an "overlapping consensus," in which citizens' collectively endorse a conception of justice from a variety of comprehensive points of view, which themselves may or may not overlap. Endorsement in this case indicates *partial* consent: citizens communicate according to what they consider to be the most reasonable conception of justice, even if there is no consensus about what this conception ought to be, and even if "fair cooperation" with others requires that one set aside one's own views about what ought to be done in a given situation. Describing this sort of "agreement-within-disagreement," Maffettone writes that "when the veil of ignorance is raised and the parts enter the field of non-ideal theory, citizens may realize that the principles of justice that they decided upon in the original position do not correspond to their actual profound ethical and religious views, and yet, if the liberal-democratic regime in which they live seems legitimized in liberal-democratic terms, they may still give some support to it" (Maffettone, *Rawls*, 220).
[58] Larmore, "Public Reason," 375.
[59] It is this commitment to the "reciprocity" of the reasoning process itself that ensures the stability of an overlapping—that is, limited—consensus: even in the midst of deep disagreement, all citizens agree to treat each other fairly according to a conception of justice that all can agree is, at the very least, reasonable, even if they do not agree that it is the *most* reasonable conception. As Rawls writes, "citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms

accept that they ought to treat others fairly according to what they—and what they imagine others—would consider the most reasonable terms of cooperation.[60]

Following the elevated status of the "public" character of political engagement, *Political Liberalism* introduces the idea of "public reason" as one of a number of concepts required to support agreement about political conceptions of justice and social order in the context of irreducibly plural, and potentially conflicting, values. At the heart of the idea of public reason, for Rawls, is the recognition of one's responsibility to present one's point of view in the form of reasons that one thinks others are able to accept, that is, to include others in the process of reasoning towards decisions regarding matters of justice.[61] When "citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines," Rawls insists, "they need to consider what kinds of reasons they may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake."[62] This act of reason-giving, moreover, represents a commitment to a shared project of deliberation in which participants accept to deprioritize their own most basic views for the sake of the collective reasoning process itself. As Larmore writes, "in a well-ordered society, citizens do not determine basic matters of justice by announcing to one another the conclusions they each have derived from their own first principles"; rather, "they reason from what they understand to be a common point of view; their aim is to adjudicate disagreements by argument."[63] For Rawls, citizens of democratic states have a "duty of civility" to engage in public reason, one that requires them to offer reasons that they think will be acceptable to all, and hence that rules out from the start any form of reasoning that issues directly from a person's comprehensive views. Of course, Rawls acknowledges, comprehensive doctrines cannot be wholly detached from citizens' understanding of political matters;[64] however, a strictly *political* consensus requires

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of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice; and when they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that other citizens also accept those terms. The criterion of reciprocity requires that when those terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position. Citizens will of course differ as to which conceptions of political justice they think the most reasonable, but they will agree that all are reasonable, even if barely so" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 446).

[60] Ibid., xlv.

[61] In this way, reason is "public" not simply in the sense that reasonable dialogue is performed in the presence of many, but in the sense that that the reasoning process is qualitatively accessible, transparent, and inclusive.

[62] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 441.

[63] Larmore, "Public Reason," 377.

[64] One consequence of accepting the fact of reasonable pluralism, Rawls says, is that the influence of a persons' comprehensive doctrines on his or her political engagement cannot be entirely erased, regardless of how genuinely this persons endorse the political conception for political reasons. He writes that once we accept reasonable

only that citizens communicate on the basis of what *they think* are the most reasonable terms, not that all citizens actually agree in the same way on what terms are the most appropriate for public discussion. As Rawls writes, a citizen responds to this duty of civility "when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens might also reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse."[65]

In more concrete terms, the demand of public reason is satisfied when citizens think of themselves "*as if they were legislators* and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact."[66] As Rawls explains,

> when, on a constitutional essential or matter of basic justice, all appropriate government officials act from and follow public reason, and when all reasonable citizens think of themselves ideally as if they were legislators following public reason, the legal enactment expressing the opinion of the majority is legitimate law. It may not be thought the most reasonable, or the most appropriate, by each, but it is politically (morally) binding on him or her as a citizen and is to be accepted as such. Each thinks that all have spoken and voted at least reasonably, and therefore all have followed public reason and honored their duty of civility.[67]

In other words, citizens participate in public reason by holding themselves accountable to the same requirements of a public official—namely, to affirm or criticize a given law or decision in the form of reasons that they imagine other citizens will understand and accept. As Rawls writes, "when firm and widespread, the disposition of citizens to view themselves as ideal legislators, and to repudiate government officials and candidates for public office who violate public reason, is one of the political and social roots of democracy."[68] In this way, the democratic process is thus sustained not only by public officials who facilitate the legal process and explain their reasons for supporting political positions, but also by citizens who, imagining themselves as part of this legal process, are prepared to contribute to political decisions on the basis of a common commitment to "good faith" reason-giving.

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pluralism, "then we assume that, in an ideal overlapping consensus, each citizen affirms both a comprehensive doctrine and the focal political conception, somehow related. In some cases the political conception is simply the consequence of, or continuous with, a citizens' comprehensive doctrine; in others it may be related as an acceptable approximation given the circumstances of the social world." Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xix. Political liberalism does not require that comprehensive doctrines cease to inform a person's political engagement; it demands rather that persons express themselves with reasons they think others will accept, according to a shared political conception of justice.

[65] Ibid., 450.

[66] Ibid., 444-445.

[67] Ibid., 446.

[68] Ibid., 445.

Rawls insists that the process of reasoning in public is considerably flexible and open-ended: there is a plurality of possible political conceptions through which to ground public debate, and none of these conceptions are determined in advance of the process of public reasoning that leads to their identification. "There are many liberalisms," writes Rawls, "and therefore many forms of public reason specified by a family of reasonable political conceptions."[69] However, this process also has certain limits. Any political conception of justice—and Rawls is careful to insist that his own conception of justice as fairness is just one of the many that may arise out of the original position—will be relevant only to a limited set of public and institutional matters,[70] and is justifiable independently of any non-political doctrine. In addition to being "freestanding," Rawls explains, such conceptions pertain only to the social, political, and economic institutions that comprise what he calls the "basic structure" of society, and are limited in content to issues arising in the "public political culture" of a society, as distinct from the "background culture" that comprises the many associations and communities within society more broadly.[71] Public reason, likewise, is restricted to questions arising in the "public political forum," which Rawls associates with courts of law, governmental and legislative institutions, and the electoral process. For this reason, the demand of public reason applies most readily to judges, government officials, and electoral candidates—persons who, as official members of the public political forum, represent citizens and take part in the establishment and interpretation of law.[72] Yet even citizens who do not occupy such official positions are expected to respect the "appropriately political"[73] parameters of public reason. As Rawls says, "the content of public reason is given by the principles and values of the family of liberal political

[69] Ibid., 450. Rawls admits that even his own proposed method—the original position—is only one among many possible ways to arrive at conceptions of justice.
[70] Rawls defines these as "matters of basic justice" related to the institutional arrangement of society, as well as "constitutional essentials" related to the definition and protection of basic rights and liberties (Ibid., 442).
[71] Ibid., 13-14. The standard of public reason—that is, reciprocity—does not apply, says Rawls, to the many associations, communities, and activities that make up the "background culture" of civil society, since decisions made here do not have legal force in society as a whole and, hence, there is no obligation to argue on the basis of a reasonable political conception. —i.e., one is not obligated here to clarify, for the sake of reciprocity and mutual understanding, the "political" principle of one's reasoning. This is not to say, however, that there is no relation between "public political" and "background" cultures. Rawls' point, rather, is that participation in processes of reasoning about questions of fundamental political justice requires that one step outside, to an extent, one's background culture and enter the political forum by offering reasons that satisfy the ideal of reciprocity.
[72] Such officials, Rawls says, are most effectively positioned to realize the *idea* of public reason, which occurs "whenever judges, legislators, chief executives, and other government officials, as well as candidates for public office, act from and follow this idea of public reason and explain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political questions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable" (Ibid., 444).
[73] Ibid., xix.

conceptions of justice meeting these conditions,"[74] and so citizens engaged in public reason must appeal to political conceptions that are limited accordingly. They must, in short, offer "appropriately political" reasons in support of their positions, especially where such positions are informed by their particular comprehensive doctrine.

It is in the context of the limits of public reason that Rawls addresses religion. In insisting on the strictly "political" limits of public discussion of matters of justice, Rawls claims that he is not promoting a kind of "secular reason," by which he means "reasoning in terms of comprehensive nonreligious doctrines."[75] For Rawls, the strictly political parameters of democratic consensus and the public reasoning that sustains it disqualifies reason-giving that is articulated in the terms of *any* "comprehensive doctrine," regardless of whether such a doctrine is explicitly religious or not.[76] "Secular" reasoning, which may present itself in the terms of a moral or philosophical comprehensive doctrine, transgresses the necessary limitations of a political liberalism as much as arguing in religious terms; hence, a simple switchover from "religious" to "nonreligious" terms may nevertheless fall short of the ideal of public reason, if there is no appropriate transition from the comprehensive to the political level. Rawls' aim is neither to discourage religious belief or practice, nor to discourage citizens who practice religion from engaging in public reason, but rather to outline the terms through which citizens who live out of any form of comprehensive doctrine can engage in public reason with respect to fundamental political issues. Indeed, Rawls' ultimate concern is to establish how religious persons can be "wholehearted members of a democratic society who endorse society's intrinsic political ideals and values," and in this way can endorse the liberal democracy in which they live "for the right reasons."[77] It is insufficient, Rawls thinks, for citizens holding religious doctrines to accept a constitutional democratic regime on the basis of a *modus vivendi*—that is, as a temporary or conditional agreement that one would hope to see altered or removed as

[74] Ibid., 453.
[75] As Rawls writes, "we must distinguish public reason from what is sometimes referred to as secular reason and secular values. These are not the same as public reason. For I define secular reason as reasoning in terms of comprehensive nonreligious doctrines. Such doctrines and values are much too broad to serve the purposes of public reason. Political values are not moral doctrines, however available or accessible these may be to our reason and common sense reflection. Moral doctrines are on a level with religion and first philosophy. By contrast, liberal political principles and values, although intrinsically moral values, are specified by liberal political conceptions of justice and fall under the category of the political." (Ibid., 452)
[76] Rawls thus distinguishes his political liberalism from a of "comprehensive" liberalism that aims to replace religious views with secular ones: "Political liberalism is not a form of Enlightenment liberalism, that is, a comprehensive liberal and often secular doctrine founded on reason and viewed as suitable for the modern age now that the religious authority of Christian ages is said to be no longer dominant. Political liberalism has no such aims" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxxviii).
[77] Ibid., 458-459.

circumstances change. Religious citizens endorse constitutional democracy for the *wrong* reasons when, in order to maintain social stability and avoid conflict, they suspend their wishes to establish a religious hegemony and "acquiesce" to the authority of political ideals. Things are similar, says Rawls, with religious citizens who limit their endorsement of democratic values in order to protect their religious doctrine from "losing ground" with respect either to influence or number.[78] On Rawls's view, citizens should accept the ideals of constitutional democracy for their own sake, even where such acceptance prevents them from insulating their doctrines against decline or being otherwise affected by political obligations. Only here can it be certain that the constitutional regime is stable for the right reasons, that is, because citizens agree to treat each other according to the ideal of reciprocity, without harboring any desire to "win the world for the whole truth."[79] "While no one is expected to put his or her religious or nonreligious doctrine in danger," says Rawls, "we must each give up forever the hope of changing the constitution so as to establish our religion's hegemony, or of qualifying our obligations so as to ensure its influence and success."[80]

How, then, can religious citizens endorse a democratic regime for the "right" reasons and participate in public reason in a politically "appropriate" way? More specifically, how are religious citizens to avoid feeling as though the conditions of public reason entail "lost ground" with respect to their ability to contribute to political discussion according to their own convictions? Rawls' answer to such questions is as follows:

> reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support. This injunction… specifies public political culture as distinct from the background culture.[81]

Rawls admits that this response, which he identifies as a "proviso" regarding religious comprehensive doctrines, leaves many questions unanswered, insisting that "the details about how to satisfy this proviso must be worked out in practice and cannot feasibly be governed by a clear family of rules given in advance."[82] Despite its vagueness, however, the intent of the proviso is clear: arguments motivated by a comprehensive doctrine can be included in political

[78] Ibid., 458-460.
[79] Ibid., 442.
[80] Ibid., 460.
[81] Ibid., 462.
[82] Ibid., 462.

discussion so long as they are made to satisfy the conditions of public reason by, in a timely fashion, being supplemented with "proper political reasons." There is considerable freedom, Rawls says, with respect to how religious or nonreligious doctrines *themselves* are expressed; such doctrines, however, become politically relevant only where their justification is given in the terms of a reasonable political conception of justice to which citizens have committed themselves in response to the reciprocity condition.

2.3. Habermas' "institutional translation proviso"

On the surface, Rawls's proviso appears to promote the inclusion of religious (and otherwise "comprehensive") view in political discourse: religious doctrines can enter public political discussion on the simple conditions that they endorse the constitutional regime for the right reasons and are in due course presented in the form of properly political reasons. Is it the case, though, that all religious citizens are prepared to satisfy these conditions? Do the reasons for which such citizens endorse the democratic nature of the state necessarily and immediately resemble the "right" reasons represented by legislators and state officials?[83] More importantly, perhaps, do religious citizens have access to ready-made political reasons that can stand in for their religious doctrines when they choose to engage in public reason? In the end, it is not clear that Rawls can assure against his proviso being employed in the service of an "overly narrow, supposedly secularist definition of the political role of religion,"[84] one that compromises the liberal values of inclusivity and fairness that the "strictly political" character of public discourse is meant to protect.

Habermas raises doubts about the conditions of Rawls' "proviso" along precisely these lines in "Religion in the Public Sphere." For Habermas, it is clear neither that citizens whose religious faith is integral to their self-understanding are *able* to satisfy the requirements of public reason according to Rawls's proviso, nor that such citizens *ought* to bear this burden, even if they

[83] As I discuss in more detail in the conclusion to this chapter, it would appear that Rawls does expect such a resemblance, as suggested by his designation of some comprehensive doctrines as "reasonable" (and in for the most part discussing only these "reasonable comprehensive doctrines" in connection with his idea of public reason). Here, though, Rawls' account is ambiguous, and possibly circular, suggesting that comprehensive doctrines are compatible with public reason simply because they themselves are "reasonable," and hence that citizens who adhere to such comprehensive doctrines will immediately feel obligated to communicate in the terms of public reason because of the reasonable nature of their comprehensive beliefs. However, Rawls provides little assurance that citizens possess the will or desire to present their reasoning in transparent and accessible terms, seeming to presume that citizens will affirm the idea of public reason as in their own interests. Nevertheless, I take Hegel's account to offer a possible route towards justifying Rawls' confidence, in a way that differs from the approach taken by Habermas.

[84] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 123.

could. For religious persons, he writes, "genuine faith is not merely a doctrine, something believed, but is also a source of energy that the person of faith taps into performatively to nurture her whole life."[85] Since it is doubtful, therefore, whether persons of faith are able to provide alternate reasons for the beliefs that they hold, Rawls's proviso proves too restrictive if it demands that believers, whose very practical and cognitive abilities are shaped by a religious doctrine, adopt an artificial, "political" identity in order to participate in public discussion. Nor is it clear, though, that the liberal state even *ought* to require citizens to engage in public discussion in alternative terms. As he argues, "a state cannot encumber its citizens, to whom it guarantees freedom of religion, with duties that are incompatible with pursuing a devout life."[86] For Habermas, if the liberal state is "secular" in the sense that it remains neutrally open to all forms of life, religious or not, then "we cannot infer from the secular character of the state a direct personal obligation on all citizens to supplement their publicly expressed religious convictions by equivalents in a generally accessible language."[87] Modern democracy must be oriented toward facilitating the political participation of religious persons *as religious persons*, without forcing them to distance themselves inauthentically from their convictions.

