

The self-reflection of the human community

1. Religious practice as self-reflection

The reflections on the nature of religion begins to bring to a close that series of reflections on spirit as social practice – that is, on the series of self-understandings and accounts of what is taken as authoritative that began with the Greek alternative to modernity and ends with the fully modern self-understanding that structures the community that unites the post-revolutionary Kantian conception of autonomy as impersonal rationality with romantic discourse about personal self-choice. These various forms of self-understandings about the self-identity of the community have led to a conception of a form of social practice which is a form of “absolute reflection” – that is, what Hegel calls *absolute spirit*: a given community’s reflection on its essential self-identity and its highest interests through the historical practices and institutions of art, religion, and philosophy.¹

The section on “absolute spirit” is necessary to explain the kind of teleology that has occurred in the move from the Greek *Sittlichkeit* to the culmination of modern life in the uniting of Kantian and romantic conceptions of autonomy. Only when such “reflective institutions” are established – that is, when social practices are established whose function is to reflect on, and thereby to affirm or disaffirm that what a given form of life *takes* as authoritative reasons for belief and action *really are* authoritative reasons – can there be a *teleological* historical progression. Prior to that there can only be a historical “chronology,” a set of changes and alterations without any inherent story to them. A form of life can change its reasons, perhaps in profound ways, for a variety of contingent social and historical reasons. However, unless a form of life develops some way of reflecting on its reason-giving activities, it cannot generate the kinds of self-undermining skeptical discrediting that then *re-quire* and make possible their resolution in some later form of life having its own distinctive account of itself and its own set of reflective institutions. Unless a form of life develops these reflective institutions, it can change in its structure and in what it takes as authoritative for itself, but it cannot have an idea of teleology, of progress, within itself; its change can only be differences, not rational resolutions of earlier dilemmas. A form of life thus becomes *Geist*, “spirit,” by developing the practices whose function is to reflect on what that form of life takes to be the “essence” for itself (to be authoritative for it). This type of reflection thereby introduces “negativity” into the form of life in that this type of reflection discovers within the terms that the form of

life has set for itself certain contradictions and incoherences that engender a skepticism about what it had up until then simply taken for granted. By reflecting on what a form of life takes to be authoritative reasons for belief and action, these forms of reflective practice thereby put into question the self-identity of the agents within that form of life. This prompts a need for reassurance about the "essence," about what is definitive and supreme for that form of life. The series of reflections on "spirit" which lead to the chapter on religion have shown that not only were none of those reassurances successful, but that when they are seen from the standpoint of the succeeding accounts, it becomes clear that they *could not* have been successful within the terms each had set for itself.

In reflecting on what is the "essence" for itself, a form of life reflects on what for it is definitive of what it means to be a person, an agent in that form of life. All forms of absolute reflection are reflections on the forms of character and the highest interests of those forms of character – that is, those interests that have to do with what people take as definitive grounds for belief and action, in short, for living the lives they do. Earlier accounts of the various "formations of spirit" looked at both what people took to be authoritative for themselves (what they took to be the "essence" of things) and how the people in that form of life took themselves to be related to the "essence" (how they took themselves to *know* that which was authoritative for them – in Hegel's terms, what was the "object" of their consciousness). In many of those "formations of consciousness," a religious or quasi-religious conception was taken to be authoritative for people. Having run through the series of "formations of consciousness," however, Hegel has arrived at the point where he can focus on that authoritativeness itself, on what the European community's highest interests must be, given who that community has come to be.²

As a form of absolute spirit, that is, of the human community reflecting on its essential self-identity and therefore on the ultimate ends of life, the practice of religion is a form of communal reflection on the *absolute principles* governing human life. As the self-consciousness of a community, it is "authoritative reflection" on what is authoritative for that community – that is, it is a type of practice that has come to count in that community as being itself warranted to articulate what else in that community is definitive for it. Religion is a form of institutionalized social practice in which a community reflects on what it takes to be the "ground" of everything else that is basic to its beliefs and practices; it is the communal reflection on what for a community in Hegel's terms counts as "existing in and for itself."

For example, one basic problem for religious reflection is the reconciliation of two different aspects of humanity. People are part of the world of natural phenomena, and one of the basic natural facts about them is the crucial fact of their mortality. However, what makes natural humans into thinking, acting *agents* are not these natural facts about them, but their place in a "social space," in their symbolic, cultural world. The natural facts about humans are not, of course, irrelevant to how humans understand themselves in cultural space; the family, the economic system of production and so on are incon-

ceivable apart from obvious natural facts about humanity. They are simply not determinative of what makes humans into thinking, acting *agents*, even if they make a difference to the form that their agency takes. This poses the issue of whether *nature* and *spirit* can be reconciled.

What makes this kind of reflection religious are both the *object* of the concern and the *form* that this concern takes. The objects of religious reflection are the absolute principles governing human life – that is, with what at all times has been understood as the *divine*, as that which is the ground of what is sacred, of ultimate and inherent value to humans, of what constitutes the point of life. The knowledge of the absolute principles governing human life is thus knowledge of what is divine, and it is this kind of knowledge with which all forms of absolute spirit including religion are concerned. Religion thus has a similar content to other forms of communal reflection – namely, human self-identity in terms of what it takes as authoritative in determining the grounds of belief and action. What distinguishes its type of knowledge from other forms of knowledge, so Hegel argues, is the *form* that religious reflection takes – namely, that of *Vorstellung*, which I have rendered here as “representation” and sometimes as “representational thought” to distinguish it from theoretical, conceptual thought. The idea is that religion gives us a self-reflection neither in terms of concepts and theories nor in terms of works of art but in terms of “representations” or, we might put it nowadays, in terms of *symbols*, stories and rites.³ Religion gives us a self-reflection through various symbols and stories, not through conceptually articulated theories or artistically produced works. Nonetheless, it shares with all forms of absolute spirit the key idea that it is, as Hegel puts it, “the spirit that knows itself as spirit,” that knows that it is authoritative as to what counts for it as a ground of belief or action.⁴

To *represent* something in this Hegelian sense is to try to make it present for consciousness in some intuitive sense so that it can be seen or grasped. For example, representational thought is a mode of conceiving of things in which we try to picture certain conceptual relations as relations among entities or even as entities themselves. As we have noted, representational thought can mislead us, since it can suggest to us that we look for substantives where there are none. But representational thought can also be a means of genuine knowledge; it can concretely present to us certain very abstract relations so that they are more easily intelligible. (For example, reflecting on life in terms of certain key religious stories can illuminate our highest interests in new and emotionally gripping forms better than any more dry accounting of fine theological points can do.) Hegel argues that there are genuine developments of thought that can only proceed in such representational form, and religious thought is one of them.

All religious practice is therefore a reflection in representational form on what is ultimately authoritative in human life. In that way, it symbolically presents to us what we take as that which “exists in and for itself.” It tells stories and uses various images to mediate our reflections on who we essentially are and what is absolute in human life. Thus, we might represent God

as a "loving father" (or perhaps better nowadays in our changed social circumstances as a "loving parent"); and for the purposes of this type of reflection on our essential self-identities, that would be fully adequate. Such representational thought helps to structure our more conceptual, discursive knowledge about ourselves and gives us paradigms around which to anchor certain types of claims about knowledge and practice. Whereas philosophy articulates matters in discursive abstract conceptual thought, religion presents matters in representations, in the form of concrete symbols and images. As representing what is ultimate in human life, religious practice moves individual agents out of their natural, egoistic state (their merely personal point of view) into a communal state in which they accept reasons, obligations and proscriptions that for them place objective limits on belief and action. Religion is thus a *representation* of the divine, of the "absolute ground of belief and action," of what "exists in and for itself," and the proper religious *attitude* is therefore that of awe and reverence toward the divine.

At the end of the section on morality and forgiveness, Hegel shows how a conception of a modern community that reconciles its members with each other by transcending the morality of praise and blame must be a religious community of a certain type – that is, not a community based on rigid responsibilities and on the finding of fault or on the idea of us as humans fully transcending the contingencies of our nature, but on a structure of mutual recognition that allows the members of the community to achieve a reconciliation both with each other and with themselves as individuals. The historical construction of self-identity in human communities becomes thereby transformed into the project of *coming to terms* with who we are. This transformation is brought about, so Hegel argues, by the modern community's having become a community in which a certain type of Judeo-Christian morality has come to play a formative role in the *secular* life of the community. In order to understand, however, how this form of a *religious* account of ourselves has come for us to be dialectically transformed into the rational *secular* account of ourselves in a modern community, it is necessary to see how this form of religion is to be understood as itself an answer to problems of self-identity. If a form of religious community – an understanding of ourselves in terms of certain basic tenets of Judeo-Christian morality – is the rational secular solution to problems of the character and the ultimate ends of life of the European community, then we must understand what it is about fully modern religious consciousness itself that gives it this place.

A fully *modern* form of religious consciousness would be a reflection on the absolute principles governing the forms and practices of the modern community, in which we reconcile the modern conception of ourselves as self-determining agents with both the facts of social life and the emerging scientific picture of people as merely natural phenomena governed by the same set of laws as the rest of nature. Hegel argues that modern life has made several failed attempts at establishing a fully modern religious consciousness, but each of these has failed. These forms may be seen in the preceding chapters of the *Phenomenology*, and he thus begins his reflections on religion with

some very general remarks about why these early modern attempts have failed.

All forms of religion are representational reflections on the divine, on what we must regard as not merely valuable but *sacred* in the world. Until the explicit treatment of religion in the chapter dedicated to it, the *Phenomenology* treats religion only as a “form of consciousness” – that is, a way in which subjects take themselves to be aware of what is authoritative for them (the “absolute essence,” as Hegel calls it). In each of these forms (for example, the “unhappy consciousness” and “faith”), there was discussion of an agent’s taking something as “absolute” (as sacred), but the focus of the discussion had to do with the way in which that form of life’s accounts of agents’ taking this or that as “absolute” could be counted as legitimate. The focus of discussion in the chapter on religion, however, is with the sacred itself and how religious accounts of the sacred undermine themselves, break down, and thus require more complete religious accounts.

Religious consciousness is, moreover, not to be understood as a kind of truncated form of theory-building (that is, as a kind of primitive alternative to natural science or philosophy). Religion is not primarily concerned at all with positing supersensible entities to explain the phenomena of experience. It is concerned instead with formulating reflections and beliefs about what is the “absolute ground” of belief itself and therefore on what has “absolute value” for humans, what human agents must take as *sacred* to them. It is thus fully misunderstood if it is seen as a form of “the understanding,” as an account of our awareness of things as grounded in supersensible determining grounds.⁵ For example, accounts such as the argument from design – the idea that since the world exhibits an order, there must be a divine designer of that world – cannot function as fully *religious* reflections, for they focus on what they take to be a good explanation for the determinateness of appearance, not on what we must take to be of value “in and for itself.” Nor could the “supreme being” function as an object of awe and reverence.⁶ The “other” for “the understanding” is simply an abstract entity beyond consciousness, beyond appearance in general. Modern religious consciousness, however, requires an account of how its communal, reflective activity of taking something as authoritative can serve as a ground for taking something to be sacred. (Indeed, part of the historical maturation of religious consciousness involves the development of the separation of “the understanding’s” accounts of appearance in terms of supersensible entities and religion’s concern with what is of ultimate value in human life.)

Nor can the “unhappy consciousness” be a genuine form of fully *modern* religious consciousness. The form of life of the “unhappy consciousness” in late antiquity seeks to secure its self-identity both within its communities of devotion and in its communion with the transcendent supersensible beyond which it cannot attain. The “unhappy consciousness” is a form of life in which what has been taken as authoritative is no longer able to defend itself against skeptical discrediting but in which no alternative account has yet emerged. Thus, the “unhappy consciousness” represents a form of life that

has lost faith in itself, that can no longer really believe in what it once took to be authoritative for itself, and that also has no alternative to its skeptically regarded accounts of itself. In its early medieval form, moreover, the form of life of the "unhappy consciousness" engendered a self-understanding that actually laid the ground for a fully non-religious, secular form of life, since its account of itself as coming to a knowledge of the "essence" of things through a mediator-priest helped to create a view of nature that opened the door for early modern natural science to seek an account of nature in human reason alone. That form of self-understanding that grows out of the early medieval form of the "unhappy consciousness" thus actually undermines many aspects of the religious view and leads to a non-religious, secular view of nature and a search for the ultimate values in human life in some form of naturalism and gratification of the senses.⁷

The "religion of morality" (Hegel's name for the kind of religion associated with the "moral worldview") comes the closest to developing a fully modern conception of religious consciousness, but it still cannot fully understand itself as religious. In the religion of morality, the agent understands himself as a completely autonomous being, divorced from nature. The essence of things is seen to lie in the noumenal willing subject, who does not (who actually *cannot*) surface in the appearing world and whose self-determination and purity of motive are its important features. The self-conception involved in the moral worldview, with its appeals to conscience and irony, leads to the harsh world of praise and blame that can only be lived through in a kind of ongoing mutual hypocrisy. This itself is overcome only by an adoption of a practice of forgiveness and reconciliation, in which people come to terms with their limitations by practicing a secularized version of certain Christian virtues. The practice of "religion as morality" undermines itself in that its own antinomies lead to a community of "beautiful souls" who, in their attempts to overcome the alienation and antinomies of the moral worldview (along with its envy of the happy and its incipient hypocrisy), themselves become a community of mutually accusatory ironists and hard-hearted judgmentalists. Only in realizing that each has presupposed a certain form of rational, self-conscious life as what is of utmost value – only as realizing that it holds such rational, self-conscious self-grounding life to be sacred, to be that which, as Kant held of the moral law itself, we must stand in awe – did the community of "beautiful souls" come to any reconciliation with itself. That is, the "beautiful souls" can come to the type of reconciliation that is needed to affirm that which both the ironists and the judgmental moralists hold as being of ultimate value by ceasing to be a purely *romantic* community and becoming instead a modern *religious* community.

A fully modern religious consciousness thus must articulate the kind of self-understanding that is constitutive of modern individuals, and it must be compatible with the secular worldview that Hegel will argue is in part generated by the kinds of accounts that religion has given of humanity. Moreover, in the ideal case, in modern religious practice each would understand himself to be acting out of a sense of who he is, and he would understand that who he

is is not the result of some determination by a metaphysical entity beyond appearance but of the history that has structured his “social space” in the way that it is. Finally, not only must a fully modern religious consciousness articulate these ideas, if it is to be a fully modern *religious* consciousness, it must be the case that there is something about this fully modern *self-consciousness* that requires a *religious* component – that is, something which *only* religious reflection can perform in modern life.

