

The Absolute Perspective of the Personal Subject Hegel vs. Plato on Social Philosophy, Art, and Religion

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ABSTRACT

Normally, we focus on objective matters, not on performances in apperception and judgment. High-level reflections on ourselves also tend to look *sideways-on* upon us as ‘individual objects’ – thus overlooking the basic facts of subjectivity, perspectivity, and temporal actuality in all our relations to the world. Hegel, who had realized this, is nevertheless widely attacked by defenders of ‘methodological individualism’ as defending a version of Platonic idealism and holism, claiming, allegedly, a higher existence of conceptual forms to empirical appearances. However, not Ancient Greek philosophy, but Christian religion and medieval art show us the absoluteness of subjectivity in performing a personal life, as Hegel argues in his criticism of Plato’s ‘collectivist’ and ‘conventional virtue, thus agreeing in part with Karl Popper. The highest dignity of human individuals thus results from free orientations at traditional and general wisdom, together with the insight, that all objectivity is relative to perspectival changes.

KEYWORDS

Personality, Individualism, Objectivity, Perspectivity, Subjectivity

1. *Background and Topic*

It is a ‘natural’ stance to the world to focus on an allegedly subject-independent reality by ‘looking through’ our seemingly transparent representations, ignoring all conceptual mediations and ‘meta-level’ reflections. Hegel as the ‘great foe of immediacy’ (Wilfrid Sellars) is the first critic of this naivety not only in an empiricist, but also in any metaphysical (materialist or Platonist) ‘myth of the given’,¹ namely by radicalizing Kant’s transcendental analysis of implicitly presupposed forms in our knowledge-claims and beliefs. The first step consists in reading Kant’s “Ding an sich” just as a

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¹ W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, in H. Feigl and M. Scriven (eds.), *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1956, §§1, 14, pp. 253-329 (repr. in W. Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1963).

new version of Spinoza's "substance", which, in turn, is nothing but the whole world, looked upon *side-ways on* (John McDowell),² in a *view from nowhere* (Thomas Nagel),³ or from a counterfactual standpoint of an all-knowing God, placed at the end of all times. In a second step, Hegel sees that Thomas Hobbes's (and David Hume's) proposals just to talk about atomic individuals, to avoid all figurative speech and to cut off all generic, holistic or speculative sentences as allegedly superfluous 'metaphysics' by Occam's razor, makes full logical reflection on *presupposed domains* for our distinctions of species of things and entities impossible. Contrary to the assumptions of logical atomism, any object and any subject stand in indefinite many relations to virtually 'all' other things – such that we implicitly refer to an *indefinite totality* of 'always' ongoing processes when we talk about an 'absolute' truth about finite beings in time and space. To replace logical knowledge about this by religious or metaphysical belief is, as Hegel clearly sees, no option. Therefore, he *opposes* F.H. Jacobi's restitution of (theological) metaphysics on the ground of Kant's allowance to *believe* in *freedom, soul, and God* as possibilities in a world of speculative thoughts, a *mundus intelligibilis*.

Here, I shall focus on the most important special case, namely on the constitution of the 'spiritual soul' in the sense of a full personal individual in 'all' her relations and attitudes to her being-in-the-world as a member of humankind. The well-known opposition of 'methodological individualism' in the social sciences to Hegelian 'holism' thus shows the deeper reasons why Hegel's reading of religion and art as early versions of our insights into the overall condition of human sapience is not yet understood until today.

2. Dogmatic Liberalism vs. Conceptual Foundation of Personal Freedom

Supporters of so-called *methodological individualism* in the social sciences, Joseph Schumpeter, Max Weber, Friedrich August v. Hayek, Jon Elster, but especially Ludwig von Mises and Karl Popper, attack Hegel's philosophy in its *holism* and even see it as *illiberal collectivism*. However, the resulting common opinion overlooks that Hegel elaborates the *absolute status* of the *individual subject*. He even shows how its acknowledgment is part of an ongoing historic revolution in logical and political philosophy on one side, religious thinking and free art on the other.

² J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1994.

³ T. Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford 1986.

The situation gets even more interesting when we see the two sides in Hegel's reaction to Plato's political pedagogics. Hegel *defends* Plato's insights into the conceptual relations between *personality* and *community*: The (frequently merely conventional) *virtue* of a person depends on the overall *constitution* of state and society. However, Hegel sees much clearer than Popper⁴ that not only Plato but more or less his whole time did not yet have a proper understanding of *personal subjectivity* as the *absolute* ground for *personal freedom* and *human dignity* – the highest values of *Christian* religion and philosophy.

The enormous gulf between the different 'interpretations' of the difficult texts in Hegel's corpus results from the tensions between two complementary *logical* insights. I call the first the *absoluteness of subjective performance*, the second the *generality of concepts*. According to the first, being as performance – for example of one's own life – is *absolute*, whereas assertions are *relative* with respect to general meaning and particular fulfilment of already canonized ("gesetzt") (truth-)conditions for instantiations of conceptual forms. The fact that concepts are necessary condition of *personal* freedom, mediated by the *communality of reason*, is the second point:⁵ Thoughts and free actions of persons that transcend merely enactive (Alva Noë)⁶ reaction to present perceptions are *obviously* possible only on the ground of representing *possibilities*, which in turn presupposes the mediation of symbols and words.⁷

In ordinary understanding, especially in the context of "absolute truth", the word "absolute" seems to refer to an immediate view onto the whole world from the side of an all-knowing God, who comes in two versions, a 'physicalist' version of a world-architect and an 'empiricist' version of a Great Historian. In his astounding dialogue dedicated to *Parmenides*, Plato has already argued that even a divine physicist who is supposed to know all lawful relations between forms or concepts would not know *how to apply them* onto the actual appearances of the world in our *doxa*. Merely theoretical, hence only generic, *episteme* still lacks the practical knowledge of how to project it to perceptual

⁴ K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 2 vols., Routledge, London 1945.

⁵ T. Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology. The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994.

⁶ Cf. A. Noë, *Action in perception*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2004.

⁷ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), in *Hegels Werke*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, vol. 8-10, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1986 (=Enc.), §§ 458-464.

experience.⁸ On the other hand, Plato declares clearly enough that his ‘historical’ God of a Last Judgement in the 10th book of the *Republic* who looks back from eternity to all particular facts is merely a counterfactual myth.⁹

In contrast to these two traditions, Hegel re-reads the word “absolute” together with Fichte and Schelling in the context of Kant’s so-called “intellectual intuition”, which consist of the power to make, for example, light *just by thinking or saying* “there shall be light”. Kant and the Neo-Kantians like Friedrich Albert Lange believe that only God has this ability. The German Idealist see that there really are important cases of *saying so makes it so*. We know this structure of illocutionary performances today from John L. Austin.¹⁰ Mere *declarations*, as I would like to call this *moment* in our speech acts (which are more than mere *locutions*), bring something new into the world – even though the results of these actions frequently do not have all the intended or desired properties.