At the same time, for Habermas, the religious citizen of a liberal society must recognize that she "no longer lives as a member of a religiously homogeneous population within a religiously legitimated state."[88] Liberal democracies are and must remain secular; hence, while the conditions of political participation must not outrightly exclude or unfairly burden religious persons, no politically engaged religious person can overlook the demand to offer generally accessible reasons when arguing in public. All must acknowledge, Habermas writes, that "in a secular state, only those political decisions can count as legitimate that can be impartially justified in the light of generally accessible reasons, in other words, that can be justified equally toward religious and nonreligious citizens and citizens of different confessions."[89] "On the liberal conception," he writes further, the state guarantees citizens freedom of religion so long as they, "accept not only the separation of church and state, but also the restrictive definition of the public use of reason."[90]

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[85] Ibid., 127.
[86] Ibid., 126.
[87] Ibid., 129
[88] Ibid., 129
[89] Ibid., 122.
[90] Ibid., 123.

Here, Habermas finds it necessary to propose a refinement to Rawls' proviso. If the supplementation of religious views with properly political reasons is not the "personal" responsibility of religious citizens, it must be clear on whom this demand ought to fall:

> [The] liberal state, which expressly protects such [religious] forms of existence as a basic right, cannot at the same time expect of *all* citizens in addition to justify their political positions independently of their religious convictions or worldviews. This strict demand can only be made of politicians operating within state institutions who have a duty to remain neutral among competing worldviews, in other words of all those who hold a public office or are candidates for such.[91]

In one sense, Habermas' revision of the proviso reproduces the "strictly political" limitations of Rawls' liberal theory and its central tenets (such as public reason): citizens are required to use "public" reasons only when arguing on the basis of a political conception of justice about the basic institutional structure of society. However, what for Rawls is a difference between forms of communication[92] is for Habermas a difference between institutional spaces, one that produces distinct responsibilities for those who (e.g., politicians) represent or operate within them, and whose "threshold" is traversed by processes of "translation." Habermas' central proposal is the following:

> The liberal state must not transform the necessary *institutional* separation between religion and politics into an unreasonable *mental* and *psychological* burden for its religious citizens. It must, however, expect them to recognize the principle that the exercise of political authority must be neutral toward competing worldviews. Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold separating the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations. This only calls for the epistemic ability to consider one's own religious convictions reflexively from the outside and to connect them with secular views. Religious citizens can certainly recognize this "institutional translation proviso" without having to split their identity into public and private parts the moment they participate in public discourses. They should therefore also be allowed to express and justify their

[91] Ibid., 128.

[92] Rawls writes that "a domain is not a kind of space, or place, but rather is simply the result, or upshot, of how the principles of political justice are applied, directly to the basic structure and indirectly to the associations within it" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 471). The political domain, for Rawls, is not a distinct space, but rather something activated whenever political conceptions of justice are taken up in the appropriate way. Habermas, by contrast, appears continually to use the language of "entering in" and "spheres" in describing political engagement: "The truth contents of religious contributions can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e., in the political public sphere itself" (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 131). In terms of Rawls' proviso, then, we can think of the act of providing properly political reasons for one's position, not as marking one's entrance into a new political sphere, but simply as one's transition into a different form of speech or argumentation. In satisfying the conditions of public reason with respect to comprehensive doctrines one does not submit oneself to the language and restrictions of a foreign space. One satisfies these conditions, rather, by submitting oneself to the requirements of reciprocity that issue from one's comprehensive doctrine, insofar as this doctrine is reasonable.

> convictions in a religious language even when they cannot find secular "translations" for them.[93]

Habermas thus emphasizes the secular nature of the modern democratic state while at the same time minimizing the strain felt by religious individuals and communities when they act politically. The demand to provide secular reasons for one's convictions is one facing "every citizen," whether one is a "religious citizen" or not.[94] In order to avoid, moreover, the impression that this demand weighs more heavily on persons of faith, Habermas insists that the "institutional translation proviso" facing religious citizens corresponds to an equally taxing epistemic obligation for secular persons to imaginatively step into the perspective of religious citizens. He writes: "whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the translation proviso, by way of compensation secular citizens must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments."[95] It is this dual demand—the "translation proviso" placed on religious persons and the "open mind proviso" placed on secular persons—that allows the secular state to remain principally neutral, and thus open, toward all forms of life. In short, "citizens of a democratic polity owe one another good reasons for their political positions," and this is an obligation faced by all citizens alike.[96]

In his reformulation of Rawls' proviso, Habermas articulates a political liberalism that does not simply tolerate, but in fact insists on the inclusion of religious voices.[97] For the sake of

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[93] Ibid., 130.

[94] Notably, Rawls does not distinguish between religious and secular citizens.

[95] Ibid., 132. The appropriate secular attitude for a post-secular society must be informed by an understanding of reason as non-autonomous, and rational public language as having a rich, diverse and (in part) religious heritage. Habermas writes that post- metaphysical thought's "ambivalent attitude to religion corresponds exactly to the epistemic attitude that secular citizens must adopt if they are to be prepared to learn something from the contributions of their religious counterparts to public debates which are potentially translatable into a generally accessible language" (143). Willingness to learn and have an open mind means more than accommodating persons of faith within the public sphere of "good reasons;" it also means understanding the heterogeneous constitution of "good reason" itself.

[96] Ibid., 132. Habermas adds that even "mono-glot" citizens, who are unable to formulate their opinion in anything other than their religious language, need not be excluded from politics, since they, being fully aware of their place in a pluralist society, can be "confident that their fellow-citizens will cooperate in producing a translation" (Ibid., 130).

[97] Habermas' reasons for insisting that the secular state remain inclusive of religious persons go well beyond the principle of state neutrality. Behind his reformulation of Rawls' proviso is the view that "without a successful translation the substantive content of religious voices has no prospect of being taken up into the agendas and negotiations within political bodies and of gaining a hearing in the broader political process" (Ibid., 132). Indeed, at many points in his discussion Habermas appears to encourage the inclusion religion in the political sphere, thus broadening the epistemic burden faced by secular citizens. "What is at stake is not a respectful sensibility for the possible existential significance of religion for some other person, something also expected of secular citizens, but a

its own vitality and enrichment, Habermas writes, the state ought to maintain the "polyphonic complexity of public voices."[98] That is, the state "must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves *as such* in the political arena, for it cannot be sure that secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity."[99] Yet, it is questionable whether Habermas, despite the valuable "resources" he sees in religion, successfully overcomes the potential restrictiveness to religion that he detects in Rawls' account. Consider the following claims: "Secular citizens," Habermas writes, "or those of other religious persuasions can also learn something from religious contributions under certain circumstances, for example, when they recognized buried intuitions of their own in the normative truth contents of a religious utterance." And further: "Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. . . [This] potential makes religious speech into a serious vehicle for possible truth contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language."[100] Sentences such as these clearly reflect Habermas' openness to the politically transformative semantic potential of religion. Yet, in framing this openness solely in terms of what the democratic process has to learn from religion—that is, in terms of what of its own "resources" reason can find in religion—Habermas reinforces the understanding of religion and reason as independent species' of meaning and truth, whose relation sees one such species (religion) become appropriated by the other (reason). But does it do justice to the intertwined genealogy of reason and religion simply to say—rather condescendingly—that reason is "prepared to learn from religion," or to suggest that, "under certain circumstances" secular persons should be willing to treat religion as "a serious vehicle" for truth content? Can the necessarily rational character of public communication in modern, secular politics be affirmed in a way that is not in the service of treating reason as an autonomous

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self-reflexive overcoming of a rigid and exclusive secularist self-understanding of modernity" (Ibid., 138). In the latter parts of his essay, Habermas points out the insufficiency of the understanding of secularism as entailing simply the tolerance of religious attitudes. Our modern "post-metaphysical" condition demands the very re-imagination of the intellectual constitution of liberal rationality, according to the "complex web of inheritance" of Western modernity (Ibid., 142). As Habermas says, "philosophy has repeatedly learned through its encounters with religious traditions—and also, of course, with Muslim traditions—that it receives innovative impulses when it succeeds in freeing cognitive contents from their dogmatic encapsulation in the crucible of rational discourse" (Ibid., 142). Hence, philosophy does itself a favor in "reject[ing]... a scientistically truncated conception of reason and the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason" (Ibid., 140).

[98] Ibid., 131.

[99] Ibid., 131.

[100] Ibid., 131.

sphere of truth and meaning into which the "normative truth contents of religion," stripped of their religious guise, might somehow fit?

In the end, there is little evidence that Habermas' additional translation requirement actually improves Rawls' formula for the inclusion of religious arguments in the public sphere,[101] and instead considerable evidence that Habermas has imposed his own theory of religion onto Rawls' proviso. As we have seen, Habermas's understanding of the relation between religion and the liberal state is informed by his "conviction that indispensable potentials for meaning are preserved in religious language, potentials that philosophy has not yet fully exhausted, has not yet translated into the language of public, that is of presumptively generally convincing, reasons."[102] For Habermas, as Darren Walhof points out, "religious language is not already part of the language of the public."[103] In his criticism of Habermas, Walhof argues is that the "translation requirement" placed on religious statements follows from Habermas's "presumption" that "religious reasons arise from a distinct area of human life and then are directed toward political matters, rather than taking shape as part of the social and political world."[104] According to Walhof, Habermas regards religion and public reason as more or less distinct—the former requiring translation into "generally convincing" reasons if it is to have any connection to politics, and the latter representing that self-enclosed, rational, and political domain into which religious contributions enter once they are translated.

Seeking to correct any imbalance of cognitive burdens felt by "secular" and "religious" citizens in public dialogue, Habermas argues that the demand to adapt (or to allow to be adapted) one's religious views to the rational standards of public discourse must be met by an equal demand that non-religious persons remain epistemically open to the potentially rational content of their fellow citizens' religious views. Although those with religious commitments may welcome the generosity and inclusivity of Habermas' proposal, however, it is not clear whether it truly corrects the imbalance. More to the point, it is possible that Habermas' philosophical commitments end up undermining the fairness he aims to achieve at the political level, insofar as his framing of the interrelation between reason and religion presents reason as an isolated

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[101] Which, to be sure, is ambiguous in its original formulation.
[102] Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 162.
[103] Darren Walhof, "Habermas, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Problem of Religion in Public Life," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2013), 11. Rawls, who articulates a theory of *reasonable* comprehensive doctrines, is in fact safer from this accusation than is Habermas.
[104] Ibid., 6.

discourse against which the potential value of religion is to be measured. Indeed, even as he "eschews the rationalist presumption" that "decide[s] which aspects of religious doctrines are rational and which irrational," the framework in which Habermas presents the relation between reason and religion nevertheless concerns what of religion "reason appropriates through translation."[105]

3. Reason, faith, and the confession of religion

In offering this challenge to Habermas' framework, my aim is not to reassert the privilege of religion against the "rationalist" tendencies of his argument, nor even to propose another way in which to balance the political burdens of secular and religious citizens. I argue, rather, that we ought to rethink the very framing of reason and religion as distinct forms of discourse that need to be negotiated and balanced politically. As we will see in our exploration of the dialectic of "faith" and "pure insight" in the "Culture" section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the simple opposition of religion and reason—and its alternates "faith and knowledge" or "religion and science"—is a derivative one. Because each stance represents a finite expression of one "totality of spirit," for Hegel the opposition between faith and reason in fact conceals a common source on which both depend and of which both are implicitly expressive. Hence, to deal with either pole of this opposition on its own is necessarily to deal with a partial reality, whose full significance is manifest when each acknowledges its dependence on the other. I will not offer a full overview of this "dialectic" in the following, but rather I will focus on its most relevant implication for our discussion—namely, that the capacity for rationality—understood here as intelligible communicability—is present on both sides of the opposition between faith and reason, and is not the property of either one alone. This insight is obviously significant for an understanding of reason, since, as Hegel shows, Enlightenment rationality shares an essential trait with the very attitude—faith—in opposition to which it defines itself. Our main concern, however, is faith's discovery of its underlying kinship with its opponent, and indeed its eventual recognition that its own purpose—devotion to God—is most properly fulfilled in a kind of rational project. Religion's adaptation to the demands of secularity, therefore, need not require that reason appropriate religious discourse; rather, there is an "intelligence" to religion itself, made evident whenever one's religious commitments are "faithfully"—that is, self-critically and conscientiously—expressed as a rational commitment to "the universal."

[105] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143.

3.1 Selfhood, alienation, and faith

Following his account of the breakdown of the harmonious ethical spirit of classical Greek society, Hegel's discussion of the opposition between "faith" and "pure insight" advances his account of the essential features of selfhood. Ethical society, to recall, was founded on the performance of habitual activities—customs—that speak of the immediate coincidence of individual agency and shared values, and was thus premised on the individual's conformity to her role in the social system. The inevitable collapse of such a society, which Hegel describes by following the drama of Sophocles' *Antigone*,[106] reflects the fact that individual selfhood by definition transcends any immediate coincidence with one's social surroundings that appears to be assigned by nature; as an inherently *interpretive* standpoint, selfhood is inherently beyond any such "natural" or "given" surroundings.[107] Indeed, for Hegel, the transcendence of such immediate, "natural" relations is an essential condition for any explicit coming-to-be-a-self: as we saw above, although the immediacy of particular ethical obligations provides an essential formative environment for the development of individual selfhood, as implicitly committed to the *universal*, selfhood is irreducible to such obligations.

However, the self-destruction of the ethical world is revelatory only of the singularity of the self who transcends her "natural" relations; the "universal" significance of this discovery of selfhood—the fact that the self who interprets is also the self who is rational—requires a further development:

> Now, just as the ethical world which is separated into divine and human law in their various forms… returns from that dividedness into its destiny, into the *self* as the *negative power* of this antithesis, so [the] two realms of the self-alienated spirit will also return into the *self*; but if the [ethical realm] was the first, merely *immediately* valid self, the single *person*, this second realm, which returns out of its externalization into itself, will be the *universal self*, the consciousness which has grasped its concept, and these spiritual worlds… will dissolve in *pure intellectual insight*. (361-362, M486)

In addition to the reality of selfhood as such—the "negative power" of discernment through which I am constitutively "beyond" my given surroundings—Hegel here speaks of a "universal

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[106] A helpful account of Hegel's use of *Antigone* to explicate the nature of ethical life is given in Karin de Boer, "Hegel's *Antigone* and the Tragedy of Cultural Difference," *Mosaic* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2008): 31-45.