That religion is a form of absolute spirit, of the human community reflecting on its self-identity without the mediation of a metaphysical other, does not mean that all religions understand themselves that way. In fact, so Hegel argues, because of the manner in which religious reflection is carried out – namely, by representational thought – religious reflection in its own terms tends toward the metaphysical; this is the case even in fully modern religious reflection in which the metaphysical element is in principle undermined. The particular historical institutionalization of any form of religion will thus not be in full congruence with the overall point of religion, although (so Hegel will argue) this can only be apparent to individuals living in and formed by a fully modern community.

Religion is necessarily implicit in any form of life, since any form of life will have certain norms and standards as authoritative for its reason-giving activities. But religion only becomes genuine religion when it is part of “spirit.” A form of life becomes “spirit” when it develops reflective practices whose objects are the authoritativeness of the reason-giving activities of that form of life; as reflective practice, religion has for its objects what is ultimately authoritative in terms of what is of inherent and fundamental value and what is to count as sacred. Thus, the development of religious consciousness is itself a development of various “formations of consciousness,” of the kinds of things that are taken as authoritative and the kinds of ways in which agents take themselves to know such things (that is, of the “authoritative objects” of consciousness and the ways in which agents take themselves to be related to those “objects”), and the development of religious consciousness thus will be subject in principle to the same kind of dialectical progression as the other “formations of consciousness.” Religious consciousness, that is, is a mode by which agents individually and collectively try to develop a coherent self-understanding in coming to a coherent understanding of what is to count for them as ultimately definitive for belief and action.⁸ As such, religious consciousness is internally linked to the “spirit” of a form of life (in Hegel’s terms, to particular “formations of spirit”), and the teleology of religious consciousness is the same as the teleology of other “formations of consciousness.” Thus, religious consciousness develops from a form of “immediate” knowledge, as a form of life taking what is definitive for itself to be based in a kind of non-inferential awareness of some divine, determining ground of belief and action; or as a form of self-conscious reflection in which the “object” of consciousness is taken to be the self’s own determining powers of determining the “divine ground” to appear to the community; or finally as an awareness of the determining ground as “spirit” itself, as the structure of

practices through which a form of life reflects on what has come to be definitive for itself and the ways in which those reflections renew and reassure or transform and splinter what that form of life has come to regard as definitive for itself.⁹

Since absolute spirit is the reflection on the essential self-identity of the human community, it makes some sense to say (as it does not, for example, of politics) that there is only *one* religion, one set of basic interests that tie members of the entire human community together.¹⁰ These have to do with our understanding of ourselves as *finite* rational agents who are born and die and of our attempts at reconciliation with these facts. Unlike the politics of an earlier epoch, which can later appear as completely odd and foreign to us, the reflections of absolute spirit have a kind of timeless presence such that the truths articulated therein can be appropriated by people living in much different circumstances and times.¹¹

Natural religion

The most immediate way in which a community would understand its essential self-identity would be similar to the way in which the human community would first understand itself as a community – that is, in terms of a kind of natural background of secure beliefs that the community's practices reflect a stable order of things that just are what they are, and that the ends of human life are set by this stable unchanging order. The form of religion corresponding to this would be *natural* religion, in which the community understands itself as a product of nature (with nature being understood in a more or less obscurely metaphysical sense by that community). The community's awareness of itself would be in terms of a set of beliefs and practices that would seem as natural to the members of the community as the behavior of animals seems natural to those animals. Both the cultural and the natural orders would be understood to be the same at their source, and the issue for such reflection would thus concern the articulation of what this source is and how it structures both the world of nature and human practice. Hegel takes an illustrative version of this conception of religion to be something like early Zoroastrianism, a religion of what Hegel calls "the luminous essence" (*das Lichtwesen*).¹² The community believes that its "natural" and embedded beliefs and practices must have some kind of ground that explains why their form of life is in accordance with the order of things, and it seeks to intuit that ground in nature. One readily available symbol for such a view would be that of sunrise and light; the essence of things could be seen in terms of their being grounded in the "luminous essence." The sunlight radiates things and brings out their features, whereas night tends to obliterate the individual features of things. Thus, both nature and human social practice have their source in a common "luminous essence." The appropriate symbol for this view of the ultimate determining ground of belief and action is thus that of a great white light that bestows determinateness on things (as a symbol for the

way in which the great world-in-itself brings forth a phenomenal world of individually determinate entities).¹³

However, the very abstract metaphysical conception of the “luminous essence” has no space in it in which human agents can see themselves reflected. By reflecting on themselves through the representations of lightness and darkness, humanity can acquire no more than the most abstract understanding of its essential self-identity, of *who* it is. The divine is simply other than humanity; it is not intelligible to us, nor is it connected in any clear way with specifically human concerns. Although we may stand in the relation of awe and reverence to it, we cannot understand it, whether it has any purposes or how it is related to the appearing world for which it is the “ground.” The underlying essence of all that exists is merely the indeterminate One, from which all is supposedly said to flow, and from this very abstract understanding flow only highly general pieces of so-called abstract “wisdom,” such as “Everything has a common source” or “Everything is good.” The “negativity” of self-consciousness – the development of norms of critical reflection on the kinds of reasons we take for granted – appears also in such religious reflection. If the “light” is what is good, and everything is bathed in light, then how do we explain evil (that is, those things that the religious consciousness on its own terms must accept as the contrary of what they take to be the good), except by denying it or seeing it as posited by some other anti-divine force (such as, of course, darkness).

Reflection on who we are that is mediated by such symbols naturally leads to a proliferation of deities, just as “sense-certainty” as a form of consciousness leads to the form of consciousness called “perception” with its attendant multiplicity of abstract entities and their properties. The kind of natural pantheism of the “luminous essence” tends toward polytheism. After all, if everything has a common source (say, in the luminous essence), then why is anything different from anything else? People likewise manifest many different types of concerns that have to do with the various facets of their natural and social lives. The most natural explanation for this fact of multiplicity is the idea that there are not just *one* source but *many* sources of determinateness. Natural religion thus quite intuitively becomes polytheistic.

Since in natural religion the aspects of cultural life are to be understood in terms of natural facts (of a sort), various basic human passions and conflicts will necessarily be pictured in this polytheism by representative natural entities (for example, various plants and animals) that themselves are naturally symbolic of these passions (for example, lions as natural symbols for courage, snakes as natural symbols for sneakiness and treachery, and so on). These symbolic forms embody and mediate this kind of reflection. People understand their virtues, for example, as coming from, say, eagles. Indeed, the passage from a symbolism of plants to a symbolism of animals entails a passage from a more quiescent understanding of the divine as that which develops itself in nature to a more aggressive understanding of the divine as engaged in a form of life and death struggle with various opposed elements (just as the eagle must struggle for existence against others¹⁴).

Natural religion thus tends to represent good and evil as opposed, as manichean forces (for example, light and darkness, or the conflict among different "animal spirits"). Natural religion, moreover, has the logical tendency to develop accounts of the determining ground of reason and belief (of appearance in general) as lying not in one abstract thing (such as the "luminous essence") but in the *process* of conflict itself between various divine forces represented by symbols of light and darkness or in terms of symbols of animal life. Because of this, it cannot offer any reconciliatory vision for humanity; it must see life as eternally unreconciled, as existing in a space of eternal conflict among competing powers or divinities. In natural religion, the divine powers can thus have no real interest in human concerns. Only the religious agents themselves have concern about the divine, about that which they take to be determining and definitive for them. However, the religious *consciousness* of this "eternal process of conflict" is that which *represents* the process to itself, and as the form of life comes to offer forms of reflection on the constant movement of the "eternal conflict" (for example, in practices of meditation or in certain rites), natural religion logically develops a form of self-consciousness about how the religious agent himself stands beyond the conflict. Natural religion, as reflective social practice, thus logically tends to dissolve itself as it tries to offer accounts of what it takes to be the divine – the inherently, ultimately valuable and determining in human life – in terms of these symbols of conflicts of light and darkness or between abstractly opposed powers.

Natural religion and its attendant problems are brought to a culmination, Hegel argues, in the religion of the Egyptians.¹⁵ In ancient Egyptian religion, the human community learns to represent to itself what it takes as its essential truths by representing all of the different animal gods as expressing various realities about life. The gods, moreover, are *represented* by artifacts (for example, statues) produced by an *artisan* (*Werkmeister*). The artisan is the result of the religious consciousness that becomes self-conscious as representing the process of conflict among the gods; the artisan is, however, not self-conscious of his representing activity *as representing* so much as he simply produces artifacts according to social norms as to how this or that god is to appear (as an owl, a falcon, or as a more mysterious mixture of animal and human forms).¹⁶ The artisan is thus to be distinguished from an *artist*. The artisan understands himself as fashioning natural material that is already ready to hand in the way that simply fits conventional standards; that is, he simply fabricates various artifacts according to communally accepted norms as to what the artifact is supposed to look like. An artist, on the other hand, understands himself (and is understood by others in his community) *as an artist* to the extent that he understands his activity to be a reflection on that which the community takes as definitive for itself. The artist is *reflective* about the truth of what is ultimate for his community, and his artifacts are fashioned by him to present those truths; the artist's activity is thus inherently teleological, as involving a conception of fashioning things so that they better represent the truth about these ultimate values and beliefs. The arti-

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san's activity is not teleological; he changes the shape of his objects as the community's norms change without any reference as to whether the later or earlier norms are "closer" or "further" from the truth. The artisan of religious consciousness thus simply accepts certain things about the divine as "given," as taken for granted, whereas the artist of religious consciousness takes the divine to be accessible only through an act of reflection.

In Egyptian religion, nature and spirit are both represented as having a common divine source in something that is itself *both* nature and spirit. The gods of ancient Egypt were the concrete reflections on this question of the self-identity of the Egyptian community, for they embodied in themselves the peculiar mixture of animal forms with each other and of human and animal forms together that nowhere appear in the phenomenal world but that symbolize what are taken to be the underlying hidden truths about that world. The underlying essence of things is seen as having a kind of self-consciousness that is something *like* human self-consciousness and is therefore partially intelligible to us, yet is also very different from human life and is therefore partially unintelligible to us. In order to express this conception of the "essence" of appearance as being something that is both a part of nature and also self-conscious, the artisan is led to mixing the natural forms into more human shape, and some of the familiar gods of Egypt appear with, for example, the heads of animals and the bodies of humans. Natural religion thus creates a kind of religious account of humanity in which it is possible to form an understanding of the metaphysical essence of things to be not nature per se, but a kind of mysterious union of nature and spirit. To the extent that humans are part of nature yet are not part of it – to the extent that the distinction of nature and spirit remain in this account only very crudely opposed – it makes sense to think of the hidden essence of things as itself mixing nature and spirit in strange and mysterious ways, toward which the attitudes of devotion and awe are appropriate. Thus, although the determining ground of appearance is depicted through the various statuary, obelisks and the like, the actual determining ground itself comes to be understood as not actually appearing *in* them but as remaining *beyond* them and being mysterious and mostly unavailable for human thought. The works themselves are only *symbols* of an essential world beyond the realm of the appearance of the natural world.¹⁷ (Hegel thinks that the paradigmatic form for this kind of self-understanding is architectural: planes and lines that enclose the body either as a habitat or as a grave.)

In doing this, however, the artisan comes to see *himself* symbolically mirrored in the work (for example, a statue) in the way that the other forms of natural religion with their attendant animal gods could not allow. In such a form of religious reflection, the artisan would understand himself (and would be understood by others in the practice of natural religion) to be fashioning natural shapes according to socially accepted, simply "given" principles. However, the kind of reflection on self-identity prompted by the artifacts of such artisanship leads to an account of such artifacts as being *symbolically representative* of an "inner essence" of things that involves something like

human form. Once the move is made to understanding the artifacts as *symbolic* of some "deeper," "inner" truth that also has a human form (of sorts), religion itself becomes more self-conscious in its reflections on the principles governing humanity. But as natural religion, the object of its reflections must remain something "given," something that is apprehended by the religious consciousness and which cannot itself necessarily be comprehended.¹⁸

To understand his work in this way, however, changes the artificer's task for himself; the task ceases to be the merely technical problem of how to fashion, for example, a proper statue of a hawk but that of how the artisan's intuition of a set of "deeper" and "hidden" truths can be given adequate expression. This change in the understanding of the relation between a symbol and what it symbolizes has fundamental implications both with how the artisan and his community understand what he is doing and with understanding whether he should even be taken as an *artisan* at all. For example, it is a technical problem for the artisan as to how best to produce a statue of a hawk so that it better represents some favored natural quality (for example, prowess in hunting); fashions in this can change and develop, and different artisans can be better or worse at it. Underlying that view of the artisan's role is the understanding that a statue possesses a perfectly natural relation between itself (the statue of a hawk) and what it symbolizes (prowess in hunting).

However, once the inner truth being expressed is not seen as standing in a *natural* relation with the symbol – that is, once the problem is seen as lying precisely in the *indeterminate* relation between the symbol and what it symbolizes – then the problem can no longer be purely technical. The problem becomes instead how to unite the naturalistic and human prototypes with a form that is more conducive to expressing the so-called "deeper," "inner" truth. In order to do this, however, the artisan must be understood to be possessing special insight into these "hidden" truths about human life, for otherwise he could not even begin to know how to craft the proper statue.

The artisan and his community must therefore come to hold that he is not so much an *artisan* fashioning statues of natural entities (plants or animals) in the accepted style, instinctively shaping material into its proper form but someone who must possess an "insight" into a range of mysterious and hidden truths. In this way, the religious consciousness comes to understand him not as an artisan but as the *artist* of a cult who creates works that capture these "hidden" truths about what are the divine grounds of human life. Out of the possibilities created for them by natural religion, the ancient Egyptians themselves created an account of the relation between nature and spirit that made it possible to think of the opposition between them in a way that both played up their difference and that brought the divine closer to the human. They were thus able to move away from natural religion to a more reflective religion and thus historically enable a move into spirit – *Geist* – proper. The underlying sense or point of the religious practices of the Egyptians had to do with a reflection on what it is to be a human agent. The transformation within their religious practices of *artisanal* activity into self-conscious *artistic* activity created the possibility of *reflecting* on whether the "artist" was not just "get-

ting it right" in terms of certain socially established norms of fabrication and symbolization but in terms of whether he was presenting a reflective version of what the community had come to take as definitive for itself. The *artisan* produces his artifacts in light of what has come to be taken as the norm for how, for example, a statue of Osiris should look; the *artist* begins to produce works that embody a communal reflection on whether what has been taken as a valid statue of Osiris is indeed *really* a valid portrayal of what is truly divine. With that creation of the social means for reflecting on what a community has come to take as authoritative for itself, a dialectical transition is effected to a different form of religious life that is historically exemplified in the passage from the world of ancient Egyptians to that of the ancient Greeks.