The consequences of the ‘neo-Cartesian’ insights of post-Kantian German Idealism cannot be underestimated: They involve that *being* a subject in performances like thinking or walking¹¹ is *not relative* to the fulfilment of some conditions, for example of true assertions. The *truth of a proposition* p and the existence of the referents of singular terms are *relative* with respect to what is the case in the world at large; but being and living are ‘absolute’.¹² An intended content of a declaration in speaking or doing something may not be fulfilled, a claim may be wrong, but the actual performance remains real. As far as I know, it was Fichte, who had understood Descartes’s inference “I think” from “I doubt” in this way.

For improving our understanding this logical form, it might be helpful to see that Michael Dummett’s interpretation of Gottlob Frege’s assertion-sign as expressing *force* in distinction to *content* points into a similar direction. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein, we might rephrase the central insight thus: Not I say that p, but “p”

⁸ Plato, *Parmenides* 134 (St.) (Plato, *Werke*, vol. 5, ed. by G. Eigler, Wissenschaftliche Buchhandlung, Darmstadt 1990, p. 222f).

⁹ Plato, *Republic* 614ff (St.) (Plato, *Werke*, vol. 4, ed. by Eigler, Wissenschaftliche Buchhandlung, Darmstadt 1990, p. 850ff).

¹⁰ J. R. Austin, *How to do things with words*, ed. by J. O. Urmson, Oxford University Press, London *et al.* 1962. Cf. also J.R. Searle, *Speech acts. An essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1969.

¹¹ However, Descartes was not happy with Malebranche’s “ambulo ergo sum” in the second example – even though it is also logically true, if we take ‘logic’ in the right, material, not only formal, syntactic, way.

¹² According to my reading, Martin Heidegger’s stress on Being with capital B with its time-structure of present *Dasein* refers precisely to this *logical* insight and is developed in his book *Sein und Zeit* (1927), Niemeyer, Tübingen 2006¹⁹.

says that p.¹³ Wittgenstein uses the variable p together with quotation signs for talking about sentences as (repeatable linguistic) forms, not yet about their content – and he avoids Frege’s ambivalent assertion stroke.¹⁴ It is, as Wittgenstein shows, the logical deep structure of the sentences that represents meanings. There is no simple soul or subject, as Wittgenstein adds, that could have an ‘immediate’ access to thoughts or concepts, facts or objects.¹⁵ When I instantiate the sentence-form “p”, I say immediately (aloud or silently to myself) “p”. In other words, I ‘think’ only in a mediated way *that p*. Precisely this is already Hegel’s point.

The deep logical insight of this obviously in part also ‘anti-Cartesian’ move is this: The relation between the syntacto-semantic form “p” and its content ‘that p’ exists only via an institution of general (linguistic) practice. This practice is holistic. It involves variations of saying *essentially the same* in one language or in translations to virtually all human languages. Moreover, we evaluate ‘the truth’ of an assertion p according to its *relevant differentially conditioned content* in proper coordination of the elements in the sentences on one side, the facts resp. things in the world on the other, as Wittgenstein says in another oracle. Whenever I say “p”, the truth condition of the (perhaps silent) consideration, judgement, or assertion *is relative to a communal practice* –and its fulfilment may depend on things and facts in the world to which I refer.

Karl Marx thinks that Hegel believes in some metaphysical spirit behind the scene of history. However, “spirit” is a *formal title* in our reflections on *the whole* of our faculties to know and think. “Perception”, “intuition”, “intelligence”, “rationality” and “reason” are special moments. Cultural history provides us with concepts and laws, norms and rules as parts of the very constitution of mind as subjective spirit, i. e. of being a personal subject.¹⁶ Objective spirit is, in short, the communality of reason as the overall object of reflection in what Hegel calls in the generic singular *science of*

¹³ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1973⁹; Eng. trans. Blackwell, Oxford 1959; (= TLP), No. 5.542: “Es ist aber klar, dass “A glaubt, dass p”, “A denkt p”, “A sagt p” von der Form “>p< sagt p” sind”: “But it is clear that “A believes that p”, “A thinks p”, “A says p” are of the form “>p< says p””.

¹⁴ In one reading, the assertion stroke says that the writer or speaker *claims* that the following proposition is true, in another it is just a *mark* for *derived* or *proven* mathematical sentences.

¹⁵ Cf. TLP, No. 5.5421. Neither Wittgenstein nor any other philosopher of the 20th century knew that this was precisely Hegel’s main point in his philosophical ‘psychology’, as I shall show in my forthcoming commentary on the core passages of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (under the title *Hegel’s Realphilosophie*, Meiner, Hamburg 2022).

¹⁶ Unfortunately, Marx and his followers join Ludwig Feuerbach in attributing to Hegel a belief in mystical we-subjects, not realizing that their own claim that humans make their history is logically of exactly the same logical form of generic reflection.

spirit (Wissenschaft des Geistes). Wilhelm Dilthey will later reduce these “Geisteswissenschaften” in the footsteps of Friedrich Schleiermacher more or less to the ‘humanities’, i.e. to historical hermeneutics. We better should stick to the tradition according to which “spirit” is the overall title for performative forms of human cooperation, instituted in joint practices. Hegel is aware of the logical problem that we must use the given forms of sentences like ‘N is P’ and ‘N does Q’ in talking about generic properties and doings of such communal institutions – and marks this special usage explicitly by the word “speculative”. He shows in some detail how to understand such high level, generic reflections properly – even though his audience largely seems to lack the special logical skills needed for this.

3. *From Form to Content: Individual, Subject, and Person*

Sameness of (‘inner’) content is always of the form of generic generality. The equivalence of different forms (as ‘outer’ representations) is always much finer than content-equivalence – as we can clearly see when we compare fractions and rational numbers or numerals and integers. However, people tend, instead, to identify content with their own preferred ways of talking – and thus confuse form and content, words and meanings. Heinrich von Kleist and other romantic writers – down to Theodor W. Adorno’s love for non-identities – have thought that their inner thoughts were unspeakable and their individual personality were ineffable. Hegel contradicts.

In fact, the presuppositional developments in Hegel’s phenomenological reflections lead, at first, from mystifying inner content to outer form, for example from concepts to words – and then back to common content that we can share. Hegel calls the way back “negation of negation”. As content-abstraction, it consists in ignoring differences by identifying the relevant equivalence (Gleichgültigkeit) that defines the identity of content – for example in the practice of ‘changing perspectives’. This practice lies at the ground of all reference to the same thing. It consists in ignoring *inessential* differences of access and translation. There is no other way to focus on *essentially the same meaning resp. object*. All entities, to which we refer, presuppose a corresponding perspectival change of access,¹⁷ hence a *practical* distinction between (irrelevant) outer forms and (essential) inner contents. Thought as the content of thinking is,

¹⁷ Hegel sees that perspectival change from me to you never means literally to try to see the world with your eyes.

therefore, like all objective matter, in principle common to us all, as Heraclitus already knew.¹⁸ The word “ideal” marks the constitution of generic conceptual truths as default inferences, presupposed in all understanding. The contested label “objective idealism” is just the title for this insight. As a result, we have to revise a traditional picture of Hegel. Dogmatic liberalism assumes in the metaphysical tradition of Cartesian Rationalism an immediately given personal subject or, as in Hobbes’s materialist anthropology resp. Locke’s ‘physiology of understanding’ (as Kant critically says), a merely ‘natural’ development of subjective skills. Hegel sees, instead, that the formation of personal competence is *communal*, not *individual*. Personal formation precedes explicit cooperation between already educated individuals. Such cooperation presupposes that they are already possess the personal faculty to speak and think, plan actions and coordinate behaviour – and understand the relevant equivalence of general content. This, in turn, presupposes an enormous amount of general knowledge of the world.