[107] Ethical life, by contrast, is premised on the performance of one's social roles as if they were given by nature. As de Boer writes, "Hegel refers to the values that allow members of a particular community to identity with that community—and to act according to rules—as the sphere of ethical life. Insofar as a community relates to these values as handed down to it since time immemorial, this sphere presents itself as a natural product rather than as the result of rational deliberation" (Ibid., 35). De Boer's reference to rational deliberation here is opportune, as it is precisely our capacity to communicate and reason with others that, as I am arguing here, Hegel's discussion of faith and enlightenment adds to the discovery of interpretive agency in his discussion of ethical life.

self," according to which the interpretive nature of selfhood has the significance of "insight," that is, a universally recognizable claim to truth. As Hegel's account of the dialogue between faith and pure insight will show, our nature as interpretive beings calls us beyond the simple assertion of "our" way of seeing things, and thus to our responsibility to communicate with other interpretive beings in the shared domain of reason.[108]

To see how this is so, we should consider first Hegel's characterization of the world that succeeds the collapsed ethical spirit as "self-alienated spirit." Hegel describes as "alienated" [*entfremdet*] the self that embraces its particularity as an "absolutely discrete unit," detached from its natural, immediate surroundings (359, M484).[109] The alienation of discrete self-consciousness from its ethical substance not only expresses the inadequacy—that is, partiality—of ethical life, but also accomplishes an initial expression of self-conscious identity as a particular entity—a *person*—distinct from her social substance: "the actuality of the self that did not exist in the ethical world has been won by its return into the 'person'; what in the former was harmoniously one now emerges in a developed from, but as alienated from itself" (359, M483). The discrete personhood achieved here is *self*-alienated, moreover, since she assumes her identity as a particular person only by detaching herself from her own ethical substance, that is, her own most immediate communal bonds. As Hegel explains, this self-alienation is immediately doubled [*gedoppelte*] (363, M487), since her detachment from the "essence" she once called home produces a sense not only of the "actual," ethical world with which she has lost immediate contact, but also the "non-actual" world that contains the vision of her true, self-reconciled self—the "unity of self and essence" (360, M485)— that she cannot find "here."[110]

This vision of one's non-actual self, which represents the reconciliation of one's actual alienation from the world, Hegel identifies as faith. As he explains, the world of alienation "falls apart into a realm in which *self-consciousness* as well as its object is *actual*, and into another, the

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[108] Farneth helpfully characterizes the difference between the "ethical world" and the "self-alienated spirit" (of "culture") in terms of the emergence of the significance of intention and the need to offer reasons for one's action. "Antigone," Farneth writes, "did not attempt to answer the 'why' question, providing reasons for her action to Creon. Nor did Creon ask. In Greek *Sittlichkeit*, one acted the way one did simply because that was the way things were to be done. That is what makes that shape of spirit *immediate*. Faith and Enlightenment, by contrast, give reasons for their beliefs and actions, and they sense the need to give authoritative reasons" (Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 50).

[109] In the immediacy of ethical life, by contrast, "consciousness neither thinks of itself as *this particular self*, nor has substance the significance of an existence excluded from it, with which it would have to become united only by alienating itself from itself and at the same time producing the substance itself" (359, M484).

[110] According to Hegel, the distinction of "self" and "world" as discrete realities is a result of the alienation of self-consciousness; the external world, he explains, "obtains its existence through self-consciousness's *own* externalization and separation of itself from its essence" (360, M484).

realm of *pure* consciousness which, lying beyond the first, is not a present actuality but exists only for faith" (361, M486). Consequently, he continues,

> the world of [self-alienated] spirit breaks up into two. The first is the world of reality or of its self-alienation; but the other is that which spirit, rising above the first, constructs [*erbaut*] for itself in the aether of pure consciousness. This second world, standing in antithesis to that alienation, is for that very reason not free from it; on the contrary, it is really only the other form of that alienation which consists precisely in being conscious of two different worlds, and which embraces both. (362-363, M487)

But the second world "constructed" by faith is "not free" from the actual world for which it is meant to provide an alternative. The alienated self is no more at home in the "aether of pure consciousness" produced by faith than it is in its actual world, since faith is only the *imagined*—that is, non-actual—reconciliation of the self with its worldly "essence." Hence Hegel's precise definition of faith: "faith is certainly pure consciousness of essence," he writes, "and thus *is* thought—the cardinal factor in the nature of faith, which is usually overlooked" (394, M529); however, as a particular *kind* of thought, faith has its content "in *thought*, not in *concepts*, *in pure consciousness*, *not in pure self-consciousness*" (394, M529). As consciousness (and not *self*-consciousness), Hegel adds, faith "only *has*… thoughts, but as yet it does not *think* them, or is unaware that they are thoughts; they exist for consciousness in the form of *representation*. For it steps out of its actual world into pure consciousness, yet is itself generally still in the sphere of the actual world and its determinateness" (391, M527). Faith, therefore, is thinking at the level of *Vorstellung*, which represents itself in the form of an object—an "other"—constructed out of content derived from the actual world. Thus, because faith apprehends "an objective *being* which lies beyond the consciousness of the self," the "essence of faith is no longer a thought, but is reduced to the level of something imagined, and becomes a supersensible world which is essentially an '*other*' in relation to self-consciousness" (394, M529).

Although this representational character links faith to religion, Hegel is clear that faith constitutes only a partial appearance of the phenomenon of religion. In the context of alienated self-consciousness, Hegel explains, "it is not the self-consciousness of absolute being as it is *in* and *for itself*, not religion, that is here dealt with but faith, so far as this is a *flight* from the real world and thus is not *in* and *for itself*" (363, M487). Whereas religion, that is, accomplishes the comprehensive self-expression of absolute reality "in and for itself," faith, as a "flight" from reality—an "antithesis to actuality"—is, as Hegel says, "essentially merely a *belief* [*Glauben*]," a purely intellectual stance taken toward and object with which it claims to have no worldly contact (M528). In other words, whereas faith, in its orientation toward an object or standard that

transcends any norm that is simply "given,"[111] no doubt represents a kind of religious attitude, faith assumes this orientation in distinction from its actual world, and thus abstracts itself from its own practical, social, and material conditions.[112] This abstraction is the source of faith's conflict with pure insight, which subjects all claims to rational scrutiny, and which is especially intolerant of any attempt to locate the highest standards beyond the world of actuality. In the course of their interaction, each side is confronted with its one-sidedness, and faith in particular discovers not only that it shares a common nature with "secular" rationality but also that its worldly situation plays an essential role in its "construction" of its religious object. Despite its one-sidedness, though, we should also notice in faith the emergence of a kind of proto-conscientious religious expression, insofar as faith is, in a sense, the recognition of one's irreducibility to one's ethical and cultural surroundings, and thus shares with conscience the awareness of the interpretive priority of one's subjectivity with respect to all established standards and norms. Of course, the stance of faith, as self-alienated, is *not* the self of conscience, which, rather than fleeing from the world, recognizes in her worldly situation of action the appearance of the absolute standard from which she is precisely *not* alienated.[113] However, the self-transformative critique undergone by faith in its dialogue with pure insight (or enlightenment), I want to suggest, roughly parallels the process of recognition undergone by the

[111] This orientation towards rational standards is, rather obviously, true also of faith's opponent "enlightenment"; both, as Farneth explains, attempt to ground their position in a kind of universal norm (although they initially do not recognize this attempt as "common ground" between them): "What marks Faith and Enlightenment as modern shapes of spirit, in contrast to Greek *Sittlichkeit*, is their effort to find *grounds* for the authority of their social roles and norms. Both Faith and Enlightenment believe that the authority of their social roles and norms comes not from their givenness or immediacy but from their correspondence to a standard that is, in principle, available to any person at any time. When they reject the actual world in favor of the ether of pure consciousness, they reject tradition, social and political authorities, and other contingent grounds for their social roles and norms. They turn inward, seeking universal and timeless foundations for norms in religious faith or reason" (Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 45).

[112] Whereas religion gathers together "all reality" in the same exhaustive (and implicitly self-conscious) image (cf. M677), faith introduces a separation between the object of its consciousness and the real world, and thus falls short of the comprehensiveness of religious expression. As Farneth explains, faith is a particular religious stance that assigns authority and significance to its absolute object and its relation with this object, while denying the significance of the "worldly" activities through which it maintains this relation. "Central to faith's self-understanding," she writes, "is the notion that religious practices may be vehicles for reconciliation with the absolute without being essential or authoritative in themselves" (Ibid., 41).

[113] Further confirming this comparison, Williams identifies conscience as the form of experience that integrates the one-sided opponents of faith and enlightenment. The "failure of recognition between Enlightenment and Faith," he writes, "results from a one-sided dogmatic absolutizing of being-for-self (e.g., Enlightenment) and a dogmatic absolutizing of being-for-other (e.g., Faith). Such dogmatism leads each to exclude its opposite." In criticizing both "the abstract atomic individualism and humanism of the Enlightenment… and the abstract theology of faith," Hegel's "third alternative is conscience" (Williams, *Recognition*, 206).

conscientious agent,[114] enabling an interpretation of faith as the conscientious expression of one's religious context.

3.2. The (internal) dialogue of faith and pure insight

3.2.1. Faith as an interpretive standpoint

Faith and pure insight alike, Hegel explains, are "reflection[s] out of the world of culture" and into the "absolute movement and negativity" of their own standpoint as interpretive "being[s]-for-self," and in this way enable reflection on the nature of self-identity as such.[115] Hence, although faith places before itself—that is, *represents* to itself—an objective essence (i.e., God), the *form* of faith's alienation—namely, pure consciousness—is identical to that of the pure insight of enlightenment, which differs from faith solely by the fact that, unlike faith, it has no objective content.[116] Pure insight, therefore, is simply the one-sided assertion of the form of pure consciousness—of the "universal self"—that faith resists in its own one-sided way. As Hegel explains, "*pure insight* [is] the spiritual *process* which focuses itself in *self*-consciousness," revealing selfhood to be the principle behind all reality, "a process which is confronted by consciousness of what is positive, the form of objectivity or of representation, and which turns against it" (393-394, M529). These seemingly opposed stances are in fact expressions of an "undivided unity" and "belong in common to the element of pure consciousness" (394, M530). Hence, the attempt of each to assert its propriety as the true expression of pure consciousness is, as each side must learn, an expression of its essential interwovenness with the other.

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[114] See Chapter One, Section Three above.

[115] In contrast to the unreflective adherence to social norms characteristic of ethical life, the experience of alienation (out of which faith emerges) constitutes a *reflective* stance, for which the difference between its own stance as self and the world of "substance" is explicit and definitive. "Pure consciousness," Hegel writes, "is reflection out of the world of culture in such a way that the substance of that world, and also the 'masses' or groups into which it is articulated, are shown to be what they are in themselves, *spiritual* essentialities… Their essence, simple consciousness, is thus the simplicity of *absolute difference* which is at once no difference. Consequently, it is pure *being-for-self*, not as this *single* self but as the immanently *universal* self in the form of a restless process which attacks and pervades the passive essence of the 'matter at hand.' In it is thus to be found the certainty that at once knows itself to be truth, pure thought as the *absolute concept* in the might of its *negativity*, which eliminates everything objective that supposedly stands over against consciousness, and makes it into a being which has its origin in consciousness." (393, M529)

[116] "Pure insight has, therefore, in the first instance, no content of its own, because it is negative being-for-self; to faith, on the other hand, there belongs a content, but without insight." Cf. also an earlier remark: "Forced back into itself out of the essenceless, merely dissolving world, spirit, in accordance with its truth, is in an undivided unity, at once [as pure insight] the *absolute movement* and *negativity* of its process and manifestation, as well as [as faith] its inwardly *satisfied* essence and its positive *repose*" (394, M529).

In the course of the "struggle" that ensues between faith and pure insight (or "enlightenment"),[117] faith in particular learns that it plays an essential interpretive role in the construction of its absolute object, and hence that it cannot consistently maintain its attribution of all essential reality to this object. Faith's form of self-alienation, through which it detaches itself from its actual surroundings, is achieved by treating as "primary" the "*absolute being*, spirit that is in and for itself in so far as it is the simple eternal *substance*" (395, M532), and thus by treating as inessential all aspects of the finite, temporal world. This inessentiality applies especially to the standpoint of faith itself, since, as Hegel writes, faith "renounces its own *being-for-self*" in "giv[ing] complete liberty to absolute being, as well as to its parts, in the simple element of its thought" (402, M544). This self-renunciation is not a self-destruction, but rather is an attempt to achieve one's "true" self-identity in unity with the absolute being, in practices of self-abnegation through which one sets aside the material goods of the actual world. As Hegel points out, however, in its "obedience of service and praise" faith in fact "produces" this unity, and thus plays an essential and active role in giving shape both to the appearance of the absolute being and its relationship with it (396, M534[118]). In a sense, faith can take no other form, since the self-renunciating assignment of all reality and authority to God is nevertheless an *act*, through which one's devotion to one's absolute object is achieved and expressed necessarily through one's own activity as subject. As Georg Simmel writes, "to be one with God is conditioned in its very significance by being other than God," since it is *I*, who am *not* God, who is responsible for achieving this oneness.[119]

Hence, faith's claim to locate all essential reality in the eternal, absolute being is in fact a disavowal of its own significance as a *claim*, and faith fails to appreciate the extent to which the "tranquil self-identity" of its imagined unity with God is the product of its own thought and

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[117] M541-573; I will not review the details of Hegel's account of this struggle here. Helpful discussions are available in Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 39-45 and Daniel E. Shannon, "Hegel: On Modern Philosophy versus Faith," *Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4 (1996): 351-388.

[118] "This obedience of service and praise, by setting aside sense-knowledge and action, produces the consciousness of unity with the absolute being, though not as a unity that is actually perceived; on the contrary, this service is only the perpetual process of producing that unity, a process which does not completely attain its goal in the present" (396, M534).

[119] Simmel, "How is Society Possible?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: A Reader*, ed. Maurice Natanson (New York: Random House, 1963), 84. As Simmel writes further, "The religious man feels himself fully seized by the divine, as if he were merely a pulse-beat of its life. His own substance is given over unreservedly, if not in a mystical, undifferentiated fusion, to that of the absolute. But in spite of this, in order to give this fusion any significance whatsoever, he must preserve some sort of self-existence, some sort of personal encounter, a differentiated ego, for whom the absorption in this divine all-being is a never ending task. It is a process that neither would be possible metaphysically, nor could be felt religiously, if it did not start from the existence of the individual…" (Ibid., 84).

practice (394, M529).[120] This disavowal becomes the object of criticism for "pure insight," the correlate to faith's alienated standpoint that locates the essence of things, not in God, but in the critical capacities of human subjectivity.[121] "Seek[ing] to abolish every kind of independence other than that of self-consciousness," Hegel writes, pure insight launches an attack against faith, in an effort to reveal that the absolute object to which faith is devoted is, in fact, a product of its own thinking, that faith has constructed God in its own image (397, M536). Specifically, enlightenment argues that to "find one's true self" in an absolute, objective essence is to construe that essence according to the vision that one has about oneself, and hence that faith is as much an "act of consciousness" as itself. "Opposing faith," enlightenment "maintains that the absolute being of faith is a being of the believer's own consciousness *qua* a self, or that the absolute being is a *product* of consciousness" (419, M566). Hence, when faith "roundly asserts that the *in-itself* of absolute being is beyond the activity of consciousness," enlightenment just "reminds" faith of the mutually constitutive relationship it claims to have with the absolute being in entrusting all of itself to that being. For faith cannot deny that, while the absolute *does* possess "intrinsic being," this being is not merely an "alien thing" that faith discovers arbitrarily. Rather, as *trust*, "the faith of the believer consists just in his *finding* himself as *this* particular personal consciousness in the absolute being, and his obedience and service consist in producing, through his own *activity*, that being as *his own* absolute being" (419, M566).

In defending itself, faith replies that it in fact finds nothing to object to in this accusation, since, in "entrusting" itself to God as the source of all reality, it thoroughly expects to "find itself" in its relation to God.[122] But faith admits too much here: while it does not go so far as to claim that it *produces* its absolute object (the "action of faith does not indeed make it appear as if absolute being itself is produced by it"), in its assertion of its own essential relation to the absolute object,[123] faith cannot help but imply that the existence of this object—or at least the

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[120] As Farneth writes, faith recognizes that its own ritual activities "prepare the way for religious experience but are not themselves essential or authoritative. It is the religious experience itself that provides authoritative grounds for belief and action" (Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 46).

[121] As Hegel writes, just "as faith is the tranquil pure *consciousness* of spirit as *essence*, so is pure insight the *self*-consciousness of spirit as essence; it [insight] therefore knows essence, not as *essence*, but as absolute *self*" (397, M536).