The religion of art: Greek life

Beauty, truth and divinity. The ancient Greek form of life with its characteristic self-understandings arose out of the religious accounts of human life created by Egyptian religion's completion of the accounts of life in terms of natural religion. Natural religion had depicted the divine grounds of belief and action in terms of some parts of nature abstracted and made into symbols, and Egyptian religion had transformed that symbolic natural ground into something that mixed both nature and spirit together. Egyptian religion therefore tacitly brought the difference between spirit and nature to the forefront of human reflection in the way it represented the metaphysical basis of human life as resting in something that was not simply nature but the mysterious complex of nature/spirit/humanity that constituted the Egyptian divinities. In the Greek form of life, this account is sharpened into a symbolic presentation of the gods as being very much human. Out of their earlier natural gods, the Greeks represented to themselves a more nearly human set of gods as evolving and eventually triumphing over the nature-gods. Thus, in the Greek form of life, the *divine* comes to assume a *human* form, and because of this, these gods and the self-understandings they represented were best expressed and understood in works of art. The gods are seen as fulfillments of human beauty and perfection, similar to us yet also radically unlike us. They are like us in that they assume human form; they are unlike us in their immortality and thus their incomprehension and indifference to many of the basic passions and motivations of humanity. As eternal, they are, unlike humans, untroubled by the natural facts of birth and death. The Greek form of life thus resolved in its own way the difficulties left over in the Egyptian fulfillment of natural religion in that it saw no need to conceive of a single source – nature/spirit – in order to give an account of the absolute principles of human life. It now conceived of the divine as very much like humanity and divine ends as thus more intelligible to us than the ends of an unintelligible natural world. In natural religion, the divine – the ground of what is sacred, of ultimate and inherent value to humans – is itself indifferent to human concerns; in Greek religion, the divine is conceived as somewhat closer to human concerns.

Greek religion and Greek art are combined in the presentation of the Greek understanding of the divine. The divine for the Greeks is represented as human perfection – specifically, of the Greek ideals of male and female beauty. Both art and religion are types of absolute spirit, that is, practices which offer reflections on what has come to be taken as authoritative for a community; in Greek life, art and religious practice coincide. Art is reflection on what is authoritative by means of the production of beautiful artifacts; beauty is, in Hegel's terms in his lectures on aesthetics, the “sensuous *appearance* (*Scheinen*) of the idea,” the rational coherence of sensuous appearance.¹⁹ For the Greek conception of divinity, the artist who produces a work of beauty therefore also presents the divine; the artist who wishes to craft a sculpture of, for example, Apollo or Aphrodite, need only concentrate on what a beautiful young man or woman would look like in order to present an accurate image of Apollo. Beauty and truth (at least about divinity) thus fuse together for the Greeks, and the Greek religion is therefore the *religion of art*. The serenity of the Greek gods, untroubled by the *natural* fact of mortality, is captured in the statues of them; philosophical reflections, for example, on their eternal nature must measure up to that understanding rather than evaluate the gods from the standpoint of independent thought. (For this reason, Hegel thinks, genuine philosophical reflection was profoundly destabilizing for Greek life.) Likewise, the conflicts between gods and humans are best captured in epic and tragic poetry, not in abstract speculations about the foundations of knowledge. It is this understanding of what was involved in Greek life and why it had to fail on its own terms that led Hegel to his belief that this kind of fulfillment of the practice of art was achieved only in ancient Greek art and indeed *could* only be achieved in Greek art.²⁰

Hegel begins his discussion of Greek life by focusing on the way in which in the transition from Egypt to Greece, the artist's self-understanding necessarily must change because of the change in the conception of the divine. In coming to understand himself as an artist, the artisan of natural religion comes to see his task in a different light. He must create something out of natural material that expresses the “inner essence” of the community (what for it is authoritative) but is not itself simply a piece of nature. This would be the kind of art that seems to have an *immediate* presence to it, and it finds its expression in ancient Greek art. In such a work of religious art, one would supposedly behold the divine presence immediately in the work. The work would not be a *representation* of the divine through symbols, which would leave it to the beholder to infer the characteristics of the divine on the basis of the representation. Rather, it would actually *present* the divine fully before one. One would behold the divine in the work (for example, a statue of Apollo) without having to make any further inferences. Thus, the initial steps of the “religion of art” take over from natural religion the idea that the divine is an immediate object of religious consciousness, something directly apprehended without any further knowledge being necessary.

However, because in casting, say, a statue, the artist in the Greek form of life understands that statue as bringing the god forth without any interven-

tion either on the artist's part or on the part of the beholders of the work, the artist at first cannot understand himself as fully creative. Although he understands that he is not merely an artisan putting things into their "natural" forms, he does not understand himself as putting anything of *his* own into the work any more than the beholders are putting something of themselves into it. Since (for example) Athena actually appears in the work, he is not constructing a work that is *his* understanding of how, for example, Athena is to be understood. The work of art is therefore an object that is independent of him, that depicts its truth without any contribution from him. Thus, the artist, although thinking of himself as an artist, still conceives of himself along the lines of being an artisan.

There is a conceptual development, however, from natural religion, and that concerns the form which religious art takes. The statue that represents the God assumes a human and not an animal form. In natural religion, divinity took on animal and plant forms. But the facts about spirit – the self-understandings involved in the practices of the community – are not natural facts. The "facts" about spirit are contained not in the natural facts about human life but in the kinds of practices and norms that together constitute the "social space" within which the self-identity of its members takes shape. In Greek art, this comes to the foreground of artistic representation. By representing the gods as human-like, the Greeks were able to articulate a different conception of themselves than would have been possible in natural religion. They were able to gain a more determinate (although still abstract) form of self-knowledge in thinking of the divine as human in shape.²¹

However, the representation of the god cannot be understood by this form of life (at least at this stage in the development of its self-understanding) as a *representation*. The statue is not a *representation* of the god; it is the presence of the god itself that is beheld by the members of the cult by virtue of the presence of the statue to them. The god is present in the statue, and we intuit him (or her) in seeing the statue. The artist therefore can only understand himself as a fabricator, someone who makes things, not someone who creates things. The statue must be seen as having, so to speak, inspired its own creation.²² The god who is beheld in the statue is a perfect entity (he displays human qualities to perfection) and yet the god is also a non-human entity (he displays an indifference to human life that is also characteristic of nature's indifference to human life, while at the same time he sometimes takes pity on humans in a way typical of humanity itself).

If it is to provide a means of self-conscious reflection on self-identity, the work of art must be linked to human self-conscious activity; it must be understood as being an artifact, not a product of nature. If it is seen to animate itself, the work cannot proffer much of a means of mediating the reflections of individuals. If it is to be understood as *art* and not as a relapse into natural religion, the work must therefore be understood in its relation to the artist's activity. If the statue is seen as animating or ensouling (*beseelen*) itself, then it cannot be seen as coming to an appearance through any *human* mediation, however human the statue may look. If the presence of the god is

to be in some way human, then it must be linked with self-conscious human activity, and it can only do this if the artist or the community itself plays a role in bringing the god to view. The god cannot simply appear on his own; he must be assisted in his appearance in some way by the act of the community. In seeing the divine – that which governs the absolute principles concerning human life – as approaching the human and as coming to understand human intervention as essential for the appearance of the divine, Greek religion revises its account of the divine, taking it in the direction of conceiving of the absolute principles directing human life as coming from humanity itself – that is, toward a conception of spirit as the human community self-consciously reflecting on its self-identity as a human community.

This signals a crucial change in the self-understanding of the community. The members of the community had understood themselves simply to be beholding the presence of the god. However, they come to see that only through their activity can the god be present. This change in self-understanding is part of the way in which the artist gradually comes to understand himself not just as an artisan but as an artist. As the community comes to have this self-understanding – that of creating a work in which the god can appear – it too comes to understand itself differently. It comes to see itself as playing a determining role in how what is definitive for itself takes the shape it does.

However, once it comes to see this as its role, it also comes to understand that statuary is an imperfect vehicle for this type of understanding. The reciprocal interplay between the community's activity and the appearance of the god demands a type of work in which the appearance of the god is reflective of both the self-conscious activity of the artist and the community in bringing about that appearance, and in which the self-conscious nature of the god is not tied into something so obviously lacking in self-consciousness as a statue. A form of art involving language is much more suited than statuary for this role, and, so Hegel argued, something like the hymn practiced by the cults of ancient Greek life stepped into the space of logical possibilities created by the development of this kind of reflective practice. Language is, after all, the major mode in which we appear to each other as agents and subjects. Language is fully intersubjective, and it nonetheless expresses the individuality of the person speaking. Language is also a complete expression of thought; the thoughts expressed by language are not hidden essences or entities standing "behind" the words; the language and its use *are* the meanings.²³

The religious overcoming of alienation. In the hymn to the god, the community creates a work of art that helps it to understand its own determinative role in the appearance of the divine. Whereas natural religion had seen the divine as something outside of human life (in nature) that determined human life according to its own laws, the Greek form of life sees humanity's own acts as partially constitutive of the appearing of the divine. Not only do the gods partially resemble humanity, humanity's actions are necessary for the gods to appear. Humanity begins, that is, to see the absolute

principles governing human life not as imposed by something alien to their concerns but as something that is intimately connected with their concerns.

In coming to this kind of understanding of the divine, the Greek religious consciousness fashions for itself an understanding of the divine with which it can be "at home," or "with itself."²⁴ Ultimately, the agent can only be "with himself" in a social situation in which the determining ground is constituted by the practices of his community, and those practices have a kind of internal rationality to them that makes it both appropriate and necessary for the agent to identify with them completely. But there is more to it than merely being "at home with oneself" in a community. Hegel also speaks of the agent's being *in* the action.²⁵ An agent is *in* his action if that action is such that the agent can identify with the action, see it as embodying who he takes himself to be, and if the agent is not *in* the action, then he may be said to be *alienated* from it. Only in acting does the subject acquire a self-identity and any concrete, visible presence in the world. (Thus, since the "beautiful soul" of romanticism refuses to act, he cannot have any concrete existence in the world of appearance.) A further sense of the subject's "being with himself" is thus that he not be alienated from his actions, which, as we have seen, is only possible in a "social space" in which there are no fundamental, essential irrationalities. In those forms of life (of spirit) in which the structure of "social space" is essentially contradictory, the subject will experience a deep sense of being alienated from himself or from his social environment.

In Greek life (on Hegel's view of it), the agent finds such an identification (at least at first) in that the institutions and practices of Greek life were internally rational enough to make a claim on his identifying with those practices, since in Greek ethical life the subjective certainty of self-identity and the affirming structures of mutual recognition meshed. In following out the demands of a social situation with its associated roles and duties, the agent is "with himself" to the extent that these socially determining factors characterize him as a rational agent, such that he does not take any of these social requirements as being in any sense alien to him.

The religion of the ancient Greeks embodied this idea of "being with oneself." The religious hymn unites the individual and the community in a practice that is understood as calling forth the appearance of the god. Each therefore finds that in participating in the hymn, he is encountering the divine – what is of ultimate and inherent value to that community – in himself and in the community as a whole. Each finds, that is, that in following out what the *community* determines he is to do, he is doing that which his personal point of view demands of him.²⁶

Hegel contrasts the way in which the hymn is used to call forth the presence of the god and the Greek practice of consulting oracles. He argues that the role of oracles in Greek life and religion is to be understood as a holdover of the genesis of the Greek gods from the gods of nature (the titans of Greek mythology, who were vanquished by the Olympians). Oracles represent a conceptually more primitive formation of religious consciousness. Interpreting the throwing of dice or the reading of entrails comports well with the kind

of self-understanding of natural religion, since in it the divine is taken as something ultimately unintelligible to us and which reveals itself in natural symbols. As the indeterminate ground of the determinateness of appearance (well represented by the light of sunrise), the divine has no basic commonality with human life that can be discerned. Being so different from us, it cannot be really understood by us; indeed, the nature of the difference cannot even be stated, since the divine is taken to be unknown. Thus, it follows that the utterances of the divine must be mysterious, in "another language" and the best one can do would be to learn to "read" its mysterious utterances (from bones or entrails) as best one can. The divine is supposed to be found in the mysteries of nature; therefore its utterances must themselves take the form of natural events (smoke, rustlings in the trees, etc.) Interestingly, rather than espousing the romantic view that was then beginning to be articulated in his own day, namely, that primitive people were less alienated than modern people and more in touch with nature, Hegel argued the opposite: Primitive forms of life are *more* alienated from each other and nature than are modern forms of life. The conception of divinity found in natural religion is fully alien even to the people who are most in its grasp.²⁷

In early Greek life (in the abstract work of art), the god makes an appearance because of the activity of the community, and in the activity of the community, the god (not a representation of the god) is taken to be fully present to the participants. Certain truths about the essential self-identity of the participants are therefore manifested to them. But because the gods are represented as individuals and as the divinities governing a particular people, it is logical to understand their peculiar utterances as being similar to the contingencies of an individual's deliberations. Thus, the god is seen as deciding what is best for the community of which he is the god by deliberating in a fashion analogous to the way in which a person deliberates – for example, perhaps similar to the way in which Socrates claimed that he relied on his personal daemon, his own oracle, to make particular decisions about with whom he should keep company. (The example is Hegel's.) In this way, the utterances of the oracle become humanized in a way which is not possible for a purely natural religion. It is typical of the conceptual development of Greek religion that even its naturalistic holdovers, such as belief in oracles, would be transformed into a more human form. As being the god of a particular people, he takes a concern for that people's welfare, and his deliberations are about what to do with and for the people for whom he is the deity. The oracle, rather than being something mysterious lying behind appearance becomes instead something that is more congenial to human concerns.²⁸

The cult. Speech and statuary – human participation and the god – come together in the Greek cult. In the cult, one sings hymns before the statue in order to behold the presence of the god. The cult is the practice in which the people reflect on the absolute principles of their lives. However, in its attempt to reveal the divine truth immediately in the minds of the participants, the form of self-reflection on the divine practiced in the cult is only a very abstract form of reflection on what is absolute in human life. In its under-

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standing of what it is doing (bringing the god to presence in the minds of the participants), the cult attempts, however abstractly, to unite nature and spirit, but it does this by doing two very different things. On the one hand, the cult attempts to highlight the unessential, contingent aspects of human life in terms of the eternal divine necessities, yet on the other hand it attempts to show just how essential human self-conscious practice is in calling forth the presence of the divine. The practices of the cult bring out this contradiction fully. In natural religion, people simply acknowledged themselves to be at the mercy of the divine, to be themselves merely contingent, unessential aspects of the world, and the kind of self-knowledge gained was thus abstract and alienating. In the Greek cult, a richer and more determinate form of self-knowledge is gained, for in it the participants come to reflect on the nature of their own activity and to see that activity as itself essential to the bringing forth of the divine for human witness.²⁹