In contradistinction to the ideas of natural law, the historical emergence and development of states is also already an institutional and conceptual pre-condition not only of lawful order and legal rights, but of free commerce and economical division of labour and exchange of goods. Being a *full* person (or citizen) in the modern sense of the word thus *presupposes* a whole system of instituted forms and norms, including state-structures.

We have, however, to take the words “right” and “state” (from Latin “status”) here in a very general meaning. Hegel uses “right” explicitly as a title for all normativity of general entitlements and commitments in relation to virtually all other personal subjects in living and acting together. “State” in its most general sense is a title for the whole system of communal and political, societal and ethical *institutions* or forms of joint practice. Identifying the state with its government would be like identifying the university with its rector and senate. In its widest sense, the state is the framework of ethical life, i. e. of all institutions of *Sittlichkeit*, including language, knowledge, science, law-administration, religion, and art.

Ethical life as the system of all instituted forms of cooperative practices, roles and statuses is the condition of the very possibility of becoming and being a personal subject. We do not grow into autonomous persons as apples grow on trees. We do not jump in full intellectual armour on the earth as Minerva from the head of Jupiter.

Civil society (bürgerliche Gesellschaft) is, according to one of

¹⁸ Cf. Heraklit, *Fragmente*, ed. and trans. by B. Snell, Artemis, Zürich 1995, Nr. 113 and 114.

Hegel's most important insights, the domain of *free interaction of particular individuals with other particular individuals* – in abstraction from all *presupposed* normativity in our personal relations between individuals, from all corresponding state laws and all cultural history. Modern sociology on the lines of Max Weber's methodological individualism wants, like Hobbes, 'to build up' – or 'reconstruct' – societal and state structures on the ground of individual behaviour and action. However, state structures *are already implicit* in the institutional framework and concept of society such that there cannot be a 'contract' between the people and their state, just as there are no contracts in animal life.

The *contractual* interaction between individuals in civil society are of a form that *we legally allow* to use the 'egoistic principles' of 'rational man' in the sense of *homo oeconomicus*.¹⁹ The problem of dogmatic liberalism and its individualism consists in overlooking the fact that there is no free commerce without state-sheltered property – and that a *homo oeconomicus* in private life would belong to what Hegel ironically calls "geistiges Tierreich", *spirited animal kingdom*.

Religion now is, according to Hegel, the earliest form of reflecting self-consciously on these forms of communal practices. Religious liturgies celebrate these forms together with our general being-in-the-world in rites and arts, namely as transcendental conditions of possibility for my, your and our *personal subjectivity* with general spirit or personhood and our actual performances as two moments in our developing and having *personality* as a mixture of competence and status in the community of humankind.

Moreover, personhood is the real content of our traditional ways of talking about "an immortal soul": Religion teaches us that being a *full* person really *transcends* being a merely actual *subject*²⁰ – which is limited to the perspectival stance of immediate (merely enactive) performances as we share it with animals and their 'autistic' subjectivity.

Not only religious reflection, all art and philosophy uses and must use metaphorical forms, allegories and analogies. Logical analysis does so also, not only when reflecting on the personal form of being human. The main task of higher-level reflection is to make

¹⁹ No incident has made this as clear as the actual Corona pandemic, in which the leading role of state administration for commerce and family life, education and the sciences, religious practices and all art performance shows up.

²⁰ In Enc. § 552, Hegel writes: "religion appears for self-consciousness as the basis of morality and the state". I would propose to add what is obviously expressed between the lines: this is so *only for our reflections*, i. e. when we make the forms of morality and state in corresponding religious narratives explicit.

these semantic forms better understood, by which we talk reflectively about practical forms of leading a personal life.

Like our mathematical models of nature, all reflections on personal faculties, on mind and spirit, have a figurative form of expression and use ideal forms of articulation. Hegel's label "objective idealism" is, on this line, a title for the insight that we always use *ideals* in making *forms* explicit, namely as the 'objects' of 'objective spirit', i. e. of true "Geisteswissenschaften". The label "absolute idealism" is a title for our highest reflections on, and celebrations of, the human condition in general, institutionalised in religion, arts, and philosophy. When we grasp this fact, it gets clear that, and why, we should *not* burn theological and religious texts in an autodafé of all 'metaphysics', as David Hume had proposed. Instead, we have to *explicate* their *real* content *critically*: Only logically enlightened philosophy can overcome dogmatic belief-philosophy in theology, but also in scientism and naturalism.

Hegel's 'transcendental' reflections result, indeed, in a most radical development of Kant's insights into a priori truths as they are *presupposed* in our understanding. Kant's analysis was, at first, limited to *empirical thoughts* and has only the form of a generic self-reflection of *consciousness*, as Hegel explicitly says.²¹ Hegel goes beyond this limited scope by developing theoretical knowledge as a *moment* of practical knowledge, which is, as such, a general *form of practice* or *institution* in a most general sense of these words. I find no better expressions that could serve us in our short and general characterizations. Individual knowledge and free action exist only in taking part in – or instantiating of – general forms in a self-conscious, self-reflected and actively controlled way.

'Speculative' reflection makes the form of generically canonized knowledge, conceptualized cognition and means-ends-relation in possible free actions explicit, namely as conditions of possibility of thinking and leading a personal life. The task of philosophy is to articulate and comment upon these presuppositions of subjective spirit. Philosophy thus provides *explications of the major forms* of communal practices that function as relatively a priori conditions for understanding and free action, i. e. for a competent participation of the individual subject in a human life with all other persons.

²¹ Enc. § 415.

4. *Mind, Spirit, and the Immortal Soul*

True liberalism must refute naïve individualism. Human rights, for example, are of a kind that *we want* the positive laws and the powers of governments be restricted by them. I. e. *we limit* the right to set positive laws by a legal government (or parliament). To understand the grammar of this generic *We* correctly, however, is as difficult as to understand the true meaning of our religious talk about *God* and '*his*' *divine will*, or its verbal secularization in metaphorically talks about *natural rights*.²² Such talks appeal to a 'true understanding' of the 'essential conditions' of rightful law-giving. What we call natural or divine laws are most general principles. They are neither divine nor natural. They are, and must be, already acknowledged 'by us' or claimed to be acceptable 'to us'.

Transcendental philosophy as developed by Kant can already be seen as the enterprise to *translate* traditional talks about the transcendence of heaven and God, the immortal soul and a Last Judgement *into ideas*, i.e. into really acknowledged orientations that govern our taking part in, and developments of, community-based personhood, mediated by ideal concepts. *An idea* is, in this sense, a 'realized notion', not just some subjective 'thought'. *The idea* is, generically, the whole system of accepted conceptual orientations in thinking and acting.

In Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the explicit starting point (of the introduction) is the *gnothi seauton* of the Delphic Oracle. We have to learn who we are. This is not achieved by subjective introspection. It needs a reflective analysis of us as personal beings with understanding and reason. Understanding (*Verstand*) is, terminologically, just the ability of following rules and reproducing schematic forms. Reason (*Vernunft*) is, again according to the philosophical terminology developed by Kant and Hegel, good participation in the applicative use and critical development of forms, norms, and rules as they are made explicit by labels (words) or (implicative) sentences (expressed by linguistic forms like "if p then q", but also "P is Q" in some of its abstract readings). Becoming and being a person (not just in the sense of a

²² In Enc. § 552, Hegel says that the principles of legal liberty can only be abstract. They are, as such always somehow superficial. He adds that the institutions of a state must recognize that 'accurate' religious conscience of the individual subjects is always the actual form of their 'absolute' moral truth. On the difficult notion of accuracy see B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2002. Accuracy is a kind of self-control that is as 'objective' as possible – in contrast to mere *sincerity* of immediate intuition. However, the absolute subjectivity of our local perspective in all our performative acts of thinking, intending and doing, including all reflective self-consciousness, self-control and self-determination heavily limits this ideal of objectivity in our self-assessments.

human individual as it is counted in elevators but in the full sense of personal competence and life) means taking part in personal relations to other persons in the framework of institutions that define the *roles* via their successful *fulfilments*.

Now we can see already better in which sense (objective) “Spirit” with capital letters is a reflective title for the development of *all the institutions of personhood*, so to speak, which *incorporates* since Socrates, Jesus and St Paul the *principle of absolute subjectivity* i. e. of conscience and accuracy.

Hegel himself identifies Spirit with what we would call today the *History of Human Culture* – but again, with making a difference between an Oriental culture of collective conduct, Mediterranean culture of heroic virtue and post-Christian culture of subjective conscience. Hegel’s word for these three ‘epochs’ is “world history” (“*Weltgeschichte*”). It does not at all refer to all particular historical events and outer forms of political powers, only to the major moments in the development of the most basic principles of being a free personal subject.

The most crucial logical point here is that all thinking takes place in a *we-mode*. In (silent) talks I say that one or we can say what I say. Herein, Wittgenstein unknowingly agrees with Hegel. The same holds for any action, which is, as such, always already a form of participation in personal practices. In performing an action scheme or ‘maxim’, we declare *ipso facto*, as Kant already sees, that it is ‘good’ or ‘allowed’ to instantiate the generic action. Knowledge always already is what a generic *we*, Kant’s transcendental subject, canonizes or could canonize as *generic truths*, not what *I* as an individual subject hold to be true or cognize. It might be difficult to understand ‘who’ this *we* (or *concept*) is. It is, however, just as difficult as to differentiate real science from its mere appearance, or true knowledge from mere belief.

The tradition of rationalism and empiricism (from Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and Hume to Kant) begins with self-certainty and wants to develop a notion of true knowledge of the objective world on the ground of such subjective certainty. Hegel sees that such an epistemology comes much too late. Feelings of certainty are no essential part of any robust notion of knowledge. Certainty is even a misleading *idée fixe* of modern theory of knowledge and moral philosophy in the post-Cartesian epoch – overlooking the deep logical fact that any well-determined content is coarse and general, never fine-grained and particular in the sense of ‘singular’.

As a result, philosophy of Spirit is essentially the same as philosophy of the generic person. It transcends as such by far the

limits of any mere philosophy of mind. Mind and intelligence are only subjective features of human subjects. The central categorical imperative for Hegel is, therefore: *be a person and respect the others as persons* (§ 36 Philosophy of Right). Of course, the first part of the formula goes back to Pindar's "be who you are by learning".²³ It says (if we do not restrict it to the legal status of a citizen): Become a full person by education and self-formation. Its second part says that we should treat *all* human beings as a personal co-subjects, which means that we must care for their dignity and allow them at least in principle to cooperate with us freely – as far as they are capable.

In view of Kant's talk about "*homo noumenon*" or "transcendental I", it is just a kind of truism to say, as Hegel famously does in the *Phenomenology*, that the *personal I* is a *We*. The other direction, that any *We* is an *I*, expresses the obvious fact that individual subjects who say "we" take their judgments as *representative* for a *We with capital letter*. This expression refers to *generic we-groups*, so to speak, from the most comprehensive of mankind down to concrete cases. The use of expressions like "subject", "individual", "personal identity", "person" is as various as that of the words "I" and "we", on which they logically refer. At least some rough canonization are, therefore, helpful.

We all are *individuals*. Our *bodies* cannot be *cut into two parts* such that more than one part survives. This is the anthropomorphic (or rather: animal-related) material pre-knowledge that lies on the conceptual ground of all uses of the word "individual" – which has, therefore, in all other contexts a 'metaphorical' meaning. This holds for the equivalent Greek word "atomon" as well, especially in physics. As animals, our identity is naturally defined by the life process from birth to death. Other physical 'things' are defined as individuals by particular features, some of them depending on relations to us and our interests. A chair, for example, was no chair before its construction and (possible) use. It stops being a chair when it ends to be useable as a chair.

The word "*subject*" is obviously ambiguous; its purely grammatical use refers to the subject of a sentence. Its usage in reflecting on me (or you) as a personal subject focuses on the fact that we (like higher animals) live a life with a peculiar local perspective on the surrounding world. In other words, as sensitive beings with enactive perception, i.e. with a perception-dependent behaviour, oriented at

²³ Pindar, 2. Pyth. Ode 72, in Pindar, *Die Dichtungen und Fragmente*, ed. and trans. by L. Wolde, Dieterich, Leipzig 1942 (reprints: Leipzig, German Democratic Republic): *genoi hoios essi mathōn*.

our animal appetite or already at symbolically represented goals, we share with animals the subjectivity of our local and temporal performances here and now. (I do not use the words “person” and “subject” in all details exactly like Hegel, but the main contents are the same.)

There are different ways to distinguish between the finite and the infinite. In one reading, empirical things, matters, or events here or there, now or then are finite *particulars* (‘*Einzelnes*’), whereas the *general* (‘*das Allgemeine*’) is always infinite or *indefinite* in status. Singular matters are limited in time and space; if they are perceived, then from *finite* perspectives. What a subject actually senses, perceives or does – here and now – is *empirical*. We should restrict the word “empirical” to such indexical cases (no matter how many).

The *general form* of our action and *generic conduct* is, as such, not empirical. It is ‘infinite’ insofar as generic types transcend local time and local space. They are trans-subjective, situation-invariant. This holds for the life-form of animals as well as for the forms-in-performance that we humans can reproduce. Some of them are such that we can instantiate or re-enact them deliberately and freely, on purpose and with (self) consciousness. Being a person in the sense of a personal subject consists in actualizing such forms (properly).²⁴

On the other hand, singular empirical matters and subjects are in another sense infinite: They are indefinite, inscrutable and ineffable insofar as we can never *fully describe* them. Under *this* point of view, general concepts are finite – and written texts and their general content also.