[122] As Hegel writes, "enlightenment that wants to teach faith the new wisdom does not tell it anything new; for its [faith's] object is also for it just this, viz. a pure essence of its own consciousness, so that this consciousness does nor take itself to be lost and negated in that object, but rather puts its trust in it, i.e., it finds itself as *this particular* consciousness, or as *self*-consciousness, precisely *in the object*" (406, M549).

[123] "Trust, however, is faith, because the consciousness of the believer is *directly related* to its object and is thus also intuitively aware that it is *one* with it and in it." "Whomsoever I trust," Hegel writes further, "his *certainty of himself*

knowledge of it—is in some way dependent on its own activity. The "obedience and action [of faith] form a necessary moment," Hegel writes, "through which the certainty that absolute being *is* comes about" (406-407, M549).

Specifically, enlightenment claims that the absolute object of faith is—contradictorily—both the invention of faith's cognitive activity and beyond faith's cognitive grasp.[124] "On the one hand," it argues, faith "puts its trust in absolute being, and in doing so obtains the certainty of itself; on the other hand, for faith, absolute being is unsearchable in all its ways and in its being unattainable" (419, M566).[125] Faith understands its devotional activity—its obedience and service, as Hegel calls it—as an effort to make the absolute being of God one with its own absolute being, to make itself "like God" in response to its trusting recognition of God as the source of its particularity as a self. Here, though, enlightenment exposes in faith "the opposite moment of *action* in contrast to *being*," pointing out that this understanding of one's own faithful activity as essential to the realization of God "in me" is in tension both with the understanding of God as absolute essence "in-itself" not produced by one's own thinking, and with the understanding of God as "unsearchable" and "unattainable." Ultimately, faith claims to find the absolute certainty of itself in a being that is constitutively beyond itself—to know itself through that which is unknowable, and also to know that God is unknowable. Faith, which takes its definitive self-expression to reside in its devoted affirmation of the intrinsic being of an absolute object, finds that it cannot deny what its opponent pure insight points out—namely, that its own activity as a self constitutes an essential moment even in the affirmation of a reality that appears to transcend all individual selfhood.

Not only, therefore, does the challenge of pure insight reveal to faith that God is, to a decisive extent, a product of faith's own thinking, but it has in the process also revealed that faith

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is for me the *certainty of myself*; I recognize in him my own being-for-self, know that he acknowledges it and that it is for him purpose and essence" (406, M549).

[124] This contradiction belongs to enlightenment as well, which does not recognize that it makes precisely the same claim about God that it criticizes faith for making. As Hegel explains, enlightenment both reduces the object of faith's representations to contingent "fictions [that] possess no *intrinsic* being," and declares this object to be "something which in no way concerns consciousness, lies beyond it, is alien to it and unknown" (419, M566). Here, enlightenment does not recognize its own inconsistency in claiming both that faith's God is unknowable (a wholly alien reality) and that faith has constructed and idea of God through its own images and representations (in which case God is precisely *not* an alien reality). Hence, its principal assertion against faith—"all you can ever access is your own *representation* of the God you seek; the absolute being is beyond your cognitive grasp!"—is in fact simply a repetition of faith's own claim about God.

[125] In the commentary to his translation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Michael Inwood point to Romans 11:33 in connection with this statement: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 460.

is just as much an assertion of individual selfhood as is pure insight, and hence cannot consistently claim to have renounced its own self-consciousness in its pursuit of unity with the absolute being. For while "faith has the divine right, the right of absolute *self-identity* or of pure thought, as against Enlightenment," the "human right" of enlightenment "belongs to the nature of *self-consciousness* as against simple essential being or *thought*" (417, M563). In this way, the "right" asserted by enlightenment is implicit in faith: enlightenment can "maintain its absolute right because self-consciousness is the negativity of the concept, a negativity which is active not only on its own account, but which also takes within its grasp is opposite. And because faith itself is a consciousness it will not be able to deny enlightenment its right" (417, M563).

In this way, pure insight's (or enlightenment's) critique of faith as self-assertive is, therefore, faith's internal self-critique, in which faith comes to recognize itself as the "negative essence"—that is, the interpretive subject—of all of its various thoughts. As Hegel explains,

> Enlightenment does not employ principles particular to itself in its attack on faith, but principles which are implicit in faith itself. Enlightenment merely presents faith with *its own* thoughts which faith unconsciously lets fall apart, but which Enlightenment brings together; it merely reminds faith when one of its own modes is present to it, of the others which it also has, but which it forgets when the other one is present… Consequently, it is neither alien to faith, nor can faith disavow it. (417-418, M564)

Enlightenment thus does not assert any particular content against faith; rather, it functions simply as a goad towards faith's self-awareness, reminding faith of its own activity, which faith forgets in its affirmation of its absolute object and the otherworldly vision it has of itself via this object. What appears to faith as an irreverent "perversion"[126] is therefore simply faith's own conceptual activity—its own self[127]—reflected back to it, activity that, as Hegel says, any self-aware faith is unable to disavow. Enlightenment "upsets the housekeeping of spirit in the household of faith by bringing into that household the tools and utensils of *this* world, a world which that spirit cannot deny is its own, because its consciousness likewise belongs to it" (362, M486). Faith's

[126] "Enlightenment shows itself to faith to be pure insight by the fact that, in a *specific* moment, it sees the whole, brings forward the other moment which is opposed to it, and, converting one into the other, brings to notice the negative essence of both thoughts, the concept. To faith, it seems to be a perversion and a lie because it points out the *otherness* of its moments; in doing so, it seems directly to make something else out of them than they are in their separateness; but this 'other' is equally essential and, in truth, is present in the believing consciousness itself, only this does not think about it, but puts it away somewhere" (417-418, M564).

[127] "Insight, as the self that *apprehends* itself, completes culture; it apprehends nothing but self and everything as self, i.e., it *comprehends* everything, wipes out the objectivity of things and coverts all *intrinsic* being into a being for *itself*. In its hostility to faith as the alien realm of *essence* lying in the beyond… enlightenment completes the alienation of spirit in this realm, too, in which that spirit takes refuge and where it is conscious of an unruffled peace" (362, M486).

opposition to pure insight is really a struggle with an "enemy within,"[128] and in defending itself from the "attack" of pure insight it really wrestles with an aspect of its own self. In response to the rational criticisms of pure insight, faith comes to discover its identity with insight: faith too is a rational standpoint, an interpretive "take" on things oriented toward communication with other such standpoints.

3.2.2. Faith as a communicative standpoint

For faith, it is surely a scandal to realize that its vision of absolute essence is tainted by the particularities of its own perspective. What we should notice, though, is that the motivating principle behind pure insight's attack on faith is not the assertion of its own *particular* selfhood against any "other" as such. Although, in its devotion to God, faith cannot but interpret pure insight's affirmation of individual self-consciousness as irreverence, what drives pure insight (beyond its narrow opposition to faith) is the recognition of the "universal" nature of selfhood, that is, that the individuality of self-conscious activity (i.e., interpretation) is the shared human condition. The ultimate "intention" of pure insight, Hegel explains, is to show "that everything objective has only the significance of *being-for-self*, of self-consciousness, and that this has the significance of a *universal*, that pure insight is to become the property of every self-consciousness" (397, M537). Hence, the "self" uncovered at the heart of faith need not be understood as prideful self-assertion against God; rather, this selfhood is the shared meaning—what Hegel calls "universal self-consciousness"—that reveals itself to be the true site for our reckoning with absolute reality.

Thus, while the challenge to faith made by enlightened thinking is meant to point out the *subjective* dimension of faith (as against faith's self-renunciation in favour of an absolute *object*), the ultimate significance of this challenge is its revelation of the *intersubjective* nature of faith. Originally blind to its own cognitive activity and creative contribution to its view of the world, faith learns through its struggle with enlightenment that it is indeed an interpretive stance, and that it cannot consistently remain committed to its ascription of all essential reality to its absolute object. This conclusion allows us to make the further observation that faith, as an interpretive stance, is also—implicitly, at least—a communicative stance. As we saw in Chapter One

[128] At this stage, Hegel says, "the disrupted [i.e., alienated] consciousness is only *in itself*, or implicitly, the *self-identity* of pure consciousness, a fact that is known to *us*, but not to *itself*." Hence, "it still has within it its opposite principle by which it is conditioned, without having become master of it through the movement of mediation" (391, M527).

regarding the interpretive nature of experience in general, to 'take up' or assume one's particular stance in and on the world is necessarily to do so in the context of a world of *others*. Perception, "taking-as-true," is an act with inherently public significance; to take the world *as* I see it is to inhabit—actively—an irreducibly *not indifferent* stance on the world, one for which I am at all times responsible. In his account of the dialectic between faith and pure insight, Hegel makes the inherent "publicity" of our singular standpoint explicit. To acknowledge that faith possesses the trait of rationality is to acknowledge that even the most thorough-going claim to self-certainty—for example, faith's claim that I am what I am only *for God*—is answerable to what is "in common." To be a singular self is, in this very singularity, to share selfhood with others—that is, to be (a) "subject" to (of) communication.[129]

One way Hegel makes this necessity of communication evident in the present context is his observation that faith, despite its "flight" from the world, is in fact thoroughly embedded in the world of actuality. Faith is as much a human practice as it is an appeal to or affirmation of God (or rather, such affirmation could only ever be a human practice[130]), and, as Hegel explains, must answer to the "world of sense" as much as to the world of thought in which it conceives of its God.[131] As Hegel argues, while it may seem that enlightenment has simply "rent asunder" the

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[129] To be responsible for one's singular stance, moreover, is not simply to recognize the scrutiny of others on one's own perspective, but rather to recognize that it is only through such others that one's own perspective has any significance in the first place. Hegel's account of faith and enlightenment, Farneth explains, thus reveals "the social-practical or intersubjective nature of normativity," making evident that "others not only judge our self-determined [normative] judgments; they are also the condition for the possibility of our judgments in the first place. In order to have meaningful commitments, in individual must be a part of a community in which the concepts entailed by those commitments have determinate content" (Farneth, *Hegel's Social Ethics*, 46-47)

[130] As we saw above in Hegel's remarks from the *Philosophy of Right*, religion is a call to action, as much as it is an implicit ritual. In her own account of the communicative nature of faith, Farneth writes, "the absolute essence—what is self-sufficiently authoritative—for Faith turns out not to be the experience of unity with the transcendent absolute but the participation in the 'spirit of the religious community'—the norms, practices, institutions, and other aspect's of Faith's communal life. Faith's sacrifices and worship practices are *necessary moments* that unify the members of the community with that which is actually absolute for them" (Ibid., 49). Farneth is surely correct here; however, Hegel's account of the significance of communicative practices for faith is arguably even stronger that Farneth suggests. According to Farneth, faith, which initially prioritizes its experience of a transcendent absolute over all else, must recognize the essential significance of its actual practices. As I argued in the previous section, though, Hegel is also saying that, having initially assigned all significance solely to the absolute object, must come to terms with its own contribution to the nature and reality of that object. At issue, therefore, is more than simply the proper balancing or appreciating of the cognitive and practical realities involved in faith; rather, faith discovers that its action and its communicative context are constitutive of the absolute reality it affirms.

[131] For this reason, Hegel explains, faith is consigned to a perpetually two-sided existence, having to negotiate between the two worlds into which its consciousness is split. "The believing consciousness," he writes, "weighs and measures by a twofold standard; it has two sorts of eyes, speaks with two voices, has duplicated all ideas without comparing the twofold meanings. In other words, faith lives in two sorts of non-*conceptual* perceptions, the one the perceptions of the *slumbering* consciousness which lives purely in non-conceptual thoughts, the other those of the *waking* consciousness which lives solely in the world of sense; and in each of them it has its own separate housekeeping" (423, M572).

trust and immediate certainty of faith through its vain "self-fulfillment,"[132] the true effect of enlightenment is that it "illuminates that heavenly world with ideas belonging to the world of sense, and points out this finitude which faith cannot deny, because it is self-consciousness and hence is the unity to which both kinds of ideas belong and in which they do not fall apart" (423, M572). Enlightenment does not so much undermine faith, therefore, as reveal faith itself to be that which underlies the separate worlds in which it is involved,[133] in which case faith cannot wholly reside in either one of these worlds alone. Explicitly devoted to its divine self-image constructed in the world of pure thought, faith cannot deny that it resides equally in the world of sense, and that it is a finite activity subject to criticism in the actual world of others.

3.2.3. Faith as a confessional standpoint

By virtue of its residence in the "heavenly world," faith nevertheless poses as a challenge to the pretensions of pure insight in its attempts to convert all objectivity into "being-for-self." To adopt the stance of faith beyond the enlightenment critique, therefore, would be to combine a commitment to the affirmation of absolute reality with an awareness of the inevitable finitude of any such affirmation. Such a "post-enlightenment" faith, further, would be aware that the *form* of this finitude—namely, the interpretive activity of self-conscious agency—necessarily places one in dialogue with other finite selves, and in this way would be a "confessional" faith in the sense in which we have been using this term "confession" in the present study—namely, as the conscientious expression of the inescapable finitude of one's response to an absolute call or demand. Such a faith would acknowledge the antecedence of God (or whatever absolute object) at the same time as it acknowledges its own essential interpretive contribution to the way this antecedence takes shape in being expressed. In terms of its relation to Hegel's understanding of religion, faith is the conscientious "taking-up" of a particular and finite stance within the "totality" of one's world so as to offer an ultimate expression of that world and one's dependence on it. As my affirmation of the antecedence of God, faith is the self-consciously finite affirmation of "all reality," of "who we are" most basically.

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[132] Enlightenment's "behaviour towards faith seems to rend asunder the *beautiful* unity of *trust* and immediate *certainty*, to pollute its *spiritual* consciousness with mean thoughts of *sensuous* reality, to destroy the soul which is *composed* and *secure* in its submission, by the vanity of the understanding and of self-will and self-fulfillment" (422, M572).

[133] "The result of the enlightenment," Hegel says, is "to do away with the *thoughtless*, or rather *non-conceptual*, separation which is present in faith" (422-423, M572).

Faith, as a confession of its own finitude in its expression of "the absolute," is thus essentially a stance of forgiveness. As the conscientious assumption of one's religious source, faith is the explicit declaration of its own finitude in contrast to "absolute reality," a finitude that necessitates a "confessional" stance toward others. But this confessional orientation toward the religious other differs from any model of "inter-faith" dialogue premised on the establishment of "neutral terms." The presumption of such neutrality would bypass the orientation toward communication—toward universality—present within the faithful expression of religion, an orientation that is premised on precisely the *absence* of neutrality at the level of the expression of the absolute. Beyond—or perhaps beneath—the domain of neutral dialogue there resides only the plurality of idiomatic expressions of the absolute, and any communication here, if it is to be a genuine expression of faith, must be sought *within* the irreducibly diversity of idioms, rather than despite it. Genuinely interreligious dialogue, then, requires a (forgiving) stance of openness towards the alien religious other, a pursuit of universality precisely *within* what is alien, not beyond or despite it. In this way, the possibility for such mutually confessional interreligious dialogue rests, as it were, on understanding communication as a promise, not a premise. Because neutral dialogical territory among religious idioms cannot be presupposed, dialogue between such idioms must always be *sought*. Interreligious dialogue, in other words, is the never-ending *pursuit* of communication based on the confessional self-understanding of religions as finite.