It is therefore not completely accidental that the cult develops some mode of natural sacrifice, in which, for example, goats are sacrificed or the fruits of Ceres and Bacchus are consumed.³⁰ By sacrificing something that belongs to *nature*, the individual in effect displays a devaluing of what belongs to him as a contingently existing individual in favor of what he recognizes as the underlying universal essence of nature and spirit. The act of sacrifice is a kind of reflection on what is of absolute value in the world: not the purely contingent aspects of individual life nor the contingent effects of nature but the essential and abiding aspects of divinity in its quasi-human form. In the act of sacrifice, however, the individual participant brings himself into a kind of reflective unity with the essence of things. Moreover, in consuming the wines of Bacchus, the participants assimilate the divine into themselves and are capable therefore of displaying the divine in their own humanity.³¹

In natural religion, the underlying essence of things is seen as utterly distinct from human life. However, in the practices of the ancient Greek cults – in their acts of devotion and sacrifice – the divinities become conceived as more congenial to human life. Since the divine is that which is of absolute and not contingent value, as that which is necessary, the gods must be seen to have brought this about themselves, for they have assumed determinate forms of existence and have given part of themselves over to humanity. By making themselves into participants without whose participation the god could not appear, the members of the cult create the “social space” in which it will be possible for them to acknowledge their own determining power in the way in which things are conceived. They no longer take themselves to know the divine immediately but only in terms of the shared activity between the divine letting itself come to presence before them and their activity of calling forth the divinity.³²

The practices of the cult thus lead to a transformed type of self-understanding. The individuals no longer value their own contingent lives below that of the unknown mysterious divine essence. Instead, they find their conscious lives affirmed by the practices of their religion, they find their self-conscious lives to be an ingredient in the determining essence of things (in the

appearances of the gods), and they find the gods to be more like them than would have been possible in the earlier conceptions of natural religion. The people who reflected on their lives in terms of the earlier forms of religion had to conceive of themselves merely as subject to a kind of divine power about which they could know little. In the Greek cults, on the other hand, the human community and the gods are conceived as standing in something more like that of an affinity for each other. The so-called mysteries of the cults (particularly the mysteries of the Dionysian cults) express this understanding of the divine. Their mystical nature expresses the cryptically articulated consciousness of the unity of human self-consciousness with that which is divine in the world. This unity is the unity of the vaguely informed self-understanding of the human community as not being completely under the sway of unknowable metaphysical forces (represented typically in terms of lightness and darkness or in terms of animal deities) but as having some determinative power over its destiny. What is rational in these forms of mystical life is this belief, articulated through religious symbols, that the practices of the community are not metaphysically of a different order than the underlying essence of the world and that reflection on who we essentially are is not a reflection on anything fundamentally different from the metaphysical nature of things.³³

The revelry of the bacchantes and the festivals in which these practices were refined all played a role in articulating for the ancient Greek form of life who they were. So Hegel argues, even the festivals at which athletes were admired had a religious significance for the Greeks, since the young athlete embodied for them a kind of human and yet fragile beauty that found its non-fragile expression in the statues of the gods.³⁴ The young athlete in this sense was the *living work of art*, a human who gave us some flesh and blood representation of the appearance of a god.³⁵ The Greek religion thus moves the Greeks fully away from a conception of the divine as something radically different from humanity toward a conception of the divine as being very much like humanity; indeed, the divine becomes conceived as having an affinity with the self-conscious life of a people.³⁶

The development of Greek religion as a series of individual cults, each with its own god, lays the ground for a uniting of the various gods into a collection of gods, a pantheon, in which not just a single group of people but humanity as such can be represented. The development of the pantheon marks a crucial stage in Greek self-understanding. The story of the struggle among the gods results in the triumph of the more spiritual gods over those of nature; the titans lose out and are dethroned, and Zeus becomes the commanding deity.³⁷ The more human-like gods triumph over the purely natural forces, and in this way, the early Greek forms of religious practice enabled the Greek people to understand in representational form the emergence of "spirit" not as a *natural* phenomenon but as constituted by ways in which the community's social practices give shape to forms of self-consciousness.³⁸

Religious practice is reflection on the divine, on what is ultimately of value for a form of life. It is thus a reflection on the essential self-identity of a

people, on where they stand on the issues that for them are of fundamental importance. In uniting the gods into one pantheon and in moving away from the sheer “givenness” of natural religion, the Greek form of life fashioned itself as “spirit,” as having essential to its self-conception its reflections on what is authoritative for itself. In making the Greek form of life into a reflective form of life (into “spirit”), Greek religion thereby created a need for itself to give an account of why it took the things it did to be authoritative for itself. It had to offer an account of how it was that this form of life could come to be such that these conceptions of the divine could be legitimated as being genuine. In other words, by creating a form of self-reflection, it also created a need for reassurance that what it took as authoritative *really* was authoritative – in short, that its self-identity as a form of life was what it claimed to be. If what is ultimate in life cannot be found in some kind of immediate, direct apprehension of the divine (such as natural religion thought it could do) but only in some type of reflective practice, then religious practice itself had to move toward a form in which it could offer a reflective account of why what it took to be definitive for life really was definitive. The teleology of the Greek practice of religion thus motivates it to move to a conception of religious practice as lying in a *spiritual* work of art – that is, a form of religious reflection in *art*.

Epic. The Greek form of life thus was led through its religious practices to affirm its sense of the divine in the construction of art, in the self-reflection on what is of ultimate value in terms of determining its self-identity. It does this in two ways: It determines its self-identity by self-consciously reflecting on its *differences* from other forms of life and how it conflicts with them; and it determines its self-identity by self-consciously reflecting on its own *internal* principles and the possible conflicts these principles can have with each other. The Greek form of life filled this in first through its *epics* (such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and second through its *tragedies* (such as those written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides).

In an epic, as Hegel later explains in his *Aesthetics*, a form of life reflects on its essential self-identity by focusing on its conflicts with another form of life, particularly in war, and how it comes to an awareness of who it is by virtue of this conflict. An epic embodies the form of life’s reflection on its self-identity not through the practices of the cult (the singing of hymns to the statue of the god in which the god appears) but in the construction of a poetic narrative of how that form of life came to determine itself and discover who it was. An epic tells the story of how a determinate group of people with their own form of life have come to self-consciousness about who they are because of a conflict with some other group of people that forced them to develop that sense of who they were. Because the outcome of an epic is a self-conscious affirmation of who they are as a people, it must therefore begin with a lack of such self-conscious awareness. Thus, the actions taken by the characters of epics must be taken without much or any reflection about self-identity on the part of the characters. They simply do what they have to do, given who they take themselves to be, and the result of their doing what they had to do is a

people's coming to awareness of who they are even though this is not the aim of the protagonists. Thus, the epic tells the story of how certain individualities – the mythical heroes of the past – established the self-identity of a certain form of life by their acting as they did in circumstances in which they were challenged by another form of life.³⁹

Epics thus tell the story not of a *founding* of a form of life by early heroes but of that point at which the form of life is itself already established but has not yet come to a full *self-consciousness* of who it is. The people in it are taken as knowing who they are, but they do not reflect on this self-identity; they simply are immediately who they are, and they act on the basis of that self-understanding. The more prosaic aspects of a people's life – its laws, its institutions for the administration of economic life and so on – have to be supposed not yet to exist; instead, the form of life must be seen to be seemingly natural to the people involved in it, to be something that informs each of their self-understandings without their having to think about it or administer it.⁴⁰ For this reason, epics can only be mythical remembrances of a fabled past time when the heroes knew who they were, did what they had to do, and in doing so laid the basis for the community's self-consciousness.

For the Greek form of life, the creation of its epics mark a conceptual break from its origins in natural religion. The Greek epics are structured around a reflection on the absolute principles governing Greek life; thus, they form a reflection on what is divine and on the relation between humanity and divinity. Such epics are possible only as the narration of a form of life that has developed a means of seeing the *self-consciousness* of its members reflected in their understanding of the divine. As long as the divine is represented simply as a dominant natural force, as indifferent to humanity and unintelligible to it, the divine cannot be understood as having a correspondence with humanity in any way. It is instead something alien to humanity, something that rules over humanity and nature but cannot itself be understood. The use of such representations does not give a people any means to reflect on themselves as self-conscious agents; they can only see themselves as contingent subjects of some divine power.⁴¹

In telling a narrative of how a people came to be who they are through their conflicts with other peoples, an epic tells a particular kind of story of the relation between humans and the divine. The humans strive to fulfill their plans and ambitions, and they act out of their passions (out of their sense of who they are). Since the epic is the story of a people and their form of life, the characters of the epic must be embodiments of that form of life in condensed form. They must thus be capable of *freely* acting on their own, of making their own decisions and of expressing their sense of who they are. Yet on the other hand, the circumstances of the epic must be such that the people involved really had no choice. They did what they *had* to do, given who they were and what the circumstances were.⁴² The link between this conception of free personality, worldly circumstances and the gods is that of *fate*. The heroes of the epic act freely in that they act out of a sense of who they are and

of the passions bound up with that sense of self-identity, yet what they do may be foreseen by them themselves since it has a necessary outcome to it.⁴³

Thus, the Greek epics present what at first may appear to be a largely confused and contradictory picture. On the one hand, the epics tell a story of fate and necessity – that is, of what has been ordained. On the other hand, they tell a story of individuals freely pursuing certain goals, while at the same time acting out of certain passions related to who they are. The Greek epic thus seems to run the danger of becoming either a story in which humans become only the playthings of the gods (and thus collapsing back into a form of natural religion), or in becoming a purely secular story in which the gods play only a peripheral or no role at all. It is therefore unclear to whom the actions undertaken are to be ascribed. The individual heroes are necessary to the telling of the epic, for without them nothing happens, and without the hero the gods are powerless to effect their ends. Yet it might seem pointless for the heroes to try to effect their own ends, since fate determines what is to be. Moreover, the gods themselves enter the affairs of the world through the actions and passions of humans, yet because of their immortality, they are ultimately indifferent to these affairs. Even the gods themselves may be seen as confusedly drawn figures; like humans, they scheme, plan and act, yet their plans cannot have the same effect as humans, since for them there is no risk involved; nothing at stake for these gods, since they are eternal.

The world of the gods is linked to the world of humans through the singer (the minstrel).⁴⁴ What links the gods to the minstrel, so Hegel argues, are the heroes of legend (such as Achilles and Odysseus).⁴⁵ The heroes represent the people and their form of life, and acting on their sense of *who* they are, they do what they *must* do. Yet the heroes' actions are determined by the larger plan that the gods have thrown in their way. By arranging the circumstances in such and such a way, the gods have constructed things so that the heroes (such as Achilles) will freely act in an ordained fashion because of who they are. In this way, the independence of the gods and the independence of the actors is provisionally maintained.⁴⁶

However, in arranging events so that the community will come to a self-consciousness about who it is, the gods evidence a concern for the community's coming to such an awareness. The epic thus presents a certain kind of mutual participation between humans and the gods, since without their joint participation, the epic cannot occur.⁴⁷ Indeed, the Greek conception of divinity and of human life implies a kind of necessity to the epic story. Epic is a remembrance of how a form of life came to be aware of having the self-identity it has by virtue of a conflict with another form of life, with its triumph in that conflict being a matter of fate. It must understand that in the conflicts that follow from its sense of who it is, the principles on which it is based have the *right* to triumph. They acquire this right because the gods have set up the circumstances surrounding the action such that a certain outcome is foreordained given the self-identity of the actors. Since what the gods ordain is just, the triumph of the Greek form of life over the Trojan

form is also just, however cruel, arbitrary, and perhaps unintelligible it might at first seem to those who hear the epic being sung. For this reason, the minstrel must in telling the story unfold the events such that the events have an inexorable direction. In the minstrel's account of the events, it is even the case that the direction of the events may be known to some of the protagonists in the story. The hero may be both doomed and know that he is doomed, but he must do what he has to do and accept whatever happens.⁴⁸

For the Greek epic, the problem was understanding the role of necessity in all this. On the one hand, the heroes' actions would seem pointless if the gods actually control everything. On the other hand, it is fated that the heroes will go off to perform their deeds and that the result will be a self-consciousness about the community's self-identity. Indeed, without this kind of necessity, the doomed heroes would seem foolish, since without the necessity of fate, they can only seem like obdurate and impulsive individuals, not like heroes. The necessity that drives the epic, therefore, is a *conceptual* requirement brought on by the Greek understanding of the relation of the divine and the human as it is presented first in the cults and later in the telling of the epic itself. Since the determinate, semi-human gods each have their *own* self-identity in terms of which *they* are required to act (Zeus doing what he has to do, Hera doing what she has to do), they thus seem also subject to a kind of background necessity. This necessity to which they gods are subject, however, cannot be understood by positing, for example, any more gods than determine that necessity. Thus, behind the world of the gods themselves there seems to stand a realm of unintelligible metaphysical necessity.⁴⁹

This had to raise the question for the Greeks as to whether the actions taken in epic were in fact *just*. At first, these actions seem like they must be just, since they were provoked by the gods. By constructing the circumstances in the way they did, and knowing the self-identities of the actors involved, the gods foreordained a certain outcome. Since the gods do what is just, this outcome must also be just. However, if the gods themselves are acting out of a sense of who they are – if their actions are also necessary – how can what they foreordain be just? If the gods ordain the destruction of Troy because of who they are, why is this otherwise arbitrary destruction just? Homer's sympathetic treatment, for example, of the doomed Hector implicitly raises just this question.