In understanding the context- and situation-dependent ‘object’ of speech in using the deictic or anaphoric pronoun “*I*”, we have, therefore, to distinguish between the *empirical moment* in which *I* refer to *me* as the present subject – as the object of reflection. The relevant presence (*Gegenwart*) that limits the extension of ‘immediate’ self-reference lasts as long as we have to wait for the end of the ongoing process. We may think, for example, of the time in which *I* truly say “*I am sick*” or of the time it takes when *I* am returning home. In such cases, the ‘subject-object’ of my talk about myself extends as long as the relevant process lasts.

In other cases, *I* might talk about my whole past or about me from my birth to my death. In the latter case, *I* already use the grammatical mode of *futurum exactum*, because part of what *I* refer to lies in the future. From today’s perspective, many future events

²⁴ ‘The concept’, ‘the idea’, ‘the spirit’, ‘the infinite’, ‘being’ and ‘God’ are, as we see now, *different moments* in our reflection on the world in general and on our performative participation in a personal world in particular.

are mere possibilities. Even though the ‘extension’ or reference of the word “*I*” seems in such cases to coincide with me as a whole individual, it can refer also to mere parts or moments of my life, for example, to me as a person, instantiating a character, or type of personality. My bodily identity plays nevertheless always a crucial role for determining the extension of me as the subject-object to which *I* refer to when *I* say, for example, that *I* am about to do *X*, that *I* am in the state *Y* or the *I* have the property *Z*. Peter Strawson made this point.²⁵ It would be nevertheless wrong to ‘infer’ that the subject resp. semantic object, *about which I* talk in such cases, always falls together with *my body*. You can, for example, insult or hurt me by insulting or hurting my daughter or my status, the memory of me, and so on. Usually we say that *I* do something when a part of my body does it. Not my hand is stealing when my hand takes something away, but *I* do it as a personal subject; but when a ball hits my hand involuntarily in a soccer game, it is not my action and does not count as a foul.

Referring to me in the future does not always mean to refer to my future body but future possibilities of being and acting, as Martin Heidegger had shown, rehearsing an insight of Plato and Hegel, such that caring for ‘my soul’ in Socrates’s sense is caring for ‘all of my future’.

Aristotle distinguishes in his book *De anima*, a book of highest significance for Hegel, between

1. the ‘vegetative’ soul of all living beings,
2. the ‘sensitive’ or perceptive soul as the *subjectivity* of animals, and
3. the concept-understanding soul, the *psychē noetikē* or spirit of human beings as personal subjects.

Moreover, Aristotle declares against Plato that there is no ‘fourth’, no ‘immortal’ soul, detached or separated from the body. Like scientific enlightenment or so-called naturalism of our modern times, Aristotle denies that we continue to exist after death in any way. Caring for my soul thus reduces to caring for personal virtue and my competence in further life: All self-relations reduce to knowledge, belief, attitude, conduct or action concerning my past or present being and some possibilities in my future life. More precisely, birth and death seem to limit the scope of the words “my”, “me” and “I” – for example in my present fears or expectations. However, Plato’s Socrates talks also about

4. a ‘fourth’ soul, detached from my finite life.

²⁵ P. Strawson, *Individuals*, Routledge, London 1964.

Whereas my body and *I* as a personal subject exist only empirically from birth to death, *I* also can refer by using the word “*I*” to me as a person in the domain of all dead, living and future *persons* in a much more abstract way. When Socrates declares in the dialogue *Phaedo* shortly before his death that his acceptance of the death penalty manifests a case of *caring for his soul*, it should be clear that he does not care for any virtue in the sense of a faculty or ability. The case of becoming a *person* by education and self-training is different from Socrates’ forming his ‘immortal soul’. Socrates declares, moreover, that he is willing to recognize the laws of the city *only* in principle, while disagreeing with the particular correctness of the death-sentence, the arguments of the prosecutors, and the vote of the court in particular. By doing so, Socrates does not commit a kind of suicide, as Nietzsche has suggested; nor does he make himself into a kind of self-righteous martyr. Socrates does also not seem to be mainly interested in the glory of becoming famous. He actually is turned into a hero of philosophy via the narratives of his ‘students’, starting with Xenophon and Plato, or Aristippus and Antisthenes, the founders of epicureanism and cynicism – just like Jesus was declared Christ or Messiah by his followers.

According to Socrates, true philosophy must teach us the right form to live *and die*. This is so because a full person does not fear death and sometimes might prefer high dangers to a secure life – as we can see at the attempts to oppose a tyrant like Hitler. Socrates himself lives and dies, so to speak, for his ‘new’ idea of free conscience, the Socratic *daimonion*. This daimonion, which usually only ‘says’ that something should *not* be done, did not hinder him to stay in prison until his death, as he declares explicitly. In other words, his conscience ‘told’ him indirectly to accept the death penalty. This is the – deeply dialectical – Socratic answer to the problem that political, legal and moral judgements even of a huge majority of people can be wrong, though they might formally be ‘right’ in the sense that they follow well-established traditions and in principle accepted rules or norms.²⁶ Free personal judgement and ‘conscientious objection’ can stand in radical tension to such traditional opinions, for example to a superficial majority rule, the practice of oracles and other methods of decisions by mere chance as parts of a conventional ethical life in Ancient Greece. The same can hold for all kinds of religious taboos, for example in Judaism,

²⁶ Hegel says in Enc. § 552 that it is only an abstract, empty idea that an individual could act directly “according to the sense or letter of legislation”, not mediated by her conscience, the spirit of her ‘religion’. Religion in this sense is articulation of one’s whole personhood – if only in mythological narratives.

and for many 'literal' readings of canonized Holy Scriptures, for example in Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant Christianity resp. in all varieties of Islam.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates refutes the idea of the soul as a *merely* harmonious and instrumentally rational form of living one's life. His arguments in favour of an afterlife beyond death are admittedly partly sophistic and might sound wrong in detail. Nevertheless, his main idea is as clear as it is astounding: We need a mythological allegory of an immortal soul (as some traditional religions provide it) if we really want to understand what it means to care for one's soul in the sense of the *whole* person. It means, in secular interpretation, to live and act according to a kind of *script* that outlines my major roles and tasks in a life that is good in the sense of Plato's *idea tou agathou* of the 7th book of the *Republic* – which is just that same as the idea of being a good person.²⁷

The logical form of caring for the 'infinite' person more than for the finite, empirical, subject in her present or future life is this: The personal subject transforms the person, the 'character', by instantiating generic actions of certain types – which, in turn, can change habits and attitudes, but also personal status. These actions make narratives about the person true (or false). We all know the difference between a true history and a mere novel invented 'around' the real persons – by the subject herself or by other persons. In other words, the whole person or the immortal soul is, as it were, the *truth-maker* for narratives about the person even after the death of the subject. As such, the person 'exists' in all eternity in the same way as any past fact in world history: The past is settled independently of our knowledge about it.