Understanding this project requires understanding the possibility for communication between religious idioms to rest, not on a set of separate, "universal" terms to which each idiom submits, but on the "universality" implicit in the very encounter between alien worlds. For to be confronted with another religion is to be confronted with an alien *world*, an "other" whose otherness is relevant precisely through the contrast it invokes to "my" world. That is to say, the (religious) other would not show up as alien or foreign were it not implicitly like me, an intelligible, rational world on its own account. Consider that an undiscovered territory or unsolved problem of whatever sort does not pose a threat or challenge in the same way that another "world" does; whereas such unknowns or puzzles tend to present themselves as "to-be-comprehended," the appearance of another *world* by contrast, is the challenge of another perspective, the comprehension of which engages me in a dialectic of recognition ("to-be-comprehended," to be sure, but in a different way).[134] I find the other *other* precisely because it is

[134] I owe this point to Russon, "The Ritual Basis of Self-Identity," in *Reading Hegel's* Phenomenology, Chapter 12, 169-183.

an other *me*; hence, what appears as the source of a potential threat is simultaneously the source of potential communication. The difference between threat and communication here, I want to suggest, is the difference of forgiveness. The sense of being threatened is sustained by one's commitment to the centrality of one's own idiom. In terms of religion, this commitment might be expressed by insisting, "The absolute is affirmed in *our* practices, not yours. *We* honour God; you blaspheme." A guiding intuition of this study is that the requirement to adapt or translate one's idiomatic practices in response to the norms of public dialogue and the fact of pluralism are not convincing from the perspective of this stance of self-assurance. Rather, a responsibility to publicity and plurality can be rooted only in the self-awareness of such an idiom as to its essential finitude, its finitude with respect to *its own* desire to "honour God."[135] A religion becomes publicly responsible only in recognizing its own finitude, its constitutive *failure* to honour God wholly and adequately, as an expression of dependence and a calling-out to the other for recognition, for forgiveness. One's expression of one's dependence on God is simultaneously (though not always explicitly) an expression of one's dependence on others; to affirm God as absolute is, as Hegel's phenomenology shows, to affirm the constitutive finitude—and forgivability—of human activity as such.

3.3 The intelligence of religion

In concluding this chapter, I want to highlight the way in which Hegel's account of the dialectical relationship between faith and insight advances our discussion of the relationship between reason and religion in the thought of Rawls and Habermas. In Rawlsian terms, Hegel's account reveals an intrinsic "publicity" in faith, which, when understood and enacted conscientiously, recognizes its intrinsic dependence on others, whom it must engage in dialogue in order for its affirmations of "absolute reality" to be recognized. By demonstrating that faith is

[135] In this way, my approach differs slightly from that of Hyo-Dong Lee's nevertheless rich and insightful application of Hegel's understanding of mutual recognition to the issue of interreligious dialogue in his article, "Interreligious Dialogue as a Politics of Recognition: A Postcolonial Rereading of Hegel for Interreligious Solidarity," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (2005): 555-581. Seeking to "reconceiv[e] the idea of interreligious dialogue as a form of 'politics of recognition,'" Lee argues that "the Hegelian notion of mutual recognition, especially when qualified by Frantz Fanon's postcolonial rereading of it, can be the key for such a reconception insofar as it provides a model of interreligious relationship within a common polity that rejects relations of domination and exclusion while nurturing a sense of solidarity among religious communities" (555-6). While I agree that Hegel's account of recognition can profitably applied to cases of religious plurality, my aim has been to show that religious expression is answerable on its own terms to a kind of "confessional" politics of recognition. Hence, to *apply* a politics of mutual recognition to cases of interreligious encounter as a kind of external model is to overlook the processes of mutual recognition to which religious discourses and communities are intrinsically exposed in recognizing their own finitude alongside that of other religious idioms.

on its own terms oriented toward communication with an "alien" other, Hegel presents an alternative to the Habermasian account wherein religious expressions, in order to adhere to the norms of public dialogue, must be translated into the altogether distinct language of "public reason." Habermas' conception of the "translation requirement," while seemingly no more than an elaboration of the "properly political" parameters of public discourse outlined by Rawls, in fact extends the idea of public reason beyond Rawls' original conception, and in a direction not necessarily consistent with what Rawls' suggests about the compatibility between religion and public reason.[136] Yet, Rawls' discussion of religion is relatively brief and rather inconclusive. What I intend to do here, hence, is to show how Hegel's account of this intrinsic publicity of religious faith supplies the "missing link" in Rawls' conception of the reasonableness of religion, and thus how Hegel clarifies the ambiguity of Rawls' account in a way different from Habermas' insistence (intended or not) on the strict division of the religious and the rational.[137]

Rawls, as we saw above, claims that public reason is not "secular reason," and that the communicative task of reasoning in public is (with the appropriate qualification, as outlined in the "proviso") inclusive of "reasonable comprehensive doctrines" of any sort. Crucial to this inclusivity is Rawls' understanding of comprehensive doctrines as "reasonable," and thus as in some way internally compatible with public reason. In aligning religion with "reasonable comprehensive doctrines," then, Rawls' understanding of religion differs markedly from that of Habermas. For Rawls, there is no rigid distinction between religious views and reason; for him, religion is not inherently apolitical or non-public, nor does he think of "the public" as representing a distinct space or domain that religious voices must somehow enter. For Rawls, the "public" or "political" sphere is instead distinguished as a particular form of *communication* (that

[136] As the following remarks suggest, Rawls would not endorse a translation requirement such as Habermas': "The introduction into public political culture of religious and secular doctrines, provided the proviso is met, does not change the nature and content of justification in public reason itself," which "is still given in terms of a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice. However, there are no restrictions or requirements on how religious or secular doctrines are themselves to be expressed; these doctrines need not, for example, be by some standards logically correct, or open to rational appraisal, or evidentially supportable" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 463).

[137] For a detailed comparison of Rawls and Hegel on religion and public reason that similarly stresses an underlying continuity of religion and liberal values, see David Peddle, "The Construction of the Secular in Rawls and Hegel: Religion, Philosophy, and Public Reason" *Animus* 9 (2004): 131-174. Lewis also refers to Rawls in his discussion of the continued importance of Hegel for current discussion of religion in public (*Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 244-247), arguing that, while Hegel's account is responsive to contemporary concerns about appeals to religious authority and the direct application of religious views in law and public policy, religious (or otherwise "comprehensive") views do not by definition threaten democracy, and indeed should be engaged with respect to their capacity to cultivate persons' political dispositions. "Thus," writes Lewis, "Hegel's grappling with religion's role in public discourse already presupposes a role for comprehensive doctrines that Rawls is concerned to limit" (Ibid., 245).

is, through "public reason"), one to which religious voices, in representing a "reasonable comprehensive doctrine," can themselves adapt. Thus, Rawls is confident that persons who adhere to a comprehensive doctrine—religious doctrines included—can endorse the political conceptions of a democratic society for "the right reasons." "When political liberalism speaks of a reasonable overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines," he writes, "it means that all of these doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, support a political conception of justice underwriting a constitutional democracy whose principles, ideals, and standards satisfy the criterion of reciprocity."[138]

However, it is not immediately obvious from Rawls' account that comprehensive doctrines are reasonable in the sense that is relevant to public reason. One reason for this ambiguity is that Rawls offers more than one definition of "reasonable." In Lecture II of *Political Liberalism*, Rawls says that persons are reasonable when they are ready to offer others "principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation," that is, when they are willing to dialogue with others using accessible and shared principles of communication.[139] As a matter of readiness, for Rawls, reasonableness denotes a sort of quality of communication (as opposed to a circumscribed category of terms that represents "*the* reasonable"); being "reasonable" reflects a commitment to communicate "in good faith," making known one's willingness to argue only in terms that one thinks others will find acceptable. But it is not clear that this sense of reasonableness, which underlies the ideal of reciprocity that informs the use of public reason, is the same as that which underlies those "reasonable comprehensive doctrines" that orient a person's life at most basic level of value. In fact, Rawls describes the reasonable aspect of a comprehensive doctrine as that which "organizes and characterizes recognized values so that they are compatible with one another and express and intelligible view of the world," and "singl[es] out which values to count as especially significant and how to balance them when they conflict."[140] From this arrangement of values, says Rawls, one derives one's views about which conceptions of justice are "most reasonable" according to the particular set of doctrines that informs one's life. While this selection of conceptions of justice is clearly related to the sort of reasonableness that is required for public debate, the organization of an "intelligible world," which more directly characterizes the reasonableness of a comprehensive doctrine, appears more closely to resemble what Rawls calls the "rational," which identifies the pursuit of ends by an

[138] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 482-3.
[139] Ibid., 49.
[140] Ibid., 59.

single agent.[141] For comprehensive doctrines to be reasonable in the relevantly public sense that Rawls requires, then, the "intelligibility" through which such doctrines organize *my* world must somehow be intrinsically related to the reciprocity through which I am prepared to "reason" fairly with others.

Rawls insists, however, that there is *no* intrinsic connection between the reasonable ("publicity") and the rational ("intelligibility," on my reading), and that the willingness to reason fairly in public dialogue is in no way derived from rational, ends-seeking behaviour.[142] In one sense, it is understandable that Rawls would resist such an intrinsic relation: to derive the norms of public reason from the rational pursuit of ends risks introducing a particular end—a particular conception of the good, perhaps—into the sphere of the reasonable in a way that violates the political limits of democratic consensus. In another sense, though, this strict division between the reasonable and the rational raises the question of how "reasonable" comprehensive doctrines are compatible with public reason, if their value-ordering function for the rational agent differs from the reason-giving that characterizes public dialogue. If reasonable comprehensive doctrines are compatible with public reason and the political conceptions of justice that ground it, as Rawls thinks they are, what is the common point of contact between the rational and reasonable that allows for this compatibility? And if the distinction between the reasonable and the rational is to be maintained, should we not speak instead of *rational* comprehensive doctrines, whose compatibility with public reason is questionable?

Hegel helps us to get past this ambiguity, I want to suggest, because his account allows us to properly relate and situate the two understandings of "reasonable" at work in Rawls's thinking. For Hegel, there are not two forms of reflective reasoning—the (rational) organization of one's values, and the offering of fair terms to others—whose connection we can only hypothesize about. What Hegel shows, rather, is precisely the *relationship* between value, our

[141] Ibid., 50. Rawls draws this distinction between the "reasonable" and the "rational" from Kant's distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, the former pertaining to norms that ought to be adhered to in a universal (that is, public) sense, and the latter pertaining to norms that are relative to the end that they realize. See Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: Revised Edition*, edited by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 28. As Rawls writes, "the rational is… a distinct idea from the reasonable and applies to a single, unified agent (either an individual or corporate person) with the powers of judgment and deliberation in seeking ends and interests peculiarly its own. The rational applies to how these ends and interests are adopted and affirmed, as well as to how they are given priority" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 50).

[142] Ibid., 50. As Rawls writes further, "the reasonable is public in a way that the rational is not," and, "it is by the reasonable that we enter as equals the public world of others and stand ready to propose, or to accept… fair terms of cooperation with them. These terms, set out as principles, specify the reasons we are to share and publicly recognize before one another as grounding our social relations" (Ibid., 53). But from where come these reasons that we share in communicating "reasonably," if not from the rational end-setting that we perform (see the previous footnote) in a world that we find always and already populated by others?

largely unreflective, ritual engagement in the world, and "faith," the conscientious and explicit assumption and affirmation of the primacy and normative antecedence of this ritual source. From a Hegelian perspective, one source of the ambiguity in Rawls' account is his interpretation of basic values as comprehensive *doctrines*, that is, reflectively held moral, philosophical, or religious views that, as reflective, are immediately in competition with other reflective forms of reasoning (principally, public reason). As Hegel's account suggests, though, such comprehensive value-systems must *become* doctrines. That is, the capacity for persons to reflectively "own up" to the values that shape them and articulate these values to others as "reasons" is the result of a process, one worked out at the level both of the individual's response to the norms of "public" communication (see Section 1 above) and of a religion's adaptation to the rational standards of modernity (see Chapter Four). Such a process, I have argued, is one in which religion, through the conscientious mutual recognition of its adherents, is made to adapt to its own inherent publicity; this "becoming a doctrine" is a process of mutual recognition in which religion, as conscientious faith, finds itself essentially involved.

On Hegel's account, then, the roots of publicity reach deeper than Rawls appreciates, into the "rational" (or perhaps, pre-rational) domain of one's "intelligible" organization of one's values. Hegel shows, *pace* Rawls, that the willingness to communicate "reasonably" with others in the context of the public in fact *is* derived from one's "rational" navigation of the intelligible world of one's agency.[143] Indeed, such derivation was implicitly at issue in our discussion in Chapter One above, insofar as we concluded there that the norm of communication—the "reasonable," for Rawls—is woven into the very fabric of our experience as a perspectival agent for whom the world is immediately a domain of—"rational"—activity. Of course, the appearance of such norms of communicability within the very structure of human experience is no guarantee that they will be responsibly answered to in every case. Yet, this phenomenological intervention into Rawls' political vision has the advantage of locating the normative basis of reasoning in

[143] Although Rawls' account does at times suggest the possibility of such derivation, despite his explicit insistence against it. One example is Rawls' idea of "reasoning from conjecture," which he Rawls distinguishes from the practice of reasoning in public, but which suggests a continuity between public reasoning and one's reflective comparison of one's value-systems to that of others. In this context, Rawls discusses two ideas of toleration, one that is "purely political, being expressed in terms of… rights and duties," and another that is "not purely political but expressed from within a religious or nonreligious doctrine, as when, for example, it [is] said… that such are the limits God sets to our liberty. Saving this offers an example of what I call reasoning from conjecture," in which "we reason from what we believe, or conjecture, may be other people's basic doctrines, religious or philosophical, and seek to show them that, despite what they may think, they can still endorse a reasonable political conception of justice" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 462).

public, since, as the link between the rational and the reasonable makes clear, one is answerable to such reasonable practice by virtue of one's own rational behavior.[144]

[144] This attention to the link between the "rational" and the "reasonable" helps further to account for the circularity of Rawls' definition of reasoning in public, which bases itself on citizens' reflection on "what kind of reasons they may reasonably give" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 441). Whereas Rawls' account presupposes another form of reasons to which the practice of being "reasonable" applies, I have sought to locate this preexisting rationality in the basic "intelligence" provided by the "religious" value-system in which one most basically lives.

CONCLUSION: FROM TOLERANCE TO TRANSLATION: A HEGELIAN POLITICS OF SECULARITY

Hegel understands religion as a society or culture's way of articulating its sense of the "ultimate reality" of things. Alongside art and philosophy, Hegel includes religion as one of the practices through which a society addresses that which matters most to it, that "absolute" dimension of reality in relation to which it, as a society, is fundamentally defined. Unlike art and philosophy, however, religion tends to portray this absolute reality in the form of an infinite *object*—that is, as a reality or source distinct from those who recognize and affirm it. "Religion" refers, therefore, to that set of finite practices through which a society affirms the infinite nature of the infinite object, practices that express in turn, although implicitly, this society's understanding of its own basic essence.

Prompted by the coinciding appearances of the infinite object of religion and the gesture of forgiveness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this study has sought to explore religion and forgiveness as intersecting social-cultural practices. The first four chapters of this study explored this coincidence within the context of Hegel's text. Chapters One and Two offered phenomenological accounts of forgiveness and religion respectively, and led to my exploration, in Chapter Three, of the intersection of religious practice and the gesture of forgiveness in the self-expressive practices of human communication. In Chapter Four I used this intersection as a lens through which to read Hegel's philosophical history of religion in Chapter VII of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which culminates in the claim that religion, especially in the modern world, reveals its explicit answerability to the norm of forgiveness that it enables.