From tragedy to comedy. This conceptual dynamic in Greek religious life required their construction of tragic drama. The unintelligibility of the idea of necessity can only be overcome by new type of reflection on the relation between the divine and the human in which the actions that individuals take make a difference to what happens. Tragedy is that form of art in which this reflection takes place. Just as epic reflects on self-identity of a form of life in its conflict with another form of life unrelated to it, tragedy reflects on the internal conflicts within a form of life itself (or, as in the case of modern tragedy, of conflicts within a character or between characters).⁵⁰ Moreover, tragedy represents a conceptual movement in the development of Greek self-understanding, since it offers an explicit reflection on necessity

and self-identity. In Greek tragedy, the tragic element comes about because of characters who act out of their sense of self-identity, and who thus *necessarily* act in a manner that in turn *necessarily* leads them to their frightful culminations. The profundity of Greek tragedy and its greatness, according to Hegel's view of it, lies in its self-conscious reflection on these implications of self-identity as understood by the Greeks.⁵¹

In speaking of tragedy, Hegel is referring to it as a form of drama with actors on a stage.⁵² In tragic drama, it is essential that instead of a minstrel impersonally relating the story of the epic, we have the *characters* speaking themselves. This is accomplished in the Greek form (as it is for us in the theater) by having actors play the roles.⁵³ Thus, instead of an impersonal minstrel reciting the tale for us, we have humans speaking the parts for us.⁵⁴ The work of art is present before us as it unfolds itself.⁵⁵

What makes something tragic as opposed to being merely unfortunate (or simply terribly sad) is the idea that the characters who embody some basic aspect of the self-identity of a form of life, given who they are, do what they have to do, and this action on their part necessarily leads them to some terrible end.⁵⁶ The progress toward the tragic fate of the characters is grounded in actions that necessarily follow from who they are; there is no point at which, given who they are, they could alter the course of events. The idea of something's being tragic as opposed to being merely unfortunate is linked with the possibility of *reconciliation* in tragedy. Reconciliation is achieved in tragedy by the course of events turning out such that *justice* has been shown to have been done. Indeed, without some idea of justice or desert, it makes little sense to describe something as tragic, as opposed to being merely unfortunate. What the tragic character does is something he *must* do because of who he is. Moreover, he must be *right* in doing so (that is, his character must be in itself justified – the evil actions taken by a brigand because of who he is cannot lead to tragedy). Thus, for something to constitute a tragic course of affairs, the tragic character *must* undertake an action (because of who he is) which is *right* in itself but which leads him to commit a *wrong*, and justice requires this wrong itself to be righted – that is, for the character to suffer commensurate to the wrong that has been done. Since reconciliation in tragedy requires that the ethical world be set aright, it requires *either* the destruction of the character (or some form of appropriate suffering) *or* divine absolution for the wrong which was committed.⁵⁷ For there to be reconciliation in tragedy, there must therefore be some idea of a “substantial order” of things – a scheme of ethical justice – that can be shown to prevail. Reconciliation in tragedy is not, however, simply a matter of crime being punished. For there to be reconciliation in tragedy, it must be the case that the tragic heroes be seen to be in the right; what is tragic in their actions is a function of their doing something wrong as a direct corollary of their being in the right. Reconciliation therefore requires that the “substance” of things be seen to be in harmony with itself and that its harmony be restored by the denouement of the tragedy itself. The significance of tragedy thus lies in its showing how a form of life can be conflicted *within itself*, such that

characters who embody some basic feature of that form of life are led to perform actions that, although right, are also nonetheless wrong, and for which the "substantial order" demands some type of atonement on their part in order for the "substantial order" to be set aright.

The necessity that was blind and incomprehensible in the epic is in tragedy shown to have a conceptual necessity to it, namely, in the exposure of what is internally contradictory in the Greek form of life. It is not simply that things turn out that way and had to turn out that way; they turn out that way *because* of the contradictory one-sided nature of the *roles* that Greeks found perfectly natural to assume. Nor could their conception of the gods be of much help to them in this context. The gods who contend among themselves cannot be expected to be able to resolve any of these conflicts. Moreover, given their nature, it is unclear why they would even care about them. Since there is no unitary nature to the gods, there can be no unifying overview of the basis of life.⁵⁸ When the gods do appear to assist the humans in tragedy, it is clearly a contrivance on the part of the author.

The Greek multiplication of gods was a reflection on their view of the world, which lacked a unifying focus of *principle*. Instead, the unifying focus, so Hegel argues, is that of *art*. (In his later lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel described Greek religion as the "religion of beauty.") The gods are depicted as being beautiful and serene, and the religious practices themselves come to be works of art. For the Greeks, tragedy therefore was a work of art in which their religious vision of the world was presented to them such that they were enabled to come to a self-conscious reflection on who they were. The chorus in Greek drama represents the voice of the common folk (as the embodiment of the Greek *Sittlichkeit*) expressing their view of the necessity that confronts the characters in the play.⁵⁹ From the standpoint of the chorus, this necessity must remain simply uncomprehended, and it can only express terror and compassion in light of the necessarily oncoming destruction of the parties whose actions it is witnessing. In order to provide the spectators with material for reflection, the characters in such a tragedy must represent one of the basic dimensions of the Greek form of life (such as the way in which Antigone represents the family and Creon the state). The protagonists, that is, must take upon themselves one of the dimensions of Greek life in order to expose the one-sidedness of that dimension and the terrible consequences of acting only according to that dimension in abstraction from the other. Their character is thus informed by one of the "powers" of the Greek form of life (for example, by one of the gods). This puts the characters in the position of acting on the certainty of who they are as the god has revealed it to them and finding that their destruction follows from this action.⁶⁰

In tragedies such as *Antigone*, each character represents one of the basic ethical principles of the Greek form of life (one of the ways in which Greeks understood "the way things are done"). Each thus does what he believes he must do given who he is, with the result being that each brings about his own (and the other's) destruction because of the incompatibility of the principles

themselves. Antigone finds that who she is, as the keeper of the rights of the family, is essentially at odds with who Creon is, as the keeper of the rights of the polity. The conflict between the two is not contingent, not a matter of the vagaries of two "personalities" who cannot get along with each other. Each character's self-identity conflicts with the other because the principles (or "powers," as Hegel calls them) that each embodies, which forms the *character* of each in Greek tragedy, is at odds with the other. In the case of *Antigone*, this conflict also presents a religious vision – namely, the equal power of the dark nether world with the luminous world of Zeus.⁶¹ The result of such a clash of characters (which is always really a clash of Greek life with itself) is either destruction (as in *Antigone*) or divine absolution (as in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*).⁶²

The reconciliation found in Greek tragedy cannot be therefore entirely satisfactory, for the self as portrayed in the tragedies is one-sided, having a "pathos" rather than a fully developed character.⁶³ The tragic figure completely embodies one of the powers of the form of life and is necessarily led to his destruction because of who he is. The only reconciliation that Greek tragedy offers is the view of necessity as *rational* necessity, as implied by the self-identity of the characters instead of just issuing from the blind fate found in the epic. It is the rationality of the "substantial ethical order" asserting itself against the wrongs that have been committed. For Greek tragedy to work, the laws that govern both humans and divinity must be presumed to be both eternal and rational. That is, for there to be a true reconciliation, the Greek spectators *must* presume that this fate is rational, that it is fundamentally that of a just cosmic order, even if (as in distinction from the later Christian view) the goals and aims of this order cannot be revealed to humans. Without this assumption, Greek tragedy could not make sense to the Greeks.⁶⁴ In this context, reconciliation in the tragedy can only come about through the acceptance of matters that fundamentally cannot be understood. This form of reconciliation must therefore be only partial; the form of self-consciousness on which it rests cannot fully understand itself. A kind of unintelligible irrationality still seems to hang over the whole background of Greek tragedy, since the freedom of individuals to act seems bounded not only by irrational struggles among the gods, but by a "power" or fate by which the gods themselves seem to be ruled.

In bringing this aspect of Greek thought to the foreground, however, Greek tragedy initiates the move away from Greek religion and thus from the whole Greek form of life, for by throwing into question the coherence of the pantheon – what Hegel calls "the unthinking mingling of individuality and essence"⁶⁵ – it throws into question the whole Greek conception of divinity and its relation to human life, and with that the general practices of that form of life itself. By focusing on what is essentially true about their form of life (of who they essentially were), the tragedians gave an account of Greek life that indicated certain basic contradictions within the Greek self-consciousness. The "fate," the background necessity of things, which drives the tragedies and on which the possibility of reconciliation rests, was thereby made the

object of reflection for Greek religious art. (Hegel later argues that reflection on this background necessity cannot be adequately handled by art but by something more suited to it, namely, philosophy. It is thus not surprising that the same form of life that produced the tragedians would also produce Plato and Aristotle. The tragedians in fact help to pave the way both for that kind of philosophical reflection and for the recognition of what was impossible for the Greek form of life, the status of the self-reflective individual.⁶⁶)

In presenting the truths about the conflicts essentially inherent to the Greek form of life, tragedy presented the truths about the essential self-identity of that form of life. But in exposing the contradictions inherent in Greek life itself, Greek tragedy threw into question the idea that the individual could be exhaustively described in terms purely of social roles and duties. For the Greek agent, his form of life (his *Sittlichkeit*) gave him a set of norms that he understood himself intuitively to follow; to know the norm was just to know how one "goes on," to continue in the "same way" without having to reflect on it. Greek tragedy put the individual in the position of questioning whether his acting in terms of these roles without reflection on them was in itself a fitting reason for action. It thus presented the Greeks with skepticism about whether what the Greek individual had taken as authoritative for himself – as something just "given," as acting in accordance with Greek *Sittlichkeit*, of simply "going on" in the same ways – really was a good reason for belief and action. In becoming *self-conscious* in the form of art, Greek life could no longer simply accept the norms of Greek *Sittlichkeit* at face value, nor could it accept that what it had taken as divine really was so.

Because of this, Greek religious art had to develop an account of this skeptical individual – namely, the individual self-consciously *taking* himself to be acting in such and such a fashion, which it did with *comedy*. Greek comedy – like all genuine comedy – takes as its project the same concern with presenting truths about essential self-identity, but it does this by humorously mocking the "insubstantial" aspect of the various practices of a form of life in order to make what is genuinely true and essential come to the foreground of reflection. The major vehicle for such comedy is the humorous mocking and exposing of people's pretensions in order to bring out who they really are and what the society is really about. The fundamental core of comedy is thus the gap between people's *pretensions* about who they are and who they *really* are, between what people *say* they are doing and what they *really* are doing.⁶⁷ In comedy, so Hegel argues, the *individual* for the first time makes a genuine appearance; it is even possible in comedy for the actor as an individual person to appear from behind the mask. (In his discussion of this in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel is no doubt referring to Aristophanes making an appearance without a mask as himself in his own play, *The Clouds*. Indeed, Hegel's whole discussion about comedy in the *Phenomenology* is sprinkled with references to *The Clouds*, which at least there he seems to take as paradigmatic for Greek comedy, just as he took *Antigone* to be paradigmatic for tragedy.⁶⁸) In comedy (specifically, in *The Clouds*), the mocking of the manner in which Greek life had conceived the gods shows that the Greek conception of the divine is

incoherent, and it shows that way in which divinity was conceived to be open to all kinds of bamboozlement.⁶⁹

The comedic mocking of the public conception of the gods and the tomfoolery attending to their adoration thus necessitates a *philosophical* conception of them. Although the move to a philosophical conception indicates conceptual progress for us (the readers), from the standpoint of the Greek form of life it actually marks a relapse into abstraction. Greek religion and practice were not well suited for purely philosophical reflection, however great that reflection ended up being, for the Greek religion of art was best suited for poetic rather than philosophical contemplation. For that reason, the philosophical attempts to reduce the multiplicity of gods to the very abstract philosophical conceptions of “*the beautiful*” and “*the good*” offered up a kind of wonderfully prepared raw material for the comedic writer. In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes does just that, lampooning Socrates and the entire sophistic movement as taking themselves to be deep and wise men, but who were actually just spouting what (for an Athenian tied to the old way of life) was just fashionable balderdash and high sounding poppycock. But however conservatively conceived, Greek comedy, particularly Aristophanes’ comedy, actually exposed to the Greeks what was truly going on in their form of life. Greek life had discovered the *self* behind its various conceptions of fate and devotion. The self-evident and serene assurance in the validity of Greek *Sittlichkeit* that had provided the authoritative reasons for belief and action had been thrown into question by Greek tragedy, and Greek philosophy could offer no satisfactory reassurance within Greek terms that those reasons were indeed authoritative reasons. Greek comedy exposed the reflective individual behind the role, who now came to see himself as taking up the role in a self-conscious fashion. Although Aristophanes lampooned Socrates, the inventor of this new form of reflection, he seemed not to realize that he was actually parodying the Greek self-conception itself. The Socratic individual, unsure of what was true, turned out to be the truth of Greek life.

The revealed religion

Religious alienation. The dramatic practice of comedy turns an ironic eye to all established order in an effort to bring out what is substantial and basic in that order. What genuine comedy succeeds in doing is providing a means of reflection through which the individual person himself (the individual consciousness) can distance himself from all the established norms, authorities, even from the accepted pantheon of gods themselves. Even in the hands of a conservative such as Aristophanes, the comic outlook on the world ends up distancing itself from that world. The comic outlook undermines the kind of unity that an individual would feel with the community in which he lives in that it creates a kind of distanced self who ironically looks at all the currently received views about religion, morality, and politics from a more or less disengaged point of view and thus does not identify his *self* with the practices of that community. This places that person in a new relation to his

world, for he now takes a more impersonal and an *alienated* stance toward that world, since this impersonal point of view is indifferent to his personal point of view. There comes to be nothing in that world with which he can fully identify, nothing with which he can say that its ends are fully his ends – that is, no way in which he could be said to be “at home with himself” while living out the duties of that form of life. The Greek comic view of life, while spelling the end of the classic Greek form of life and the beginning of “Hellenism,” becomes actualized in the Roman form of life, in which legal personality and brute contingency become the ways in which the citizens of that form of life account for themselves and what they take as valid for them. The Roman self-understanding allowed that there was nothing essentially to agency except the contingently formed (and therefore *essentially* empty) self assuming whatever structure it needed to assume for expediency's sake. (In his later lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel therefore called the religion of the Romans “The Religion of Expediency.”)