We obviously need such a logical disambiguation of the notion of the *I* (or me and mine) as subject, as object of reflection, and as person (which sometimes might be the same as my whole 'character'). It is true that *I* will not exist as a subject after my death, but others could at least in principle talk about me as a person and some results of my deed will last. Some aspects of our lives might be explicitly *remembered* after death. Socrates says, accordingly: After my death, *I* shall stop to be identical with my body or corpse. *I* will be somewhere else only in a metaphorical sense, since *I* shall be at no place in the world any-

²⁷ There are situations in which to accept death is better for the whole person than to decide for further living, for example, when a fight for liberty or the free judgement of personal conscience is more important than survival in a 'happy private life'. Hegel names Cato of Utica and Christian martyrs as examples. The common task of religion and art is to show or display the significance and of philosophy to explicate the real meaning of this in some way or other.

more. In reality, I will change my status from subject to person in a way as my future changes into a settled and unchangeable past. The past shares with generic truths the interesting logical status of 'eternity'.

Hegel adds to this insight that a personal subject is able to think here and now about the person she has been, she is now, the person she wants and hopes to become, and the person she might or will have been in the far future – in virtually infinite levels of reflection. The full person thus refers to herself as a whole in her present situation and achieves by this a certain independence of the judgements of others without discarding them altogether, especially if we judge the competence of these other persons as higher than our own. This form of independence surpasses by far the heroism of ancient virtue or *aretē* and leaves the usual fight for public recognition behind. Robert Brandom's reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* comes very near to this insight.²⁸ The only difference lies in the peculiar form of virtually infinite, but actually always only finite and limited self-reflection that integrates in the good case the relevant traditional norms of the true, the good, and the beautiful or perfect, the peer groups of excellence and, especially, a hopefully accurate thinking about possible futures.²⁹ – As we see now, the third soul, the *psychē noetikē*, is not yet the whole person.

It was mainly a *pedagogical* point for Plato to claim that the poets lie, especially when they attribute to the gods' bad habits and crimes. In mythological stories, there is no mimesis, no literal correspondence to facts and laws of the real world. Just because they are edifying novels about heroes and gods as ideal types, we should not depreciate the divine or seed distrust in the ideals of the perfect. – Plato himself invents theological narratives in support of a democratically controlled republican constitution based on division of labour and competition for excellence in the state, in science, education, and arts. However, Plato seems to distrust people – such that he decrees in his Laws (Nomoi) that the citizen *must* 'believe' in the immortal soul and a Last Judgement as he had sketched it in the 10th book of the Politeia. Nonbelievers are even put into education camps for brainwashing. State-religion is, for Plato, mythological articula-

²⁸ R. B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust. A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2019.

²⁹ Any merely possible infinite regress is always actually stopped somewhere by some explicit decision to act according to a possible scheme or type of action – or an implicit decision not to act. This is the remaining truth of methodological individualism. It means, again, that the individual subject is absolute in her doings.

tion of the aristocracy of the soul and common celebration of the *ēthos* of the state. Millions, nay billions, of Christian and Muslim followers share a 'literal' reading of Plato's myth about a purgatory of the soul after death even though Plato himself makes it clear that it is a fiction.

Hegel agrees with Friedrich Schiller that the so-called Last Judgement for the soul as the Ultimate Court for the value of the person is, in fact, no transcendent God, but just the future of world history: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*. This does not mean that Hegel or Schiller wanted to replace religious myths by the historical sciences. Rather, they both plead for a virtually infinite self-reflection at presence in the most general mode of judging about my judgements and action as if I could look back on me from the end of my life. We know this logical mode grammatically as 'futurum exactum', talking now about what will have been the case if we see to it. There is a narrow relation to Leibniz, as Hegel frequent references to the *monadology* shows: I myself am in a sense a monadic mirror of all possible judgement about myself. In self-evaluation, I can, do, and must refer to virtually all possible and real judgements about the quality of my own personal life. The standard criteria for evaluating them are not at all private. All this does by no means reduce to immediate feelings of a 'good conscience' or mere sincerity; and it goes far beyond striving for maximizing sensations of happiness and minimizing sensations of pain in life. Hegel sees, moreover, that a person that does not use this form in thinking about her past, present, and future life already starts to re-animalize herself. This can happen on any level of behaviour and attitude – by deciding to live a life that only cares for present feelings of satisfaction or only for some private prospects of future pleasure in a merely instrumental way of *homo rationalis oeconomicus*. The problem gets clear if we just remember the truism that we all will be dead fairly soon. Nevertheless, the slogan "after us the deluge" is wrong not only with respect to others. It is wrong also as an attitude to ourselves as persons. This is so because as a full person I have to judge about me as a full person. This gets totally clear in cases when we explicitly accuse *other* people of missing the task of being a person. If they feel offended, as we may expect that they do, they show *ipso facto* that they know what is at stake: A person who makes herself more important than she is, a person that strives for absolute certainty or a person that is not able to give things out of her hands deserves our pity. The same holds for a person who is afraid of the basic facts of human freedom.

When Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* that the world of the happy is different from the world of the unhappy, it comes near to Hegel's transformation of Kant's idea of non-contradiction in merely subjective morality into a coherent thinking of a full person. At the same time, Hegel opposes Plato's idea to force people into a belief in a detached soul and a judging God as well as his conventional and, indeed, collectivist, idea of virtue or *aretē*.

We know, however, that even in most accurate self-evaluations we can err, that we must take risks and trust the benevolence of other people – as Brandom also has seen. Virtually no technician, artist or scientist, for example, can be certain if others will accept his proposals and develop them further. The same holds for religious teachers, political leaders, entrepreneurs, reflecting philosophers, or any other person taking part in a development of our institutions that go beyond a mere application of already established schemes. This means that we have to swallow the fact that all 'real' knowledge and judgment to the best of my consciousness and conscience remains finite, fallible.³⁰ Our grasp of the infinite always consists in capture the relevant forms.

5. *The Absolute Right of Subjective Knowledge and Conscience*

For Hegel, the Christian idea of free but accurate conscience deepens the ethics of Plato by radicalizing it in a somehow Socratic way, as I would like to say.³¹ Socratic reflection on the idea of free conscience shows that a full personal subject has always to check the quality of her life from an internal perspective. This has to be done in the limits of self-knowing, in recognition of the fact that evaluations by others do not lie in our hands.

The connection of this insight with the Leibnizian idea of monads lies in the fact that a monad is conceived as a kind of subjective and perspectival mirror for the whole world – insofar as it is, so to speak, my world. A personal subject is such a monad. The wider its scope of attention and reflection and the truer its judgement about real possibilities, as it were, the fuller is its personhood.

³⁰ The notions of conscience and (self-) consciousness are two translations of Latin *conscientia* and Greek *syneidesis* (sometimes wrongly written as *synderesis*). They become central in the dialectics between the locality and finiteness of the subjective and personal life of individuals and the transcendence of personhood and personality.

³¹ Even though the proposal of the early Christians to separate the state and the celebration of absolute spirit in their religious community was an immensely progressive step, it "is not enough that in religion it is commanded: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, for it is precisely a question of determining what is Caesar's, i. e. what belongs to the worldly regime" (Enc. § 552).

In precisely this sense, a personal subject lives her finite life in present reality and nevertheless exists as a person in the indefinite domain of possible (and real) persons as generic types. Such forms might be represented by thinking or memory, i.e. by symbolic acts. As such, they are not accessible to merely *sensitive* beings. As a result, the form of my life heavily depends on something I have called its script, as I use it for orientation.