In applying my study of Hegel to the question of "religion in public" in Chapter Five, I argued that, in adapting itself to the pluralistic and secular character of the "public spheres" of modern democratic societies, religion answers to an *internal* dialogical standard. Focusing on the concept of "public reason" as explored by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, I sought to demonstrate a basic compatibility between religious language and the practice of reasoning in public. This discussion was premised on the development of religion that I explored in Chapter Four, according to which, for Hegel, religion comes to affirm the same aspect of the human being that is affirmed by the political institutions of modern democracies—namely, our inherent capacity for rational insight. Although there remain significant differences in the way in which

this capacity is affirmed politically and its varied articulation in diverse religious idioms,[1] for Hegel modernity is nevertheless characterized by the (at least partial) coincidence of political and religious affirmations of the centrality of human individuality, to the extent that religions cannot conscientiously disavow their implication in, and thus responsibility to, the norms of public dialogue in the political sphere. Religious practice, in response to its own self-critical norm of forgiveness, is thus on it own terms invested in the rational and equitable character of the public sphere, and that to be sincerely and authentically devotion to religion in the world demands that one care for "the public good."

Were I to develop this account of the public responsibility of religion, this study could further contribute to contemporary discussions about the nature of secularity and the nature of secular dialogue in the context of pluralistic societies. In the remainder of this conclusion I want to offer an indication of the "politics of secularity" I take to be implicit in the Hegelian phenomenology of religion pursued in this dissertation. If it is doubtful whether political tools such as "public reason" can at all times provide a religiously neutral dialogical terrain, this is not simply because the terms of such reasoning often overlook the orientation toward public dialogue within religious idioms themselves. Discussions of "religion," even inviting ones, can likewise compromise dialogical neutrality, insofar as the conception of religion employed in public dialogue often privileges the terms of a particular idiom or tradition. Such cases suggest that fairness and inclusivity will not be achieved through the establishment of supposedly better neutral dialogical terms, but rather through properly reckoning with the *lack of neutrality* as a basic dialogical fact. Under the heading "from tolerance to translation," I want to propose here a way of thinking about religious and cultural difference that is attentive to the fact that "neutrality" in public dialogue is always a provisional and superficial achievement, one that can entrench resentments and rivalries as much as it can facilitate productive encounters. After commenting briefly on the historical specificity of the term "religion," I turn to the issue of

[1] Whereas, for example, politics tends to establish such universal categories as the "rights-bearing individual" as media of recognition in the midst of diverse individuals and cultures, religion, itself a culturally diversified phenomenon, enables the recognition of one's singularity as an individual in relation to the object of one's devotion. In Hegelian terms, the difference here is that between "objective spirit" and "absolute spirit," that is, between the collective self-expression of an actually existing community—such as a state or a nation—and the self-expression of a religious community that speaks on behalf of human experience as such. Although it coincides with religion in the affirmation of the centrality of subjective insight, for Hegel political recognition does not reach the same "depth" (of self-opacity) as the form of recognition enacted in religious expression, which affirms human selfhood in all its—self-*opaque*—wholeness. One consequence of this discrepancy is the fact that what appears "private," and often "irrational," from the perspective of narrow liberalism is in fact a deeper insight about the nature of human experience—namely, its basic self-opacity.

translation in connection with Habermas' understanding of public reason, and then discuss the particular notion of translation that helps us avoid the presuppositions surrounding the idea of "tolerance."

1. The non-neutrality of "religion"

In Chapter Four, we explored Hegel's account of the self-transformation of religion, a development that culminates in the exposure of the object of religion as the religious community's own "absolute" essence. In this self-transformation, religion comes to express that the object of its affirmation is in the final analysis not "beyond" the community of the devoted, but rather is present "here and now" among them (precisely, in their acts of mutual forgiveness). This "self-secularizing" trajectory of religion has certain political consequences, owing to the fact that the object of religious affirmation now explicitly coincides with the "real" world of human action. Whereas above I explored these consequences as they pertain to the language of political reasoning, I want here to explore an aspect of Hegel's secularization story that has received less attention so far—the fact, namely, that the (self-)exposure of religion as the affirmation of who "we" are is accomplished, first of all, *in religious terms*. In Hegel's narrative of religion, it is specifically Christianity—the religion that announces the "incarnation" of absolute reality in the shape of a finite, individual subjectivity—that announces the absolute significance—the forgiveness—of *all* finite practices of affirming the absolute (that is, all religions), thereby assigning to itself the privilege of being the *one* religion that speaks (and in its own idiom) for *all* "religion."

In this way, Hegel's phenomenology of religion parallels more recent accounts of the historical specificity, and uniquely Christian origin, of the category "religion." To think in terms of "religion"—that is, to employ the concept "religion" in theorizing cultural and historical differences—is inevitably to assign privilege to that tradition (or those traditions) for which "religion" operated as a means for self-determination and for the conception of otherness.[2] Etymologically, the word "religion," although it suggests sources beyond simply Christian ones, nevertheless speaks particularly of the Greek and Latin roots of the "Judeo-Christian West," and hence, as Derrida notes further, in speaking of religion "we must formally take note of the fact

[2] Helpful and influential accounts of this use of the category "religion" are offered in Smith, *Relating Religion*, Chapter 8, "Religion, Religions, Religious"; and Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27-54.

that we are already speaking Latin."[3] In other words, although the social or ontological function of religion is historically pervasive, to be able to think or speak explicitly in terms of "religion"—and thus of "religious difference"—is the consequence of what Derrida labels "globalatinization,"[4] the self-universalization of the Greco-Roman idiom of *relegere* or *religare*.[5] Thinking about "religious difference," therefore, is not a neutral endeavour; "religious difference" rather, speaks for the priority of the Latin Christian self-conception as much as it serves as a distinguishing mark among diverse such self-conceptions. The term "religion," hence, does not represent a neutral "meta-language" through which to negotiate the differences between religious idioms; or rather, insofar as it performs this "meta-religious" role, it does so by implicitly granting privilege to *a* religion.

Consider, for example, a feature of many of the political debates surrounding the practice of "veiling" (that is, wearing a headscarf, *hijab*, or *niqab*) and the question of whether this practice should be permitted in public spaces and for persons in officially "public" roles. Most often, these debates are framed in terms of the public display of "religious symbols" or "signs." As Talal Asad points out, however, the understanding of the "Islamic veil" worn by many Muslim women as a symbol or sign is in fact an interpretation this practice according to the terms of a *particular* understanding of the nature of religion, one according to which clothing deemed "religious" is to be understood as the external, and thus *inessential* and *replaceable*, representation of an inner, supposedly more authentic belief or disposition.[6] As Asad explains, the framing of the veil as a religious "sign" actually misses the specific significance and function of the veil for many of those who wear it. "*If* the wearer assumes the veil as an obligation of her

[3] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 64. "To think 'religion,'" Derrida says elsewhere in this essay, "is to think the 'Roman'" (Ibid., 45).
[4] Ibid., 67.
[5] "On the one hand, supported by texts of Cicero, [there is] *relegere*, what would seem to be the avowed formal and semantic filiation: bringing together in order to return and begin again; whence *religio*, scrupulous attention, respect, patience, even modesty, shame or piety—and, on the other hand (Lactantius and Tertullian) *religare*, etymology 'invented by Christians' as Benveniste says, and linking religion to the *link*, precisely, to obligation, ligament, and hence to obligation, to debt, etc., between men or between man and God" (Ibid., 73-4).
[6] Talal Asad, "French Secularism and the 'Islamic Veil Affair,'" *The Hedgehog Review* (2006): 93-106. Asad's essay focuses on the public debates in France in 2003 and 2004 regarding whether Muslim girls should be permitted to wear headscarves in public schools, and the resulting report on the question of "secularity in schools" commissioned by France's President and published in 2003. The report, which was named after the head of the commission Bernard Stasi, recommended the prohibition of "conspicuous religious signs" in public schools, a category that included not only "Islamic veils," but also *kippas* and large crucifixes. For Asad, while the report did not target the Muslim practice specifically, it was nevertheless premised on a decisive, though never explicitly stated, definition of religion, according to which the kind or religious "signs" identified could be outlawed without compromising the religious freedom or integrity of any French citizens. "For the Stasi commission," he notes, "all the wearables mentioned *are* signs, regarded, furthermore, as *displaceable* signs" (Ibid., 96).

faith," he writes, "*if her conscience impels her to wear it as an act of piety*, the veil becomes for that reason an integral part of herself. For her it is not *a sign* intended to communicate something but *part of an orientation, a way of being*."[7] Framed as a question about religious *signs*, the very terms of such debates reflect the privileging of a particular (often Christian) conception of "religion," regardless of their outcome.[8]

Such an example reminds us that dialogue among cultural differences, even when mediated by the category "religion," requires that we be attentive to the underlying lack of dialogical neutrality, not simply among the beliefs and idioms of those who participate in such dialogue, but also in the conceptual premises of this dialogue itself. However, this challenge does not rule out the possibility of dialogical fairness, nor does it require that we abandon the conceptual apparatuses—such as "public reason" and "religion"—that are meant to serve the ideals of fairness and inclusivity in secular societies. What it does require, though, is that we appreciate the specifically linguistic character of the problem of dialogical non-neutrality, and hence also the precise significance of translation as a tool for secular dialogue. In Chapter Five, I criticized Habermas for falling short of his own vision of the collaborative project of translation, insofar as his account implies that translation moves in only one direction—namely, from the as-yet irrational expressions of religion into the pre-established terms of public reason. Here, I want to extend this criticism of the Habermasian understanding of translation by addressing more directly the assumption that secular dialogue could be represented or realized by a single and self-contained linguistic entity such as "public reason." What I want to argue is that, while secularity is surely essential to the accommodation of diversity in any genuinely "public" space or institution, it does not represent a neutral domain or language into which the differences

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[7] Ibid., 96.

[8] Asad does not argue explicitly in this essay for the uniquely Christian origins of the idea of the "religious sign" (although for Asad the category of "secularity" is certainly Christian in origin). The target of his observations here, rather, is the self-professedly secular character of the French republic, and the way in which the Stasi report reflects the active, and thus precisely *non-neutral*, investment of the state in the definition of religion. For Asad, the "Islamic veil affair" in France exemplifies the need for the state to enter the territory of religion, not in order to protects citizens' freedoms and ensure tolerance of religious difference, but more primarily in order to challenge those "religious signs" that it perceives to be in conflict with its own self-imaging. "The arguments presented in the media about the Islamic headscarf affair," Asad writes, "seemed to me not so much about tolerance towards Muslims in a religiously diverse society, nor even about the strict separation between religion and the state. They were first and foremost about the structure of political liberties… on which the state is built, and about the structure of emotions that underlie those liberties." The debate, Asad explains further, represented "a conflict between constitutional principles," one in which "the state's right to defend its personality" reveals the state's necessary embeddedness—formally, at least—in the territory of religious self-representation: "The state's inviolable personality was expressed in and through particular images, including those signifying the abstract individuals whom it represented and to which they in turn owed unconditional obedience. The headscarf worn by Muslim women was held to be a religious sign conflicting with the secular personality of the French Republic" (Ibid., 95).

between cultural and religious idioms are to be dissolved. Secularity, I intend to show, represents instead the acknowledgment of the *lack* of neutrality in the public sphere, and of the attendant responsibility to pursue communicative contact with others in the absence of any pre-established, neutral dialogical terrain. My goal, hence, is to reconceive the significance of translation as an apparatus of secularity in a way that understands religion as a practice of self-criticism—what I have been calling a "socio-cultural idiom of forgiveness."

2. Secularity and/as translation: Habermas and Derrida

It is widely held that the secular character of political institutions that serve the public good is an essential condition of their ability to accommodate and support the freedom of a culturally and religiously diverse citizenry with fairness and equality. Various formulations of secularity have been offered in response to this goal, some articulating it in terms of the relation between the state and religion (toward which the state, as "secular," is expected to remain "tolerant" and "neutral"), and some claiming that secularity applies to the broader diversity and plurality of basic views about reality and "the good," religious and nonreligious alike.[9] Situating himself within this second category, Habermas favours the inclusion of religious voices in the public sphere. Openness to religion, he argues, is in the best interests of a democratic regime, not only because it stands to benefit from the moral and conceptual resources available in religious traditions, but also (and more significantly) because it is only in welcoming the expression of religious points of view in their own (i.e., religious) terms that the secular state can avoid alienating religious citizens and discouraging them from participation in the political life. For Habermas, the secular state must not stigmatize the "monolingual" character of (especially religious) persons' self-expression—the fact, in other words, of having at hand only *one* idiom in which to express one's views—political views included. To require religious citizens to adopt a "second language"—that of secular political discourse—in order to enter political discourse

[9] For a defense of the second, broader view against the first, see for example, Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34-59. Both of these framings of secularity differ from the understanding of secularity as the absence of or freedom from religion, a view that tends actually to violate the principle of secularity in assuming a coincidence between persons' basic views about reality and the good and the political norms of the "secular state." As we saw in Chapter Four, moreover, the "secularization" process that has come to characterize the self-understanding of Western modernity ought not to be understood as a "subtraction story"; rather, the decentering of religious authority and religious language in the modern world reflects the development, rather than the retreat or disappearance, of religion.

would in effect be to disqualify their genuine participation in public life, an undemocratic situation that Habermas insists we avoid.

Habermas is thus critical of Rawls' well-known "proviso," which stipulates that statements and doctrines reflective of a person's pre-political "background culture" can be included in public discussion on the condition that "in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support."[10] Habermas accepts, on the one hand, Rawls' view that the political efficacy of "comprehensive" or religious convictions depends on their being translated into the language of "secular reason" (or what Rawls here calls "proper political reasons");[11] what worries Habermas, on the other hand, is the fact that the "translation requirement" implicit in Rawls' leaves itself open to narrowly secularist interpretations, such as would impose an undue cognitive burden on religious citizens intent on participating in public life. What of those citizens who are not straightaway ready and able to supply "proper political reasons" in place of their deeply held (but otherwise politically relevant) convictions? Must they learn to self-translate, in order not to be excluded from making a meaningful and autonomous political contribution? Are not citizens faced with such a requirement liable to become resentful, not only of the linguistically secular character of their political institutions, but also of those citizens who, themselves nonreligious, able to feel more at home in the secular domain of politics?

In view of such concerns, Habermas proposes that Rawls' formula should be reconceived as an "institutional translation proviso." Although, according to Habermas, the political institutions of modern secular democracies must operate with the neutral, and thus secular, language of publically accessible discourse, and although this neutrality may appear to place "secular citizens" at an advantage politically, the burden of translation should neither fall to citizens themselves nor, therefore, be weighted asymmetrically against religious citizens. Rather, the work of translation should be located at the "institutional threshold" that separates informal and formal public spheres. Religious citizens should be allowed to express and justify their

[10] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 462.