While this form of life is (from Hegel's point of view) not as rich or as admirable as the Greek form of life, it nonetheless begins to open up the possibilities for the kind of modern account of community and modern self. Given what it was, the Greek form of life had to splinter, for in its actions, it created the kind of self-distanced individuality that was incompatible with its sense of *Sittlichkeit*. However, by putting the gods into human, self-conscious form, Greek religion created the possibility of the Roman account of itself in terms of its own practices. In reflecting on itself – that is, in coming to see the internal incongruities within its own account of itself – the Greek form of life had reached the point at which it could no longer understand itself within its traditional terms. The “unhappy consciousness” – the alienation between a form of life that is not believed in by its adherents but to which there is no discernable rational alternative – is the *tragic fate* itself of Greece. It is tragic in its working out of a form of “character as destiny”: because of who they collectively were (that is, because of the religious accounts which they had constructed for themselves), the Greek community worked out an account of itself as self-conscious human practice, and in doing so, left its gods behind without having anything to replace them. It is tragic in that the internal conflicts of communal *character* required a resolution that in turn led to the destruction of the whole form of life itself. This internal conflict appears in the creation of the dramatic form of comedy. The alienated self surfacing in comedy finds his self-identity to be anchored in practices for which he can find no justification within the terms of those practices themselves. The gap between what is officially taken to be authoritative in accepted practice and the actual world of self-distanced individuals is thus great, and comedy steps in to offer reflections on that gap. The absurdity that characterizes the gap between accepted practice and actuality – between what people take themselves to be doing and what they are actually doing – provokes laughter in comedy; comedy's laughter is the mirror image of the despair that the “unhappy consciousness” feels in the presence of that same absurdity.⁷⁰

The Greek form of life with its epilogue in Roman legalism, stoicism,

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skepticism and finally the “unhappy consciousness” thus created the “social space” in which it became possible for the recognizably distinct social practices of art, religion, and philosophy to develop, such that what would have seemed at an earlier point to a Greek as only one kind of practice came to be seen as three distinct kinds of practice within the setting of absolute spirit, that is, as a set of practices and institutions in which the community reflects only on its own accounts of itself. The Greeks did not *cause* this form of self-reflection to come about, but only such a communal practice of self-reflection appearing in the institutional form in which it did would satisfactorily resolve the incoherences of Greek life.⁷¹ The Greek form of life had initiated a teleological direction to history in that the Greeks found their own practices to be insufficient with respect to the norms needed for the kind of self-conscious reflection embodied in Greek religious practice. In Hegel’s terms, the “substance” of their form of life had become self-conscious – had become “subject”: Their form of life had developed institutions and practices of art, religion and philosophy in such a way that this type of communal self-conscious reflection on itself had become an essential part of how it had come to understand itself. However, as Hegel has argued, this necessarily led to these agents coming to understand the basic determining ground of their practices as lying within the structure of those practices themselves, in the ground rules for what is taken as authoritative by them, and what is taken as a criticism of those practices. In this way, the development of tragedy and comedy is basic to the history of *reason* itself, for it is in the development of these types of communal reflections that the conception of a criticism of the principles of criticism themselves unfolds, that reason’s project of giving a satisfactory account of itself is both made possible and appears.

In the breakdown of Greek life, both the “substance” (a form of life’s ground rules and what it takes as authoritative for it) and the self-identity of the individuals in that form of life have, as Hegel puts it, *externalized* themselves. By this, Hegel means that the “substance” has become embodied in the institutionalized practices of self-conscious reflections on the ground rules of that form of life itself. Whereas prior to the denouement of the Greek form of life, the “substance” had resided more or less unreflectively in the accepted practices of the culture, in the way people simply “went on” in the same way, after that denouement it becomes an object of reflection and criticism. (In this sense, the “substance” has become an object of external reflection.) Likewise, the individuals in that culture more and more find their self-identities not to be naturally *given* to them by the nature of things (by the “substance”) but to be culturally *constructed* and therefore also fully open to reflection and criticism; in that sense, the individuals (or their “self-consciousness,” their locating themselves in “social space”) have become an *external* object of reflection and criticism. Both “substance” and “self-consciousness” moreover may be said to have externalized *themselves* since this is a necessary conceptual development out of the self-understandings involved in that form of life. This externalization of self-consciousness is the result of a developed form of reflexivity within the “social space” of modern

life, and it traces out the history of rationality itself. Rationality exists in those practices of appraisal and criticism according to normative standards. It is part of the inner teleology of reason that ultimately these standards of appraisal and criticism *themselves* come to be appraised and criticized, since it is in the development of the "criticism of criticism" that the practices of criticism complete themselves. The development of such a reflective practice of criticizing the standards of criticism (brought to its penultimate form in Kant's three *Critiques*) entails a new sense of reflective self-consciousness.⁷²

Hegel makes it clear that he is not doing a purely historical study of this coming-to-be of the human community's awareness of its social practice as the foundation of what it takes as authoritative for itself. This is to be a dialectical history: It draws out the way in which a form of life's self-understanding rationally leads to its successors. It is not a causal account, and it offers no causal laws of historical development. It offers, that is, no law of the form "If event A occurs, then event B follows." (For example, "If the Greek form of life reaches a certain stage, then Roman life succeeds it, and modern life follows.") Hegel notes of his own account that if it is to be convincing, it must be shown that the awareness of spirit as spirit – of the human community's recognition that it is only the community's linguistic and cultural practices and the socially instituted structures of mutual recognition that provide the grounds for determining who one is – arises through a kind of conceptual necessity, not historical causality (which is not to say that it excludes or forbids any causal accounts of how that came about). It must be shown that a stage of self-understanding in the world's cultures (what Hegel only somewhat misleadingly calls the "world-spirit") has reached a type of self-awareness such that it understands itself in that way.⁷³

Christianity. In this way, the ancient world created an account of itself that made it possible for a new religion – a new conception of what was divine – to arise with a set of rites and symbols in which humanity could see itself fully reflected. This particular *possibility* was realized in the historical appearance of Christianity.⁷⁴ Christianity represents the awareness of God as human, not in the form of a statue or a cult but as a living human being who fully represents in himself what is truly divine in human life and who extends this understanding of the absolute principles and highest interests of humanity to all who realize this. This human-divinity is not the idealization and transcendence of humanity as were the Greek gods; instead, it shares in all of humanity's features – its passions and even its mortality. The Greek gods were remote and relatively indifferent to human concerns because of their immortality; they were symbolic representations of humans with only an impersonal, detached point of view. The new representation of divinity in Christian thought, however, sees God as fully human, fully identified with the life of human beings, uniting the divine, impersonal point of view with the very subjective, personal point of view of the individual. This is the content of *absolute* religion, although the content can be given different forms (some of them inadequate). Hegel claims that this religion's claim to being *revealed* religion is appropriate, for it *reveals* in representational form

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(in the form of *Vorstellung*) what philosophy later articulates in discursive, conceptual thought.

Interestingly, Hegel does *not* seem to be arguing that Christianity per se was a necessary development. He is, however, arguing that something very much *like* Christianity is the proper fulfillment of the possibilities opened up by Greek life and its Roman aftermath; Christianity contingently happened to be the religion that stepped into the “social space” opened up by stoicism, skepticism, and the Hellenistic forms of the “unhappy consciousness.” Hegel’s arguments do not amount therefore to a kind of philosophical eschatology in which Christianity itself is understood as the meaning of history, that toward which history was aiming. Hegel is arguing a different point: dialectically understood, history is a succession of forms of self-understanding, of the teleological development of reason itself. It is not simply a succession or chronology of types of accounts that forms of life give themselves; rather, each of these types of accounts – and religious practice is one form of social self-reflection that is ingredient in these accounts – may be shown to raise questions for itself within what each takes as authoritative that retrospectively can be reconstructed to have been realized in the accounts that followed them. The kind of “absolute religion” that Christianity represents may be understood as a reflection on the way in which these forms of self-understanding are consummated. In its presentation of the incarnation (*Menschwerdung*) of God into man, Christianity presents in representational, symbolic form the idea that the divine is no longer to be sought outside of the life and practices of the human community itself. The truth that is gradually articulated in this religion is that God is known as spirit, that what is divine exists only in the human community’s self-reflection on the absolute principles governing human life, not as some metaphysical essence lying beyond or behind appearance that determines the structure of our knowledge and action. The divine just *is* the human spirit reflecting on itself and establishing *for itself*, through its religious practices, the “absolute principles” governing human life and doing so necessarily according to the principles of rationality that it itself has historically developed.⁷⁵

The conceptual possibility opened up by Greek religion and its successors is realized by Christianity, and with that the dialectical history of religious practice as communal self-reflection comes in principle to an end. In casting the gods into human form and reflecting on what that meant, the Greek form of life had created the “social space” in which a kind of full self-knowledge on the part of the human community became possible. This full self-knowledge would be expressed as the idea that there is no metaphysical determining *ground* of human consciousness that could affirm the legitimacy of these practices. There are only the free standing linguistic and cultural practices of communities themselves, which develop standards of criticism within themselves that in turn require reflective accounts of how certain norms can be maintained in the face of potentially self-undermining skepticism about themselves; the existence of such practices of self-conscious account-giving contain within themselves the ideal of a complete account – that is, an ac-

count of what is taken as authoritative that itself can renew itself in the face of self-generated skepticism about itself. Since there is nothing outside of the practices of the human community in these kinds of reflections, that which is divine in human life does not transcend human life itself, and the divine in human life can therefore be fully known as it is: this is, in Hegel's argument, the radical message that Christianity presents in symbolic form: God has been fully *revealed*.⁷⁶

God in the Christian understanding is the *representation* of the conceptual idea that spirit knows itself as spirit – namely, that the human community comes to an awareness that it is in working out the internal requirements of its own reason-giving activity that it sets for itself what is to count for it as its absolute principles, and that its internal requirements are those that it itself has developed out of the insufficiencies of its earlier accounts of what it took to be definitive for itself, and that this activity of self-conscious spirit is what is divine, what is of absolute and inherent value, what is the “ground” of all belief and action. The representational trappings of this form of religion, however, need to be explicated in the community in terms of this revelation to itself about who it is. Hegel argues, for example, that in the “social space” created by the consummation of Greek religion, Christianity offers a series of steps by which the human community comes to a full awareness of itself. These steps, like all other types of dialectical development, do not come fully developed on to the scene; they must be first articulated, then their internal insufficiencies must be worked out and superseded by other accounts that make up for these insufficiencies. Thus, the representation of the divine as self-conscious spirit is at first taken as the relation between agents and an independent object – that is, the reflective community takes what is authoritative for it as what in Hegel's language in the *Phenomenology* is called the “essence,” as an independent object of consciousness, as something different from itself that underwrites its claims to belief. Thus, not surprisingly, the divine is at first represented as a distant entity, “beyond” us in the heavens, far beyond the sky and so on. These representations of God as a distant entity are pictorial images of a still metaphysically conceived divinity.⁷⁷

Hegel does not argue that we should *replace* the concept of God (or, in general, the divine) with the concept of humanity. Rather, we must find a place for the divine within the concept of humanity. That is, Hegel is not arguing, as many of his later students were to do, that we should see the divine as *only* a fanciful projection by humanity of itself and its highest interests, a kind of fiction and illusion that humanity needs now to cast off. For Hegel, the divine is real, not a fiction that we have made up and to which we now (in a more “enlightened” age) discard. The divine (the sacred) is that which we see as the “ground” of everything and as such having a value that transcends all other more relative values. The sacred is what *counts for us* as having an “absolute” value that is also incommensurable with other values. It is that to which Kant was alluding when he said of rational beings that they had “dignity,” not a “price;” to use Hegel's language, it is that which we must take as genuinely “existing in and for itself.” Although the divine can quite

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obviously be given a theistic interpretation, the concept of divinity (and therefore religious reflection) is not intrinsically tied to theistic conceptions. Hegel's point is that we regard as divine, as the object of awe and reverence, that which we take to be the "ground" of all belief and action, and that which we take to have absolute value; the concept of the divine is not at first identical with the concept of self-founding humanity, but in working out the insufficiencies of its previous accounts of itself, humanity as "self-conscious spirit" comes to realize that identity, to see the divine as implicit in its own activity of reflecting on what it can take as divine. To comprehend what is *divine* – that is, what is *sacred* to us, we must reflect on who we have come to be and why certain things *must* count for us as having such sacrosanct value *given who we have come to be* – that is, given what we have come to take as authoritative for ourselves. To call something sacred (or divine), therefore, is to count it as something which human agents are to value independently of whether they contingently happen to desire it, and to which they stand in awe and reverence. Indeed, the divine, the sacred is exactly that which makes a claim on human agents to change their desires and their inclinations if they find that they do *not* value it. The divine is that which calls on people to transform their lives in light of it, to alter their personal point of view in light of what is "truly" valuable. Religious reflection, therefore, is a historical community's reflection on what it *must* authoritatively count for itself as sacred.

Hegel illustrates a number of elements of the Christian story in terms of these basic ideas.⁷⁸ For example, God's creation of the world in seven days is a *representation* of certain *conceptual* truths. God takes seven days to create the world and has to create humans in that world, for without such a gradual creation, God cannot come to an awareness of Himself. Nature per se is amoral, cold, valueless. Sacred value therefore enters the world only with the introduction of rational agency. Thus, the story has God creating humanity in order to insert value into what would be an otherwise well constructed but valueless world and in order to come to know Himself as reflected in His "other," (in order, that is, to come to self-consciousness about His own sacred value).⁷⁹ God, that is, requires recognition from another in order to come to a full self-consciousness about Himself. Likewise, the story of the expulsion from paradise is the story of humanity's coming to be who it is as a community of *self-conscious* free agents. As living innocently in the garden, humanity is neither good nor evil. However, as having tasted the fruits of the forbidden tree, humanity acquires a self-consciousness about itself and becomes *like* God. Human life thereby comes to have a sacredness to it that makes it a value in and for itself. The punishment, however, for having done this is pain and labor. Humanity must now work for itself; it must become self-creating. Likewise, the newly self-conscious agents, Adam and Eve, are now self-consciously for each as self-conscious agents (thus, they become "aware" of their nakedness to each other). But humanity remains mortal; unlike the originally divine, individual people must die. Because of this, humanity becomes alienated from the divine and fails to note its own sacred-

ness and instead sees the sacred as existing apart from humanity and perhaps as being indifferent to it. The existence of evil follows from humanity's combination of its natural existence and its self-consciousness. This is a symbolic version of the conceptual reflection that because of the possibility of self-consciousness itself, we acquire the possibility of *both* good and evil. Normative considerations come into play and at the same time the ability and (even for some people) the inclination to violate them. As natural creatures, we are capable of denying or being oblivious to that which is of absolute value about humanity – namely, its sacred capacity for self-conscious life; to be oblivious to what is of ultimate value in the world (rational, self-conscious life) is to see everything in the world as having only relative value and hence to be disposed to treat people as simply one more item of relative value in that world (to treat them, for example, only in terms of their usefulness to oneself or to one's community). Evil is the falling away from what is sacred about us – it is a falling away from God the divine – because of our own finite short-sightedness and our stubborn adherence to our own personal point of view, which in turn lead us to see ourselves and others as having only relative value. Good and evil, however, in representational thought are conceived as two different and opposed *entities*, and for this form of thought, it is natural that good and evil either become hypostatized into independent powers fighting for the allegiance of humanity (for example, God and the Devil), or that humanity itself is represented as having two independent “natures” inside it, one inclining it to good, the other to evil.⁸⁰