In a sense, Socrates was indeed the first to explicate *the absolute right* of the personal *subject* to use the *power of reflective judgment* in free decision and action in his talk about a *daimonion*. His life and death shows the dialectics between ‘democratic’ *collectivism* and the dangers of self-righteous (‘philosophical’) *subjectivism* in personal judgement of conscience. Erasmus of Rotterdam seems to have realized the importance of this when he coined the expression “Sanctus Socrates”. According to this oracle, we can see the life and death, the teaching and acting of Jesus as a development of Socratic insights – with the same dialectical stance to the traditional religious and moral law of his people. According to Hegel, however, the epoch of Plato still did not know yet about the absoluteness of subjectivity.³² Plato only saw the close connection between the republic and the pedagogical development of personal roles and statuses in his *Politeia*; in the *Nomoi*, he did not accept that subjects have an absolute right to judge and act according to their hopefully accurate conscience.³³

The German word “*Gesinnung*” refers to a general cast of mind, a type or quality of thinking, such that Hegel can demand from the ethical person to turn her actual conscience into a stable mind-set or *Gesinnung*, i. e. into a personal character. There are always tensions between subjective conscience, personal virtue expressed in the ideal narratives of religion, ethical conventionalism and tra-

³² In Enc. § 552, Hegel writes that Plato was unable to account in his constitution of a state for the infinite, i.e. absolute and indefinitely reflective, form of subjectivity. “He did not know it yet at all, such that there is no subjective freedom in his model of a state. Nevertheless he tried to instantiate all the moments of an ideal concept of a state, as if there were true principles of eternal justice. He also thought that philosophy in the sense of a political science was in a position to recognize them” (my trans.). “However, any actual thought contains just as much naïve subjectivity as conceptual generality or truth”. In short: Plato overlooked the true form of concrete thinking and its most important moment, subjective consciousness.

³³ See again Enc. 552: “Feeling, perception, imagination belong to that form [of immediate subjective thinking]. We develop our understanding of absolute forms and norms in a good common life necessarily in this form first. Religious explication by mythological narratives come later, though we grasp them still more immediately than philosophy. Greek philosophy therefore explicates in a sense Greek religion, which existed much earlier. It has reached its perfection by comprehending general principles of human spirit or personality. Religion is the first form in which they are explicitly reflected” (my trans.).

ditionalism.³⁴ Insofar as civil liturgy in patriotic celebrations of the constitution³⁵ are too near to the actual state administration,³⁶ they are of only limited help. In the following sense, Hegel agrees with Kant: “There cannot be two kinds of conscience that differ in content, a religious one and a moral one”. (Enc. § 552). This entails that crimes based on ‘religious’ contentions are just normal crimes and true religion only articulates the ethical normativity of being a person.

Kant’s principle(s) for subjective but conscientious moral judgement stand(s) under the title of a *categorical imperative*: “Act in way such that you can will or accept that the maxim or generic action of your act is turned into a general norm or rule (for all persons)”. The interesting point about this formulation is that it indeed excludes free riders and defrauders who cannot make their maxim public and therefore must lie about what they allow themselves and others to do. However, Hegel attacks Kant’s Practical Philosophy because of its subjectivism: An act is not yet morally good if it passes the above test. This is so because I should also check what the others *really accept* as norms of *allowed conduct and action*. Nobody is permitted to steal things, for example, just on the ground that he might consistently be against the property regime of his society by pledging for some form of communism. Kant’s moral ‘duties’ are, under this view, much too few. It is not sufficient to derive them from the formal coherence of allowing everyone to follow my maxims.³⁷

³⁴ See again Enc. § 552: “Ethical life is the state in its substantial inner being, its development and realisation. Religion makes it explicit. [...] According to this relationship, the state is based on the moral disposition of the people and the latter on their religious disposition” [...] “But true morals can be the consequence of religion only if the latter is an outer form of a true content. This means that its idea of God must be a true one” (My relatively free translations always focus on content, not words).

³⁵ See again Enc. § 552: “It was a folly of recent times to change a system of corrupt morality [in France], its constitution of state and legislation without changing religion. It was wrong to make a political revolution without a religious reformation and to think that a constitution of a state could stay in peace and harmony despite its opposition to the accepted old religion and its sanctities. No external guarantees (e.g. the so-called chambers and the power given them to determine things like the financial budget) could help against a lack of conscience of those people who were to administer the laws”.

³⁶ See again Enc. § 552: “The laws appear [...] as man-made. Even if they are instituted according to accepted norms of constitution, they are threatened to collapse under an attack of a religious spirit that is against them. Independently of their true quality they fail if the real, subjective, conscience of the people does not sanction them”.

³⁷ If Max Weber criticism of an ethics of conscience would be merely opposed to Kantian subjectivity, he would have been right. Plato was also right to say that a republican state cannot survive without a society of republican persons. Vice versa, republican persons exist in sufficient numbers only in a republican state. Max Weber and Karl Popper are, however in danger to identify conscience with self-righteous sincerity, thus becoming too critical against the right of the subject to appeal to her conscience – with the dialectical

6. *Being a Free Personal Subject*

In immediate reflection, freedom seems to be the same as free will, governing free action in the sense of “*arbitrium brutum*”. Mere intuition identifies it with *arbitrary* choice between different options. This “*Willkür*” of choice by mere chance is indeed a basic moment of human action, but still a deficient version of freedom of the will.

A free personal subject leads a life that is *her* life. This means that she acts by manifesting roles of a kind of ‘script’ for a life that she herself has recognized at least in part *as hers*. This does not preclude that she serves others; no one is free in all respects.

There are – even proverbial – four main pillars of freedom: Freedom of speech, of religion; from fear, from want. Freedom of religion is always already free subjective conscience and free self-organization in free communities and their ‘liturgies’. However, it can happen that in the name of freedom from fear and want we give up some freedom of speech or participation. State organizations that serve welfare and security like administration, police, and military, can and do limit our liberty to do what we want. Peace keeping forces, legislation, taxation and jurisdiction got more and more important after the ‘neo-lithic’ revolution of agriculture – which demanded rules for a division of labour and goods, for property and commerce. A particular problem was the fear of nomadic attacks against settlers and peasants all over the world. The tension between the strife for freedom from want i. e. for welfare and prosperity, and for freedom from fear, i. e. for security, on one side, political participation on the other, lies at the ground of Hegel’s structural analysis of world-history. Hegel characterizes the oriental riches – from Mesopotamia to Egypt or India and China – by a collective acceptance of the primacy of a politics of security and welfare – without much participation. In such ‘societies’, there is only one free person, the Great King or Patriarch, representing the whole nation, city, state, or empire. All other persons are legally ‘children’, expected to behave according to certain ‘objective’ norms of conduct.³⁸ Accepting the rule of an ‘oriental monarchy’, from Egypt and Mesopotamia via India to China clearly delimits freedom of speech and religion, not only some freedoms of participating in political decisions.

consequence that their ‘liberal’ ethics move much nearer to ‘Platonic collectivism’ than Hegel ever would defend it after he has uncovered its merely conventional *aretē*.