[11] Here, moreover, Habermas' view of the translation of religious expressions into political reasons displays more nuance than Rawls,' insofar as Habermas does not suggest (as Rawls' formula implies) that there exists a one-for-one equivalence of terms between religious and political language. Indeed, for Habermas, the liberal state should remain open precisely to the semantic uniqueness of religious voices, since the openness to the resources of religion marks one of the ways in which the conceptual foundations of democratic rationality are expanded and enriched. However, Habermas' account remains ambiguous, as it is not clear that Habermas offers a more concrete account that Rawls of how and where this translation should occur.

convictions in the language that is most familiar to them, on the simple condition that they *acknowledge* that "only secular reasons count" in the sphere of political debate; they do not, Habermas insists, need to "split their identity into public and private parts" in performing this work of translation themselves, as a kind of price of admission to public discourse, but rather need only reflexively consider their own religious views from a secular standpoint.[12] Although necessary in maintaining the secular—meaning, for Habermas, fair and neutral—character of public institutions, the translation of religious language should take the form of a collaborative political endeavour, one that is shared by religious and non-religious citizens alike and that is alienating to neither. The translation requirement, he writes,

> need not at all estrange "monolingual" citizens from the political process, because they also take political positions even when they adduce religious reasons. Even if the religious language is the only one they speak in public, and if religiously justified opinions are the only ones they can or wish to contribute to political controversies, they nevertheless understand themselves as members of a *civitas terrena*, which empowers them to be the authors of laws to which they are subject as addressees. They may express themselves in a religious idiom only on the condition that they recognize the institutional translation proviso. Thus the citizens, confident that their fellow-citizens will cooperate in producing a translation, can understand themselves as participants in the legislative process, although only secular reasons count therein.[13]

In a secular democracy founded on the principle of reciprocity (the recognition that all citizens "owe each other good reasons"), says Habermas, religious persons can trust that their secular fellow citizens will come alongside them and help accomplish the translation that allows their religious views and convictions to "count." The burden of translation remains; however, it is distributed equally, owing to the fact that secular citizens have as much to contribute to this process as do religious citizens. Although the religious citizen may face unique challenges in her participation in secular discourse, she can nevertheless recognize this secularity as necessary to the institutional character of the democratic state, and, trusting in the cooperative nature of the translation process, need not regard herself as excluded from politics. And nonreligious citizens,

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[12] In his own words, Habermas' position is basically the following: "The liberal state must not transform the necessary *institutional* separation between religion and politics into an unreasonable *mental and psychological* burden for its religious citizens. It must, however, expect them to recognize the principle that the exercise of political authority must be neutral toward competing worldviews. Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold separating the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries, and administrations. This only calls for the epistemic ability to consider one's own religious convictions reflexively from the outside and to connect them with secular views. Religious citizens can certainly acknowledge this "institutional translation proviso" without having to split their identity into public and private parts the moment they participate in public discourses. They should therefore be allowed to express and justify their convictions in a religious language even when they cannot find secular "translations" for them" (Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 130).

[13] Ibid., 130-1.

who despite appearances cannot claim the secular language of political discourse as their own, bear the burden of remaining open to the politically relevant—and perhaps transformative—content of religious statements. As Habermas writes, "whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the translation proviso, by way of compensation secular citizens must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and enter into dialogues from which religious reasons might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments."[14]

I have returned to these details of Habermas' account of the place of religious voices in the public sphere because I think that his vision for the translation requirement, although questionable in itself,[15] offers a fruitful opportunity to reconsider the nature of "the secular" as it pertains to religious expression, translation, and indeed the nature of language in general. An attempt such as Habermas' to relocate the responsibility of translation to the institutional sphere, and thus to more fairly balance the epistemic burdens of citizens around the fulcrum of "secular reason," does very little to alter our understanding of "secular reason" as a self-same linguistic entity *toward which* citizens are to comport themselves. As I read him, Habermas assumes that the neutral discourse of public reason into which religious voices are to be translated in attaining political significance exists as a more or less stable and self-containing communicative medium, one that, despite his insistence otherwise, cannot but appear as more familial territory to "secular citizens" who, unlike their religiously "monolingual" counterparts, are less likely to experience the discourse of "secular reason" as a foreign language. But is there truly such a thing as a language of secular reason? Is "the secular" itself a language? And is it accurate to speak, as Habermas does, of "secular citizens," who, in ways akin to their religious counterparts, would inhabit secular reason as a native tongue?[16]

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[14] Ibid., 131-2.

[15] Although this is not my concern here, it is worth pointing out that Habermas' way of framing the question of the presence of religious voices in the public sphere may not be as inclusive or inviting as he himself intends. My doubts pertain especially to the "functional reasons" that Habermas offers for allowing the expression of religious view in politics. Since much of Habermas' enthusiasm about religious expression concerns what religion has to offer to political rationality (see Chapter Five, Section 2.1 above), his "positive" view about the value of religious language runs the risk of appearing somewhat instrumental and disingenuous. That is, Habermas appears to be interested in the semantic potential of religion only insofar as is it is *translated* into the language of political discourse. The problem here is that Habermas' framework cannot assure against the possibility that the practice of translation, which he expects to facilitate the mutual contact between religious and secular standpoint, amounts in fact only to secular reason finding *itself* in religious expressions. These doubts are not directed toward the translation requirement as such; my point, rather, is that Habermas arguably speaks against his own purposes in appearing to be interested in only the proto-rational (in the sense of secular reason) dimension of religion.

[16] Further: Where does this collaborative translation among (so-called) "religious" and "secular" citizens that Habermas envisions take place? And how? More to the point, on what is the "confidence" that Habermas expects

In pursuing these questions, I want to set aside the question of the plausibility of Habermas' specific proposal about the participation of religious persons in political discourse, and instead challenge the underlying linguistic paradigm he employs in characterizing the problem that his "institutional translation proviso" is meant to help resolve.[17] If we remain uncertain as to whether Habermas' proposal is truly able to ensure that religious persons can participate in political discourse, as he says, "without having to split their identity,"[18] this has less to do with the terms of Habermas' argument than with the fact that our identity as language-users is inherently "split"—the fact, that is, that to be capable of self-expression is to inhabit an irreducible difference between the self that is expressed and the publically shared medium in which this expression is accomplished. As the title of the text by Derrida to which I now turn asserts, the "monolanguage," or linguistic home, that gives shape to our individual identity is always a "monolingualism *of the other*," such that the call to reckon with the reality of linguistic difference is not a demand imposed from without, but rather emerges from the very heart of human identity and self-experience. Derrida's text invites us to consider the differences between religious and secular ways of inhabiting language as occurring not between but *within* persons, such that secularity, understood here as the issue of the exposure to a foreign language, and thereby also the issue of translation, is operative at the root of the "disorder," as Derrida calls it, that is the experience of monolanguage, of having a mother tongue.

In his partially autobiographical work *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida explores the complex interrelations of identity, language, culture, nationality, and citizenship, drawing on his childhood experience in colonized Algeria. Throughout the work, Derrida recounts his experience as a monolingual French-speaker growing up and being educated outside of France. In view of this focus, the "other" identified in Derrida's title, Rey Chow explains, "is, quite straightforwardly, the colonizer who, operating on the foundation of a

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"religious citizens" to have in their "secular" fellow-citizens based? Would this confidence not have its roots in persons' pre-political environments, in which case Habermas' location of the collaborative act of translation in the public domain begs the question? And does Habermas truly avoid painting an imbalanced and condescending picture of this translation project (note that "secular citizens," for Habermas, ought to open their minds to religious views "by way of compensation")? Are the reasons why the "secular citizen" should listen to her religious fellow-citizens as compelling as the reasons why the "religious citizen" ought to "subject" herself to the translation requirement? Within the terms of Habermas' account, does not the secular character of state institutions still place so-called "secular citizens" at an advantage politically?

[17] To be sure, Habermas' concerns in "Religion in the Public Sphere" pertain more directly to the requirements of fair political participation in secular democracies, rather than to presenting a theory of language or religion; however, his argument rests on assumptions regarding both language and religion, assumptions that have been the more direct focus of my discussion in this study.

[18] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 130.

repressive sovereignty, demands that the colonized adhere to a single language [in Derrida's case, French], against which the colonized is, moreover, always found to be inferior."[19] As becomes clear, however, Derrida's personal reflections are for him an avenue through which to consider the colonizing effects of language as such, insofar as one's becoming a self-conscious agent necessarily involves one's acculturation into a particular language, a process in which one's capacities for self-expression and self-understanding are "appropriated" by a cultural and linguistic "other" at the same time as they become one's own.[20]Although Derrida insists that he does not dare to speak for anyone else, it is clear that he intends to draw on the specificities of his own experience —"at once typical and uncommon," he says—to bring to light the instability at the heart of identity and self-identification as such, the "disorder" that afflicts each one of us because of the fact that what is most intimately ours—our "mother tongue"—is thoroughly "other" to us. "To be Franco-Maghrebian, one 'like myself,' is not, not particularly, and particularly not, a surfeit or richness of identities, attributes, or names. In the first place, it would rather betray a *disorder of identity*."[21]

In order to understand the disorder that Derrida speaks of here, we must take into account the basic "antinomy" around which his text is organized—namely, "I have only one language, yet it is not mine." Derrida generalizes this contradictory statement—which he takes to reside at the basis of the experience of "having" a language—in this way: (1) We only ever have one language or idiom; (2) We never have only one language or idiom. (The second statement can be further developed as saying that no language is simply "one" or whole, that no language or idiom is simply pure.[22]) What Derrida is trying to register in these statements is the fact that

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[19] Rey Chow, "Reading Derrida on Being Monolingual," *New Literary History* Vol. 39, No. 2 (2008): 220.

[20] Commenting on Derrida's declaration that "all culture is originally colonial" (Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 39), Chow points out Derrida's "reluctance to analyze language strictly according to colonialism because, he explains, colonialism applies to all culture." As she continues, "Derrida reads colonialism as both specific and universal: colonialism is a specific instance of the appropriation of language by the use of force or cunning; at the same time, *all* practices of language involve such appropriation" (Chow, "Reading Derrida," 224).

[21] Ibid., 14. Although, as Derrida recognizes (see Ibid., 58), not everyone will share his personal experience, each one of us must reckon with the fact that that our "absolute habitat," the "dwelling" that supplies us with our identities, has preceded us and has been the property of others before us. In this way, Chow explains, Derrida "confront[s] us with the problem of language as legacy" in a sense similar to the discovery of the "other-in-me" that characterizes the experience of conscience (Chow, "Reading Derrida," 218). As Chow writes, "Derrida argues that otherness as such must be recognized as what resides within, as what constitutes language. Language as something that no one, not even the master and colonizer, can possess; language as what inherently undoes any attempt at appropriation and property ownership; language as what is ultimately nonlocalizable and noncountable; language as a type of translation involving only target but no originary languages: these reflections constitute what for Derrida is the more profound sense of the phrase 'monolingualism of the other'" (Ibid., 224-5).

[22] "For Derrida," as Chow writes, "the attitude... that treats languages as individuated entities (as prized commodities or exoticised fetishes) that can be factually and discretely enumerated... is problematic" (Chow, "Reading Derrida,"

language—and specifically our "mother tongue"—is on the one hand the basic context or "dwelling" in which we receive and develop our identity (he calls it our "absolute habitat"), and on the other hand something that we ourselves do not possess. What is most proper to us, as it were, is not our property. Our monolanguage, our linguistic "home," Derrida says, "comes from the other"; it is "a law originating from elsewhere," our basic "auto-heteronomy."[23] We are always "summoned" to language in and by our experience of others: the language that we acquire in developing as human beings in our social environments was already there before us; it precedes, Derrida, says, our abstract capacity to say "I."[24] Any successful act of saying "I" will therefore bear implicit reference to the linguistic resources that already existed to make this statement possible, and will thus offer an affirmation of these resources as the terrain on which my identity is established.

Referring to this element of affirmation, Derrida says that even before one is able to speak—that is, even before one is able to reflectively use language to express and assert oneself as a discrete identity—one has made a vow or a promise. He writes that his monolingualism "would always have preceded me. It is me [and] I would not be myself outside it. It constitutes me, dictates even the ipseity of all things to me, and also prescribes a monastic solitude for me; as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some vows."[25] In an essay entitled "Above All, No Journalists!" Derrida draws out the religious dimension to this implicit promise that underlies linguistic expression. There he describes the social bond as a kind of "sworn faith," and shows that to think about religion or the religious is to think about the acts of faith or vowing that are operative in our interactions with others in the context of a community.[26] Likewise, in "Faith and Knowledge" Derrida says that there can be no question of sincerely relating to the other, of responding to her, without a "principle of responsibility," that is, without subscribing to a common social bond that, given is antecedent nature, takes the form of a

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226). See also Derrida's remark that "the One of the monolanguage of which I speak, and the one I speak, will hence not be an arithmetical identity or, in short, any identity at all" (Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 30).

[23] Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 39.

[24] Ibid., 29. In this way, *pace* Habermas, it is not simply the "religious citizen" who is "monolingual," in the sense of living out of an idiomatic linguistic context that supplies the interpersonal substance in and through which we develop into self-conscious agents.

[25] Derrida, *Monolingualism*, 1.

[26] As Derrida writes further, "the 'return of the religious' reintroduces a new sort of transcendental condition of the fiduciary. The social bond reveals itself increasingly, in particular through new capitalist structures, to be a phenomenon of faith. No special bond without the promise of truth, without an 'I believe you,' an 'I believe.'" Derrida, "'Above All, No Journalists!'," in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 63.

sacrament.[27] On Derrida's view, then, to speak of religion is not to speak of just one monolanguage among others, but is to speak of a characteristic of all monolanguages, of all mother tongues, insofar as the meaningful and successful use of language depends on and implicitly reaffirms, as a promise or act of "sworn faith," the social bond that makes language and identity possible.

Thus, to borrow a phrase from Derrida's "The Eyes of Language," (or rather, Derrida's paraphrasing of Gershom Scholem), "there is only sacred language."[28] Or, in other words, our basic experience of being a language-user, of possessing an identity only on the basis of forces that exceed me, put us in touch with the place of the religious, the religious dimension of language. Here, though, it is essential *not to conflate* this sacramental affirmation of the social bond with the particular "monolingual dwelling" to which we are bonded and which we enact in speaking.[29] This affirmation occurs, rather, as an *implicit* feature of any speech act; "[e]ach time I open my mouth," says Derrida, "each time I speak or write, I *promise*… The performative of this promise is not one speech act among others. It is implied by any other performative, and this

[27] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 64. Commenting on this statement, Arvind Mandair writes: "For Derrida the very fact that we require language to speak to another and for another to respond, means that speaking/responding is unavoidable insofar as speech/response provides the possibility of the social bond or what might be regarded as the minimal form of community: the self in relation to an-other (the not-self). Thus the subject cannot respond and there can be no responsibility unless there is first of all an agreement already in place, a given-word, a sworn faith, without some kind of testimonial pledge, a legal binding that invokes the sacred." Mandair, "Interdictions: Language, Religion, and the (dis)Orders of Indian Identity," *Social Identities*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2007): 353.

[28] Derrida, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 201. In this essay, Derrida offers a reading of a letter Scholem wrote to Franz Rosenzweig in 1926, expressing his concerns about the Zionist ambitions to establish Hebrew as a language of common communication. For Scholem, such a secularization of the "holy tongue" as a merely functional entity would be a grossly precarious endeavour, leading not only to the desecration and forgetting of the sacred language, but also risking a violent and catastrophic "return of the repressed." To try to domesticate or secularize the sacred name, for Scholem, is to underappreciate its "abyssal" quality, the fact that "we live inside this language, as blind men… walking confidently over an abyss" (Ibid., 197). In the terms of the present study, the self-opacity we discern and express at the level of our basic religious idiom exceeds, but also underlies, the relatively superficial parameters of our everyday linguistic practices. All language is "sacred" in the sense that our "confidence" in our seemingly autonomous grasp on the language we use to communicate is premised on a linguistic heritage that we can neither manipulate nor reflectively represent to ourselves. A helpful overview of the context and significance of Scholem's letter to Rosenzweig can be found in "Language and Secularization," Chapter 9 of Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. Barbara Harshaw (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 168-182.

[29] As Derrida writes about Scholem and Rosenzweig, "Hebrew is not, for either of them, a mother tongue, but they live it as an archimaternal or patriarchal language" (Derrida, "The Eyes of Language," 200). This distinction (or "disorder," to use the language of *Monolingualism of the Other*) between mother tongue and archimaternal language recalls the distinction, explored in Chapters Two and Five above, between ethical life and religion as forms of recognition in Hegel's account. On Derrida's analysis, Scholem's writing of the letter in German is a confession, in his "mother tongue," of his complex relation to Hebrew, the "archimaternal" language in which he (and Rosenzweig) most basically, but not most immediately, "lives." The situation of this correspondence is thus one in which the two men, using their most familiar (that is, "ethical"), "mother tongue," speak "in the name" of the sacred ("religious") language that is their absolute substance.

promise heralds the uniqueness of a language to come."[30] Hence, this implicit affirmation is *not reducible* to the speech it affirms; rather, it is a bearing witness to the act of promising that precedes me and on which I as a speaker depend, and of the promise of communication "to come," to which my capacity to speak is answerable.