Representational thought pictures the reconciliation of the divine and the human through the familiar Christian story. For Hegel's purposes, however, the point is to take the familiar story and reconstruct out of it the truths to be found in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Christian story is one of the divine taking on human form and then dying in order to affirm its divinity. This is represented as the divinity's reflection into itself. The death of Jesus is the establishment of a religious community dedicated to the teachings of Jesus. But what are these? Christianity teaches that God has fully revealed himself, which, conceptually understood, means that he is fully present in the world of appearance. The Christian teaching that “The kingdom is upon us” is the representation (*Vorstellung*) of the idea that the divine is now to be taken as identical with self-conscious spirit, with the human community coming to an understanding that it must take its own rational self-conscious life as absolute, as having intrinsic value. The “kingdom of God” is thus not to be found in some transcendent metaphysical realm but in a set of reformed practices *within* the human community. Humanity can reconcile itself with itself in the religious *community* that understands certain basic truths about human life in both its “natural” and its “spiritual” form. The Christian religion thus representationally formulates an account of the divine as *present* in the human community provided that the community assume a certain reflective attitude toward itself.⁸¹

The basic *truth* that is thus revealed in the Christian religion is that the full

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“presence” of the divine within the human community means that rational, self-conscious human life *as spirit*, as determining for itself what is to count for it as authoritative, is divine. In the symbolic language – the *Vorstellung* – of religion, God had determined himself to die and thereby to unite with humanity. The awareness of the self-grounding nature of “spirit” is the awareness of the “ground” of all that we take as true and valuable; the proper attitude, therefore, is awe and reverence for the ways in which historical communal reflections on what we take to be authoritative for us generate accounts, undermine themselves, and succeed each other in a teleological fashion. Out of this awareness of the divinity of “spirit” comes a doctrine of what is therefore sacred for people living in such a community that has come to offer this account of itself. Seeing spirit as divine means that we must regard rational, self-conscious life as sacred, and that therefore we must regard treating rational, self-conscious human life as if it were of only relative importance to be a *prima facie* transgression against the sacred. Once the inherent sacredness of rational, self-conscious life comes to be seen, slavery, social practices involving petty humiliations of others, and refusals to acknowledge people’s freedom also come to be seen as transgressions against the sacred value of *rational* self-conscious life. Indeed, in Hegel’s view, even certain practices within a community can take on sacred value to the extent that they are the institutions that enable such self-conscious life to be possible. But what makes rational, self-conscious human life sacred is not some metaphysical, supersensible property within humans (such as an immaterial soul) but the way in which modern agents have come to be the kind of community for whom rational, self-conscious human life *must count as* sacred because of the history of that community’s accounts of itself. To say that the divine is present “within” us is to say that by having come to accept that account of what is authoritative for us in terms of our being self-grounding agents, we have come to accept the idea that self-grounding humanity is ultimately authoritative for everything else, even for what it takes to be sacred (that is, divine) for itself and that the sacredness of human life cannot come from a divinity that is metaphysically outside this kind of human activity. If we were only self-grounding without being *rationally self-grounding* – that is, without developing the idea of self-grounding out of the historical development of the “practices of reason” itself – we would not be committed to human life as sacred, for there would be no “ground” to include all people rather than just those of the immediate community. Reason, which develops itself out of the communal practices of reason-giving, reflection, self-undermining attempts at reassurance and the development of new accounts, is the dynamic of divinity, the ground and source of all that we can value “in and for itself.”

The sacrosanct character of communal, rational, self-conscious human life is the result of the history of the accounts that the human community has given of what is authoritative for us and the way in which those accounts have undermined themselves and thus necessitated other accounts. Christian reli-

gion is the account in representational form of how the “divine in human form” comes to be conceived as that which rational self-grounding agents *must take* as sacred, as being the kind of value that transcends contingent desire and comes to be valuable in and for itself for such agents. Rational self-conscious human life as self-grounding, though, is possible only within the forms of spirit, of those practices that offer reflections on what we have come to take as authoritative for ourselves and that examine the “negativity” of the accounts we give to reassure ourselves that what we take to be authoritative reasons really are authoritative reasons. Indeed, it is ultimately this idea of the sacredness of rational, self-conscious human life, so Hegel argues, that makes modern political community possible (as the idea that all people are “inherently free”) and indeed makes modern life itself possible as a coherent form of self-consciousness. The attitudes of awe and reverence to the sacred as lying in the inherent value of rational, self-conscious life, so Hegel argues, is the condition of modern, non-alienated political life.

The alienation of humanity from God is represented as the alienation of naturally existing individuals from the divine community, from what is true and best in human life. The issue running through the development of religious accounts of the absolute principles of human life has to do with how humanity is to understand itself as both a phenomenon of nature and as a social, cultural form of life and how it is to come to terms with the natural, contingent parameters of its life. From the philosophical standpoint, it is the conceptual issue of how two different descriptions of humanity – the naturalistic and the spiritual – are to be coherently resolved in terms of each other: How would it be possible for humanity to reconcile itself with itself as both a natural phenomenon – humanity’s understanding of its basis in the system of nature – and as a spiritual phenomenon – humanity’s coming to understand itself in terms of its social and moral constitution? In representational thought, this is presented as a struggle between two different realms or “essences” (pictured as two entities). The human world in its pride falls away from God into a natural existence, and the divine world, being independent of humanity, beckons it to join it. In falling away from God, humanity is in its natural existence evil, for it is a forsaking of God’s spiritual community in favor of a purely natural existence. This is represented as a turning inward of humanity (*Insichgehen*) away from God, and it can overcome this evil only by reuniting itself with God, by reuniting the spiritual and the natural. Seen in this way, the reconciliation is possible only if the divine bends to the human, and if humanity is willing to accept the divine.⁸² Evil can only be vanquished by God’s redeeming the world: The natural must be redeemed into the spiritual. This is accomplished in the Christian story, of course, by the appearance of Jesus and his transfiguring death. The individual, Jesus, is the symbolic representation of how this reconciliation is to be carried out: The divine is to be found directly in the human world, expressed in the Christian dictum, “the kingdom of God is upon us.” The divine assumes fully human form and experiences humiliation and death. That which is divine, is

sacred to us, comes to be taken as something not essentially different from human life at all. Christian religion teaches that rational, self-conscious human life itself, as structured in communities reflecting on the absolute principles of life, is the divine, and in this account of itself as legitimating that which it takes to be divine through its religious, artistic and philosophical practices, it is the reconciliation of nature and spirit.⁸³

When conceived as the “luminous essence,” the divine is taken to be wholly different from the human. Conceived as the Greek gods, the divine is *like* the human, but nonetheless remains both fundamentally different from humanity and more or less indifferent to human concerns; conceived as the Judaic God, the divine is both concerned with humanity and is *like* humanity in that it is in the form of “spirit” – it bestows a sacredness on human life, but is still transcendent to human life; in Christianity, Hegel claims, the divine *becomes* human, suffers, and dies. Thus, the divine and the human are reconciled as humanity comes to see that *as spirit*, humanity is self-grounding, self-legitimizing activity, while individual humans are born and die. This remains in Hegel’s view a *religious* conception in that rational, self-conscious human life *as spirit* becomes the object of religious awe and reverence – a doctrine that many of Hegel’s followers were later to reject.⁸⁴

As long as humanity’s self-conception remains metaphysical – that is, as long as the legitimating ground of knowledge and action is understood as lying “beyond” appearance – it remains alienated from itself in its conception of itself. In the religious representation of itself as having two “natures” or as living in two worlds (a divine and a natural world), humanity can still only understand itself as bifurcated, at odds with itself. It is quite natural that in that “social space” constituted by the account of itself that had been made possible by the demise of the Greek religion, it would seem that what was needed was a divine-human mediator, a person sharing elements of both worlds. For contingent reasons, early Christianity was the religion that stepped in to fill out this logical space. In its picturing of a full reconciliation of humanity and the divine, the Christian account creates the possibility of a non-representational, conceptual understanding of the way in which what is taken as authoritative in human practices can be affirmed. In becoming Christianized, Europeans became the *kind of agents* for whom such a conceptual truth could appear as one of the available options. Just as the denouement of the Greek form of life creates the conceptual possibility for something like Christian religion, Christian religion creates the possibility of an account of what legitimates belief and action that relies on no external metaphysical grounds to legitimate itself but on the terms it develops for itself in its social and cultural practices. That which is divine, which governs human life, is no longer represented as indifferent to us, as it was in Greek life; instead, the divine is to be found *within* the human, in both its natural and non-natural aspects.

In his mature Berlin lectures on the philosophy of religion, Hegel augmented his earlier discussion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as to how the

Christian form of life necessarily developed into the modern form of secular self-understanding. In those lectures, he argued that the historical process of the formation of the modern self in Christian religion took the steps it did in order to work out within the terms it had set for itself what was necessary for it to come to a rational self-consciousness about itself. If indeed the natural world is seen as an evil place, then it would follow that the religious community would wish to withdraw from that world in order to preserve its holiness. Thus, the foundation of monasteries and the self-abnegation of the monkish life are logical developments out of the original Christian self-understanding. The monkish life, however, is only a reconciliation of the heart, and thus fails to live up to the promises of the Christian teachings since the world remains unreconciled, and only the monks in the religious community have any reconciliation with the divine. It would then be reasonable that the church would try to reconcile itself with the world by trying to redeem it through the imposition of church authority and the creation of "Christendom." In attempting a reconciliation of the world and spirit, however, the church secularizes itself (makes itself more worldly) at the same time that it spiritualizes the secular world. This creates the possibility for modern life, for a reconciliation of spirituality and worldliness in the creation of communities based on the principle of freedom and the recognition of the supreme value of rational, self-conscious life.⁸⁵

However, religious practice cannot on its own give this kind of conceptual account of itself. In order to be a *religious* community, it must understand these truths in *representational* form. Representational thought, however, is inevitably led to picturing conceptual relations or structures of practices as substantive things. Thus, what we can conceptually understand as the structure of the practices of a determinate historical community will be pictured as entities (for example, as "God the Father" revealing His will to us). In that way, revealed religion (which historically turned out to be the Christian religion) necessarily remains at least quasi-metaphysical in that it takes the "essence" (that which is authoritative for itself) to be an independent object of consciousness; it is thus incapable of fully understanding what is required in its own account.⁸⁶ On its own, the form of life of revealed religion cannot break out of this picture, since it must remain dependent on a "revelation," not on a conceptual articulation of what it takes to be true. The result of the Christian community's account of itself is that in order to complete its account in the terms that it sets for itself it must become a *secular* community that nonetheless tries to understand itself in terms of the religious, metaphysical representations that have made that form of communal practice possible in the first place.⁸⁷

However, for the Christian religious community, such a secularization of itself will appear to it like a new falling away from the central truths that made it the community that it is. For it to understand truly what it has become, it needs an account of itself in terms of conceptual thought, not symbolic representation. What revealed religion has done is to form the type of person who is now ready for that type of conceptual thought.

2. Philosophy as communal self-reflection

The modern European community has given an account of itself in terms of self-determination in thought and personal independence in practical affairs. It takes the former to be partially affirmed in the practices of modern science, for these seem to authenticate the claim that modern life has the capacity to set for itself authoritative ground rules for its theoretical practices such that they reveal what the world is in itself. It has also created a set of social practices and institutions in which the independence and self-determination of practical agents can be affirmed as (1) rational self-determination, as electing for oneself what is to count as an authoritative reason for action and what will move one to action in terms of evaluating those reasons by reference to universally valid rational criteria; and as (2) personal autonomy, as counting as reasons those that have to do with oneself, *as an individual*, incorporating one's personal emotions, character, convictions, and passions into the account of what can count as an authoritative reason for the individual agent. The community populated *only* with such romantic, personally autonomous individuals, however, threatens to break down into a community of dissembling hypocrites. In a form of life in which there can be no shared moral certainties (since everything is negotiable and indeterminate in the reciprocal appeals to legitimation through to "personal conscience"), there can be no "safe areas" of life that are beyond the charges of immorality, wrongfulness or hypocritical dissembling. In order to avoid this dissolution into a community of subterfuge and hypocrisy, there must be some conception of "the way things are done" that fits the modern account of agency and collective life as self-determining and self-justifying. For this community to be able to account for what it takes to be the principles of its practical life, it must move beyond these reciprocal charges of hypocrisy and pretense to a form of life that is able to reconcile within itself the "beautiful souls," the ironists, and the moralists by fashioning an account of itself that shows *how* it may take some practices as authoritative, as embodiments of "the way things are done" in such a way that it also shows that these practices *can* count as the "way things are done" for those agents who understand themselves in terms of the self-distancing practices of modern life. Hegel's argument for how this is done is one of the bolder claims of the *Phenomenology*: This can only be accomplished through a type of modern self-reflection that Hegel calls *absolute knowing*.

Absolute knowing is a reflection on the accounts that the modern community has given of what is authoritative for us and why these "ground rules" "really are" or "really should be" taken as authoritative. In absolute knowing, this "account of the accounts" is self-consciously understood as moving altogether and completely *within* the terms those accounts have already set for themselves. That is, absolute knowing does not see itself as offering an affirmation or justification or critique of social practices by appeal to anything that would be "external" to the practices themselves – for example, not by appealing to any kind of metaphysical essence that would somehow vouchsafe those practices.

Hegel claims that it is *absolute* in its being entirely self-mediating. Its status as absolute can be contrasted with other successful, although non-absolute, forms of knowing. The practice of natural science, for example, cannot be absolute in this sense. Natural science is dependent on its objects, on the way the world happens to display itself to the community of scientists – the natural world mediates the accounts that natural science gives of it. Modern natural science must accommodate itself to that world; it cannot determine *it*, although it can determine what for the scientific community counts as an authoritative reason (what counts as a successful experiment, as a confirmed theory, and so on). For this reason, the knowledge gained by natural science is *finite* – that is, dependent on its other for its determinateness. It thus cannot within its vocation as natural science understand how it is that the scientific community sets its own norms for what is to count for it as valid grounds of belief. (Hegel's criticism of natural scientific knowledge is *not* that it is "false" because it is "one-sided," or is not a part of a "whole" that is supposedly presented by Hegelian dialectic – a common enough picture of Hegel's view of natural scientific knowledge – but that it is limited by and partially determined by its "other," the natural world. It is not self-mediating as is philosophical knowledge.)

Modern philosophy, the institutional setting for absolute knowing, is, however, not confined to the way the natural world happens to present itself to the community of working scientists. Philosophy is the reflection on what the community as a whole has come to take as authoritative for its evaluation of those practices and its attempts at legitimations of those practices in terms of an appeal to standards of rationality that themselves historically have been developed within the history of that community's accounts of itself. It can therefore legitimate that account only within those historically generated terms, within that "social space," not by accommodating itself to any kind of object external to the historically developing set of practices of reason-giving and account-giving themselves. Absolute knowledge is *absolute* in that it has no "object" external to itself that mediates it in the way the natural world mediates the claims of natural science. Absolute *knowledge* is thus the way in which absolute *spirit* articulates itself in modern life; it is the practice through which the modern community thinks about itself without attempting to posit any metaphysical "other" or set of "natural constraints" that would underwrite those practices.⁸⁸ Absolute knowledge is the internal reflection on the social practices of a modern community that takes its authoritative standards to come only from within the structure of the practices it uses to legitimate and authenticate itself.