I want to draw out two points from this quick survey of Derrida's text. First, the I-other "disorder" that, for Derrida, characterizes our basic linguistic identity can be expressed in ways that, as irreducible to any particular expressive act, speak reflexively for this structure of "disorder" as a whole. Such would be the "religious" performance of language, on Derrida's account, in which a particular speech act, beyond its ostensible meaning, affirms my basic dependence on that which is immutably other to me. Second, there is, in addition to this religiously reflexive speech, the reflexive affirmation of the possibility of *translation*, an expression of faith in the principle of communicability to which all particular monolanguages and "disorders" are answerable, based on their inherent exposure to that which is other, foreign, not their own. In addition to the "religious" enactment of the "disordered" nature of language, then, there is a "secular" enactment, one whose function is to affirm, not so much the promises on which I as an individual depend, but rather my promise to others—that is, my answerability to the ideal of translatability and the goal of communication.

For Derrida, then, as categories that refer to particular *ways* of using or inhabiting language, "the religious" and "the secular" are not themselves languages or idioms, but rather are possibilities that coincide at the root of the "disorder" that is monolingualism, the experience of one's most intimate self-possession as being in fact not one's property. For this reason, Derrida can, in "The Eyes of Language," raise doubts about the idea that there could be a neutral, "secular" linguistic medium—a metalanguage—into which other (religious) languages can be translated. Instead, Derrida argues, secularization is only a "manner of speaking" or "surface effect" that sacred language—the only kind of language that truly exists—makes possible in the contact between particular idioms in the context of public communication.[31] Secularity, the

[30] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 67.

[31] In speculating about the dangers of secularizing the sacred language, Scholem represents, for Derrida, the "hypothesis" of a "third language," a "*medium*… that, being neither sacred nor profane, permits the passage from one to the other… translating one into the other." According to Derrida, however, Scholem's letter undermines this hypothesis, suggesting instead that there is "no language in general, no neutral language within which were possible, in order to take place within it, the contamination of the sacred by the profane, …the opposition of the holy and the secular" (Derrida, "The Eyes of Language," 200). Since all language is most basically sacred, the "secular" could never stabilize into a language of its own, but remains a "surface effect" that can be produced within and by sacred language. "We must presuppose," he writes, "in this unique dimension that is the sacredness of language, the power

pursuit of common terms in the midst of irreducible linguistic particularity, could never be a domain or language that I altogether *inhabit*; it is, rather, a way in which I can "comport" myself,[32] a linguistic "epiphenomenon"[33] produced in reckoning with the basic "disorder" of inhabiting a "monolingualism of the other." As opposed to Habermas, then, who understands secular language as its own linguistic domain (i.e., medium) into which other languages are translated (and which might be the mother tongue of secular citizens), secular language, on Derrida's view, is simply a certain capacity possessed by language, a way of taking up language with a view to the impossible—that is, inevitably particular and thus perpetually unfinished—goal of translation ("translation is another name for the impossible"[34]). Just as, in familiar projects of translation, we seek to produce an intelligible contact between diverse languages by, as Derrida says, "playing with the non-identity with itself of all language,"[35] and thus without relying on a neutral, preexisting "metalanguage," so too is "the secular" not a neutral, a-religious mediator into which diverse religious idioms must be translated, but rather is a form of communicability that religious idioms can recognize within and endorse for themselves.

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to produce, to engender, to carry these surface effects, this apparent secularization, this belief in secularizing neutralization, this forgetting of the sacred and this linguistic sleepwalking. It must be that language lends itself to this surface effect, which is not a surface effect, an effect *on the surface*, but an effect that consists in producing surface, this banal flatness, on the surface of which the sleepwalker walks" (Ibid., 202).

[32] "In his own manner," Derrida writes, "Scholem maintains that there is no metalanguage. Secular language as metalanguage, therefore, does not exist in itself; it has neither presence nor consistency of its own. Its title is that of a façon de parler, thus of *comporting itself* toward the only language that is or that matters—the sacred language" (Ibid., 202, emphasis mine).

[33] As Derrida writes, "there is no real secularization, is what [Scholem's] strange confession suggests, in sum. What one lightly calls 'secularization' does not take place. This surface effect does not affect language itself, which remains sacred in its abyssal interior. Epiphenomenality is characteristic of this manner of moving along the surface. Such is also the epiphenomenality of a *manner of speaking of language*, our metalanguage, our manner of speaking of language. The secularized language would thus only be a metalinguistic epiphenomenon, a rhetoric, a façon de parler, a rhetorical effect of metalanguage" (Ibid., 202).

[34] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 57. To be sure, while the goal of a complete translation indeed remains impossible, situations of interreligious or intercultural encounter nevertheless produce the ideal of perfect translation or communicability, an ideal that allows itself to be seized by one particular idiom. Similarly to what we noticed above regarding the term "religion," Derrida writes, "*a* language shall always be called upon to speak about *the* language—*because* the latter does not exist" (Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 69). Avoiding or resisting the hegemonic appropriation of the terms of communication by *one* language or culture, for Derrida, requires the recognition that the goal of translation can only ever be conceived as a *target*, an ideal of communicability "to come," rather than a linguistic "One" that settles into place as the communicative standard. Here again, Derrida's reflections on colonialism are used to make a broader point about the nature of linguistic difference as such. "For Derrida," writes Chow, "the phrase 'monolingualism of the other' cannot be limited to the understanding of the brutality and terror of colonial hegemony, as is indicated in his personal history with the French language as an Algerian Jew... Instead, the history of colonialism, with its innumerable specters of power struggle, should alert us to how language, an other that is by nature multiple and legion rather than unified, dwells (in us) and always dwells (in us) as a future, in a sense of a calling forth of the unknown" (225).

[35] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 69.

3. Forgiveness beyond tolerance

To put this practice of translation into more concrete terms, let us consider, as a conclusion to this discussion, the familiar appeal to the idea of tolerance as a foundational moral principle for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Although it is surely desirable that we remain *at least* tolerant of our religious and cultural others in the context of the public arena, the ideal of tolerance is in fact quite limited. What tolerance implies is that I, in my self-sufficient and self-assured sense of possessing the truth, allow space for claims to truth other than my own. While I do not necessarily agree with such claims, I accept their existence for reasons of peaceful coexistence and mutual benefit. In this way, the *reason* for my tolerant stance does not affect my sense of the truth to which I bear witness; this "other" truth that I tolerate, in other words, has no bearing on my own. Hence, while it may be an effective way of "keeping the peace," the offer of tolerance as a gesture of charity from the standpoint of sovereign self-possession could never genuinely represent the standpoint of religion, which, according to what we have explored in Hegel, is precisely the declaration of one's *inability* to possess the truth, of one's *non*-self-sufficiency or non-sovereignty with respect to one's sense of ultimate value. The standpoint of religion, rather, is precisely a standpoint of *vulnerability* (rather than tolerance or indifference) to the claim to truth of others, since what I acknowledge in religion is my insufficiency with respect to the absolute reality I affirm.

This discrepancy between the "tolerant" and "religious" standpoints returns us to Ricoeur's lecture "Religious Belief," which we considered briefly at the end of Chapter Three. There, I argued that Ricoeur's account of the nature of religious belief presupposes the same understanding of forgiveness that he presents elsewhere in his writing. What I want to suggest here is that it is this intersection of religion and forgiveness that informs Ricoeur's description of how religious belief extends "beyond tolerance," and hence that it is *forgiveness* that allows religious idioms to participate in an interreligious or intercultural politics on their own terms.

Ricoeur opens his lecture with the stated aim of recasting some of the common accusations leveled against religious believers as "intimate difficulties" to be found *within* the self-identity of religious persons. As he explains that "it is in particular the threats of intolerance and violence contained in religious belief that I want to confront, by calling upon the resources of self-criticism that the intelligence inherent in such belief is able to mobilize."[36] Ricoeur's goal

[36] Ricoeur, "Religious Belief: The Difficult Path of the Religious," 27.

is to show that the "intelligence" of religious belief is rooted in the self-opacity that we discover in the depths of our capable agency—the fact that our capacity to act as individuals is derived from a source we do not possess. This basic self-opacity, around which both forgiveness and religion circulate, is the source of a kind of tolerance that, for Ricoeur, bases itself not on a reluctant and resentful acceptance of peace for the sake of self-protection, but rather on an openness to others implicit in the basic fragility of one's own religious conviction. As he writes:

> 'At the very depth of my own conviction, of my own confession, I recognize that there is a ground which I do not control. I discern in the ground of my adherence a source of inspiration which, by its demand for thought, its strength of practical mobilization, its emotional generosity, exceeds my capacity for reception and comprehension.' But then the tolerance that arrives at this peak risks falling down the slope on the other side, that of skepticism: aren't all beliefs worthless? That is to say, do the differences not become indifferent? The difficulty then is to hold myself on the crest where my conviction is at the same time anchored in its soil, like its mother tongue, and open laterally to other beliefs, other convictions, as in the case of foreign languages. It is not easy to hold oneself at this crest….[37]

Ricoeur describes this unstable exposure to what is foreign as the final stage of a "path of tolerance," which leads from the rigid—and intolerant—fixation on one's own grasp of the truth, to a gradual loosening of this grasp in respect to the truth-claims of others, and finally to one's recognition that the ground of one's "adherence" to the truth is in wholly incomprehensible.[38] For Ricoeur, this encounter with one's basic finitude and instability is not a *weakening* of one's conviction but rather a more perceptive awareness of the (excessive) conditions of one's agency and of the need to "confess" one's dependence on realities beyond one's control. The "tolerance" (if the word still fits) available here is one rooted in self-opacity, not self-sovereignty; it is an "intelligence"—a rationality, a willingness to communicate—rooted in the openness to other "tongues" on the basis of our common finitude, of the fact that regardless of our differences I and my "rival" are equally finite with respect to the "source" of our most basic conviction.

Such openness to what is other indeed surpasses what we typically mean by "tolerance." What Ricoeur describes here is not merely an acceptance of the difference of *others*, but an acknowledgment of the difference that resides within *my own* identity in depending on a source whose meaning is not mine to control. But how, exactly, does the shaky ground of my most basic self-assurance, the self-opacity that I discern at the level of my most basic "confession," become the basis for a radical openness to other confessions in which I am unable to assert the privilege

[37] Ibid., 39.
[38] Ibid., 38-9.

of my own "mother tongue"? Do not the risks involved in attending to this self-opacity—that I might lose my grip on my sense of the truth and fall prey to skepticism, relativism, or nihilism—cause me to become—violently—self-protective, insulating myself from other claims to truth?

The goal of this study has been to show that this kind of tolerance-as-openness is not simply possible, but is indeed the very standard to which our most basic convictions—what we typically identify as "religious"—are answerable according to their own logic. Before it is an adherence to a particular tradition, community, or set of doctrines, religion is the recognition of and response to the incomprehensible "source" that engenders, and thus exceeds, one's capacities as a singular individual. To adhere to a religious confession—to practice religion—is therefore to "confess," that is, to express one's basic finitude with respect to the absolute source of one's existence. To locate the roots of tolerance at this "depth" of confession, therefore, would be to anchor one's openness to otherness and difference in the precarious soil of this basic finitude; it would be to communicate, in other words, on the basis of a common *failure*, a shared inability to measure up to the absolute source to which one must necessarily bear witness. Tolerance, in this sense, would not be a gesture of generosity or charity bestowed from one's stable self-assurance, but would be nothing other than an appeal for forgiveness, an appeal for mutual recognition on the "grounds" of our shared *Abgrund*[39] as equally—though differently—answerable to an absolute demand.

As the communicative principle of a politics beyond self-protective tolerance, then, forgiveness makes possible a kind of solidarity of finitude. Forgiveness enables *solidarity*, in the first place, because it works precisely against the indifference ("truth does not matter") and skepticism ("we cannot be sure about truth") that threaten religious conviction according to Ricoeur. Forgiveness reflects a commitment to the *absoluteness* of the religious demand: it is the recognition of a truth that matters supremely, and one that will always exceed our attempts to express it "in no uncertain terms." Hence, to allow this inevitable partiality of our expression of the truth to lead to skepticism or indifference would be (much like Hegel's "beautiful soul") to uphold the ideal of an untainted, unexpressed truth, which would be to leave unanswered the religious call to "confess" and give expression to the source. Forgiveness, by contrast, allows the inevitability of partial action to be the principle of mutual recognition, and thus enables communication on the basis of the common inability to possess the truth.

[39] "I found in Schelling's philosophy of religion," Ricoeur explains, "the powerful theme of the groundless ground, of the *Grund* that is *Abgrund*, the foundation that is abyss. And then, I say to myself: this unsoundable bottom: is this not the very source of life that all receive, but that no one can encompass?" (Ibid., 35)

Consequently, forgiveness institutes a solidarity of *finitude*, in the second place, since it corresponds to the fact that there is no "higher good" that governs from the outside the encounter between religious idioms. Indeed, insofar as the interreligious situation involves differing (and often competing) conceptions of "the good," the demand to engage forgivingly with one's religious "other" must be recognized as it were "from within," that is, according to the logic of one's own religious conviction. The most honest expression of a particular religious confession is one that acknowledges its own finitude, as a practice, with respect to the "ultimate source" it is called to affirm. Such a conviction would express itself inconsistently, hence, were it to deny this finitude in its engagement with the religious other; religion, rather, is exposed to this norm of interreligious engagement according to its own self-conception (as finite). It is not, therefore, that religions ought to be mutually forgiving for the sake of some higher standard; rather, at the level of religious expression—that is, the articulation of "absolute reality"—there is no greater good other than the (conscientious) acknowledgment of idiomatic singularity.

The understanding that religion is on its own terms answerable to the demand to confess (its own) and forgive (others') particularity offers a particular insight regarding the plurality of religious and cultural idioms in the context of public, secular space. The assumption that secular dialogue is premised on a singular, substantive discourse of public reason requires that we treat religions as similarly substantive languages. On this view, the public expression of religion would simply replace the terms of one self-contained idiom with that of another; or rather, it would replace the terms of a self-contained religious *idiom* with that of the supposedly *non*-idiomatic terms of public reason. However, this model misconstrues the actual phenomenon of religion (as precisely *not* self-contained) and, consequently, fails to achieve the communicative situation it envisions, insofar as the term-for-term translation it proposes is premised on a superficial understanding of religion as a self-sovereign discourse.

As we have seen in this application of Derrida's account of language and secularity to Hegel's phenomenology of religion, "the secular," understood as the dialogical space in which diverse religious idioms interact, is not a distinct language or form of discourse, but rather is an orientation available *within* religious idioms in their acknowledgment of their own basic determinacy. The secular is not a meta-religious meta-language into which particular religious idioms must be translated for the sake of a stable and peaceful plurality of basic worldviews. Rather, we should conceive of the secular as the domain of the mutual confession and forgiveness of such basic idioms, insofar as these religious idioms, having no more basic or more

authoritative source on which to draw, are able to reckon with their religious others in terms only of their own basic self-opacity and self-discrepancy. Nor, though, should secular dialogue be thought to rest on some "religious" foundation, as if the openness to and tolerance of others that such dialogue presupposes would extend only as far as a religious idiom will endorse it. Whereas this view portrays religious conviction as authorizing openness to otherness according to its own self-assurance, the goal of this project has been to expose the fracture or opacity at the heart of such self-assurance. It locates within that fracture an openness to otherness as a demand to which religious conviction finds itself answerable, rather than as a superficial form of tolerance it is merely willing to offer.

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