The development of the Christian religious account of humanity is essential for the possibility of such reflection, since in its reflection on the absolute principles of human life – on the divine – it has provided a way in which the European community has come to understand the absolute principles of its life as set not by something transcendent to human life itself but in terms of something both close to the human "heart" (the person's sense of his own finitude) and to the human "understanding" (the person's rational, reflective

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capacities). Humanity's reflection on itself as partially accomplished in these religious narrations, and the ways in which these narrations are continually reenacted in rite and ritual, provides the account by which men and women, individually and collectively, come to recognize that their capacity for evil and for good is a "power" lying solely within the human community itself, not in some metaphysical "entity." In this way, in the religious language of sin and redemption, the modern community holds out the possibility of reconciling itself with itself, of humanity's coming to terms with whom it has become.

However, religion on its own cannot perform this practice of reconciliation in modern life; it cannot serve alone as the integrating force for bringing these essential moments of modern life and itself together. Religion's inability to provide the integrating force of modern life is, moreover, not based on any contingent social facts about the plurality of religions in modern societies, the possibility of civil war, or the inability of modern communities to attain a full consensus on religious matters. Rather, it has to do with the implications of how modern agents can rationally comprehend the stories they have told about themselves. Religion is incapable of giving the "account of the accounts" in a way that meets the criteria for this form of life to conceive of itself as fully self-justifying, for that requires that no practice be accepted of which this kind of account cannot be given, and, as *representational* social reflection, religion cannot do that. The purely *religious* outlook must therefore be overcome, for the religious form of reflection through representationalist thought cannot fully articulate what it is about since it must see the "object" of its reflections as an independent object of consciousness.⁸⁹ In representational thought, we picture things as entities; the human community is thus necessarily conceived as an object of some sort, standing in a relation to some other object (the divine). But this type of representationalist thought at its best offers an emotional, intuitive understanding of the self-understandings of the modern community that cannot serve to unite the fragmented practices of modern life into one coherent account. In order that the modern community can come to that type of integrated self-consciousness, the type of self-knowledge that religion brings about must therefore be integrated into some form that can clearly articulate what religion merely symbolically shows.⁹⁰ This may be first done in theology, but theology, as it tries to realize the ideal of a rational account of itself, becomes philosophy, and thus the form of social practice of philosophy itself becomes the general task of developing a concrete theoretical reflection on what it is for modern life to be able to affirm *for itself* its own authoritative practices.⁹¹

The development of religious reflection to the point where it needs to be "overcome" is part of the history of rationality. What we count as rationality itself is built up out of the *practices* of appraisal and criticism. In applying these standards to actions and beliefs, the European community has been logically led to extend the practices of appraisal and criticism to the practices of appraisal and criticism themselves. In a final self-reflexive move, characteristic of Hegel's day, it is then led to ask both what it means in general to appraise and criticize and what kinds of agents we must be in order to have

such reflective practices play such a central role in our self-conception. In thinking of its practices of criticism in this way, however, this practice of self-reflection must come to understand that rationality itself has a history that develops internally, and that the history of rationality is coextensive with the history of the community that is giving the account of itself at the end of the *Phenomenology*. The development of that form of practice leads to the development of the kind of philosophy found in the *Phenomenology*.⁹²

Hegel argues that the kind of account that is needed for this type of reconciliation to occur has to do with the way in which the kind of social *action* necessary for the construction and sustainability of modern life must be united with a certain way of *thinking* about that life that is continuous with those actions if that form of life is to be able to give a coherent and sustainable account of itself. The first step is to note that this reconciliation is a practical affair that is accomplished not purely by thinking about it but in terms of the way in which the modern form of life has taken on a certain institutional form. The desired unification of the religious and the modern secular accounts of what legitimates human action has thus *already* occurred through the community's practicing a secularized version of Christian morality, even if the religious community cannot understand that secularization within its own terms.⁹³ Both forms of the "beautiful soul" – the character who is forever intoning against the world's corruptions and thus can never act, and the character who is always invoking his own conscientiousness and the regrettable complexity of the world to justify whatever it is he happens to do – are parts of this act of redemption; these "beautiful souls" come to realize that they are hypocrites. The reconciliation between the self-reflected "beautiful soul" and the ironist prefigures the reconciliation between two aspects of modern social practice: that between reflective thought and social action, the kind of reflections on the basic interests of humanity that occur in the form of absolute spirit, and the ways in which in social life in general and in politics in particular people must *act* in order to accomplish anything. The reconciliation is thus between *politics* and *reflection*, between the "doers" and the "thinkers" of modern social practice (between the "Napoleons" and the "Hegels" of modern life).

Modern life's claim to be a *self-justifying* culture is thus possible only through the reflective practices of "absolute spirit": Only in the self-mediating reflections on both the *kinds* of principles that we have come to take as authoritative for us and on how they *can be* authoritative for us – that is, in those reflections by the "thinkers" in which we autonomously and independently determine what will count as a reason for us – can modern life fulfill its task of constructing its justification of itself.⁹⁴ However, modern life also claims to be a form of life embodied in independent, self-determining *individuals*. To do this, it needs various social institutions and political reforms that the "thinkers" cannot provide. In the unreconciled form of modern life, the men and women of "thought" and the men and women of "action" condemn each other; the "beautiful soul" of thought and reflection condemns what he sees as the hypocrisy, if not evil, of the "doers" in society who are forever having

to justify what they do in terms of the complexities and exigencies of the situation; likewise, the “doers” in society condemn the reflective beautiful souls for what they see as their hypocrisy in forever criticizing without ever actually doing anything. The reconciliation of modern life with itself is the reconciliation with the necessity of both action *and* reflection, and the necessity of institutionalizing both action and reflection such that the critical reflective accounts will be continuous with the kinds of things that need to be done. Both are necessary for modern life to be able to give a complete account of itself that is not subject to the kind of internally generated, destructive skeptical discrediting that characterized past forms of life. Nonetheless, this reconciliation between the actors and thinkers, although at first possible only from within the *language* of religious practice, is completed in the *dialectical* account given in the *Phenomenology* of how we may understand the absolute principles governing human life not as “given,” as independent objects of consciousness but as internal to the ways in which we *have come to take* these principles as authoritative for us.⁹⁵

Absolute knowing in the form of the historical practices and modern institutions of philosophy is the form of reflection on that “social space” in which the kinds of reasons and legitimations of the “ground rules” – of what is authoritative for us in thought and action and whether they *can* be authoritative for us – are rationally reconstructed to see if they can indeed affirm for us our sense of who we are.⁹⁶ This reflection is absolute in its being fully internal to this “social space.” We cannot leap out of this “social space” to take a look at the “real world” in order to see if our concepts match up to that world – to see if, for example, our mathematical concepts and procedures “match up” with the Platonic forms, or to see if our roles as private individuals and public citizens “match up” with the Natural Law, not because we live behind a curtain of appearance that keeps us away from the things in themselves, but because we have come to understand that the only things that *could* count for us as authoritative have to do with our understanding ourselves as historical, social beings. In the modern account, there can be no room for the role that “matching up” our practices with “natural laws” or “Platonic forms” would have formerly supposedly played. The practices of modern science and the world of modern politics have participated in the development of a self-understanding of the “ground rules” of our practice as not linking up with a world as something “metaphysically beyond” our consciousness that we only “represent” to ourselves; our thought is already from the start world-involving. The issue is rather the structure of our self-consciousness: how we take ourselves to be, what we have thus come to count as valid claims to knowledge, and the social practices in which we try to reassure ourselves and affirm for ourselves that we are who we think we are and that we really do know what we claim to know.

Self-reflection on essential self-identity is necessarily social reflection, on the positioning of oneself in “social space” and on the possibilities of self-conceptions that are both opened and foreclosed by that “social space.” This falls to the historical practice of philosophical reflection, which in its modern

form is mostly carried out in the institutions of universities and faculties of philosophy. This is not to say, of course, that this is the understanding that the practice of philosophy has always had of itself. Indeed, in this Hegelian view, the historical institutions in which philosophical reflection is embodied will necessarily take on different forms depending on the differences of self-understanding. It is only when the form of life has incorporated into its essential self-understanding a conception of self-reflection on ourselves as cultural beings – only in a *self-grounding, reflective historicist* culture when the social practices of reason-giving have been turned on themselves – that such absolute reflection is possible and that this type of dialectical philosophical reflection can appear and can understand itself for what it is.⁹⁷ Whereas philosophers might have understood their task earlier to be primarily metaphysical – that is, to put us in touch with various kinds of supersensible entities that supposedly were necessary to underwrite our claims to knowledge and that supposedly could reassure us that what we were doing was in fact right – the social institutions and practices of modern life, including the way in which this life has secularized the Christian tradition within itself, have made it possible for modern agents to come to understand past philosophy historically, as having really been parts of the progressive developments of accounts of who we were that historically have attempted to affirm and to reassure us that we really were “in touch” with things. Modern Hegelian philosophy, understanding itself as engaged in such a historical practice, cannot therefore claim to go on *outside* of the rest of culture – as if philosophy looked at things from the purely impersonal standpoint, the “standpoint of eternity,” uninfluenced by the life around it – but firmly *inside* it, part of it and its history, in a way similar to other ways in which that form of life has tried to reassure itself that it was on the right track.

Although the various forms of life portrayed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* were not consciously aiming at such an outcome, the self-understandings developed by these forms of life made possible the modern self-conception in that this modern self-conception developed out of the kinds of conceptual moves necessary to accommodate the problems of affirmation, reassurance and legitimation that earlier periods had developed. Something very much *like* the current structures of modern life, if not those exact structures themselves, had to develop *if* a resolution of those earlier dilemmas was to be possible. One can discern the kind of conceptual necessity at work only when one abstracts from issues about historical *causality* – of what caused population movements, what caused agricultural communities to take such and such form, and so on – and reflects on the conceptual structure of the “social space” that the earlier forms of spirit inhabited. One looks at the accounts that they gave of the kinds of principles and practices that they took as underwriting their form of life, and one sees the internal conceptual flaws within those self-conceptions. Indeed, the past breakdowns of metaphysical accounts – of those accounts of knowledge and practice that understand their ultimate justification as lying in our contact (somehow) with abstract, supersensible entities – lead to the modern account in which one understands that

even a concept itself is not a metaphysical entity but is itself a moment in "social space," a position in a system of inferences. It thereby becomes possible to study these forms of life in terms of the basic types of conceptual structures that distinguish them as forms of human *agency*, of spirit.⁹⁸

Hegel does not claim that history is *caused* by relations of conceptual necessity but rather claims that these relations, by making human *organisms* into *agents*, are the enabling conditions for there to be history at all. For example, there is no conceptual necessity that Rome succeed Greece; however, only something *like* the Roman self-conception could have taken the Greek self-conception and its internal contradictions in a direction that could develop that account of agency and knowledge further in a way that could both sustain the kind of form of life that Rome developed and develop within itself the ways in which the Greek self-conception could be furthered and altered, although this can only be seen in retrospect. It might have happened for purely contingent reasons that the Roman tribes never acquired the power and territorial claims that they in fact acquired. It might even have been the case that European civilization never developed in the way it did. However, the relation between communal self-conceptions is such that the *contingency* of its coming about in the form it did nonetheless has a kind of internal logic to it, such that certain *types* of self-conceptions can *retrospectively* be seen to *complete* the development of earlier conceptions in the sense that they can give accounts that within their new terms answer the skeptical discrediting that occurred within the older conceptions. It is not "fated," however, that any of these new types of accounts in fact succeed each other, for the facts of such successions are purely contingent affairs. What is necessary is that in retrospect, we can see that only such a succession could have been the logical development of the earlier one. Moreover, that such and such was in fact the answer to those problems cannot be predicted; it can only be understood *ex post facto*.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is thus the philosophical reflection on who we are in modern life. It is the explanation of how we came to be the people for whom "absolute knowing" – that is, the human community's coming to a reflective non-metaphysical understanding of what it must take as authoritative grounds for belief and action – is not *just* a possibility but something that essentially characterizes our self-understanding. History alone cannot tell us this. History can only present a contingent story of movements of peoples, the rise and fall of political dynasties, a story perhaps of the lives of ordinary men and women, all with no internal rationality to them. Nor, it seems, could academic philosophy alone, as a reflection on conceptual possibility or as a transcendental science, explain to us why this type of reflection is for us now possible, and why the old-fashioned metaphysical explanations seem to have lost their force *for us*.

As we might put it, how is it even possible to write the *Phenomenology of Spirit*? Or why would such a philosophical-historical book seem like a viable possibility for a German academic to write in 1807? That *Hegel* was the person to write the book is a purely contingent fact; that such a book became

possible in modern life is a feature of our contemporary conceptual furnishings that Hegel has traced out. If not the *Phenomenology of Spirit* itself, something like the *Phenomenology of Spirit* becomes possible in a community in which people have come to understand themselves as cultural artifacts, as constituted by their practices, as finding their forms of legitimation, of reassurance and affirmation coming only from the historical nature of norm-guided reflective activity trying to make those norms intelligible to itself. That such a book could appear as an option within the self-understandings of modern life cannot be understood by a form of reflection that abstracts itself from the history of that community. What is needed is a dialectical reflection on the series of self-understandings that traces out that history's "path of despair" to show how those self-understandings broke down because of their inability to account for themselves in ways that the agents could find satisfactory. From our standpoint, we, the readers of the *Phenomenology*, can understand that it was the failure of a satisfactory account of reflective agency and a form of life that integrated reflection and action within itself that explains the failures of these earlier self-conceptions. This is not because this was some "potentiality" lying deep within us that modern institutions have "actualized"; the history of this development, that is, is not analogous to the development of the child into the adult. It is rather because this type of account succeeds in *forming us into* such reflective agents that the success of the modern reflective account (in its being self-justifying) shows the failure of the past accounts to be failures exactly in the way in which they failed to create social institutions in which this kind of reflection could take root. This kind of reflection – comprehended history (*begriffne Geschichte*), as Hegel calls it – becomes the new paradigm for philosophy, one of whose goals is the explanation of its own possibility. But this possibility is part of the larger field of possibilities that make us who we are, and our reflections on them are themselves only part of that self-enclosed circle of human practices and the ways in which we have developed the practices of reflecting on them. Dialectic does not end in absolute knowing; it begins the task of renewing itself.