³⁸The word “liberty” expresses (implicitly, as it were) the primacy of political participation. It names at least a state of being free from captivity, serfdom, slavery, and arbitrary government by others. Full liberty, however, means taking part in societal and political development, by active proposals of change or active recognition or criticism of decisions.

A full person is a free person. Being a free person means standing on equal footing as any other free person, at least in principle. It does not mean total equality of resources or power, property and or political might; but it certainly excludes an ‘Indian’ system of castes or a feudal system of aristocratic classes by birth.³⁹

In aristocratic cities, only some individuals are free persons. This holds at first for the leading families, the patrician fathers or higher nobility, later also for the demos or plebs in Athens or Rome – which we have to understand today as a kind of lower nobility,⁴⁰ as a recent dissertation of Martin Palauneck in Leipzig also has shown.⁴¹ Athenian “democracy” was a reign of male fathers of noble families (even of low rank) over much more people, not only females, servants, and slaves, but also immigrants and other co-citizens without political rights. The ‘majority rules’ of such a ‘democratic’ government relied heavily on chance. The urge to ask trivial oracles like the flight of birds limited the free judgements of military and political leaders, who nevertheless remained responsible for ‘their’ decisions *post hoc*. The much more intelligent priests in Delphi obviously supported the ‘new’ idea of free conscientious judgement when they declared that Socrates was the wisest man in Greece. As Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* shows, this did not save him: His teaching of a *daimonion* was an attack against the conventional *religio* of Athens – as Hegel correctly observes.

The kingdoms in Western Europe preserved some of the republican sub-structures of the Roman times: Their kings were not Oriental Patriarchs, but feudal military leaders like the Caesars. This means that the political constitution of their ‘empires’ was a mixed bag, with quite some rights of the nobility, some self-rule in towns and cities and a peculiar political and moral role of the Roman Church as an organization for educating Christian personal subjects and their ethical conscience.

By down-levelling the hierarchy of clerics and laypersons, Protestantism freed the flock from the shepherd – but calls until today the leader of the parish still “pastor”. Culminating in

³⁹ In some sense, the chances of social advancement, especially in the army, might have been greater in the Roman Empire than in mediaeval feudalism (or today).

⁴⁰ It is an interesting fact that nomadic tribes like the ancient Jews between the cities of the great empires also practiced liberty already in the sense of a relatively free tribe-organization. Priests and prophets supported patriarchs of the families and kept the ‘nation’ together – by a joint religious narrative. The development of the idea of the free person goes indeed back to nomadic forms of living in tribe-structures like those of the early Greeks, Celts, Germans, Slavs, Turks, Mongols, and so on.

⁴¹ M. Palauneck, *Gescheiterte Freiheit. Hegels Kritik der aristotelischen Tugend in seiner Darstellung der griechischen pólis*, Inauguraldissertation, Leipzig 2018.

the abolition of the serfdom of the peasantry (king's decree in Prussia in the year 1807 in which England also abolished slavery), Hegel sees in these developments a progress of a state of free subjects and a society of free persons. He and his times might have, however, underestimated the question of formal state constitution, though. After the experience of the French Revolution and Bonaparte's empire, a constitutional monarchy looked preferable to a 'democratic' republic – which necessarily changed in Marx' project to give political power to dependent workers, the so-called proletariat.

7. *Romantic Art and Universal Content of Religious Truths*

The modern notion of art is a notion of Romanticism, so to speak. It finds its most influential articulation in Kant's analysis of taste or *subjective judgement* about natural beauty on one side, the poetic pieces of art on the other. Kant claims that there are no norms or rules established that could lead our aesthetic judgement in a way rational understanding is governed by criteria of differentiation and generic principles of inference. According to this Kantian notion of beauty and art, aesthetic judgements are actualizations of a *free play* with some hope of agreement between persons with good taste. Novalis calls all poetry an art to excite the mind⁴² and all art a *play with subjective attitudes and states of the mind*, in German: "Gemütszustandsspiel".

Hegel realizes that no art of this sort can satisfy, as he says, our 'highest needs'. Therefore, modern art is, like modern civic religion and civil politics, at least as much in need of philosophical reflection as religious scriptures, cults and traditional art.

Traditional art was always part of traditional religion. Traditional religion consists, in turn, not just of holy books as in the case of the Jewish bible, but also of temples and theatres, plastics and paintings, churches and choirs, their liturgy and music. Modern art is also part of modern civic religion. Even the most trivial versions of pop-art or fictional literature stand in some tradition of religious art – and 'teach' the audience some positive attitude to the community in negative criticisms of all sort of privation in politics and society. They canonize a binding world-view, just as traditional religion had done.

⁴² Novalis, *Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. by H.-J. Mühl, Hanser, München 1978, p. 801: "Poésie = Gemütsregungskunst".

Can there be a 'true' religion in such a situation, as Hegel obviously claims? Is there a true world-view, contrasting wrong ideologies or superstitious belief? Is there a true ethics, or do we have to accept a plurality of religious beliefs and moralities, just like there are many different ideas about sex life and family morals? What is the truth of religion if there is any such truth?

Hegel gives a short answer: "The generic content of religion is absolute spirit".⁴³ Absolute spirit, in turn, is the performative form of leading a personal life together with other persons, commented upon and celebrated in religion and art. Philosophy and modern literature reflect on the very meaning of these commentaries. This stands, indeed, in the tradition of Plato and Kant who see that there is need to know what we do or really mean when we talk about God and the soul. Before evaluating the truth of religious sentences or propositions or corresponding acts of faith, we better distinguish superficial or 'literal' readings from essential inferential content, which has in any case another form than statements about past, present or future empirical facts.

A first step in Hegel's analysis therefore refers to the logical form, status, and inferential content of speculative, i.e. very general and high-level sentences containing words like "God" or "soul", followed by a second step of context-relative disambiguation. Sometimes, the word "God" stands for the whole world of all being-in-performance, sometimes it stands for a counterfactual super-person knowing all truths about all objects at all times and places in the world. Altogether, however, "God" stands for spirit or sapience – and this spirit or sapience stands, in turn, for the generic We of us as partaking in a joint practice of being persons. In other words, talking about God can refer to the I as a We or to a We that stands in opposition to a merely subjective I. In the same way, we must reconstruct the very meaning of our talks about the soul or the person as the type that a personal subject manifests in her life. As such, it is time-general or 'infinite', the '*immortal psyche*' of Socrates and Plato.

The most important feature of all art and religion, science and philosophy lies, however, in the fact that it 'succeeds' only if it is becoming popular, namely in folk-art, folk-religion, folk-science and common sense. However, by becoming popular, all art and science is somehow 'trivialized', gets superficial, and changes its nimbus, just as 'serious' music can turn into pop-music. (The result of this observation is that elitist Nietzscheanism in the educational bour-

⁴³ "Der *an sich* seiende Inhalt der Religion (ist) der absolute Geist" (Enc. § 552).

geoisie of late Romanticism is inherently self-contradictory.) Hegel sees, in fact, that any word, sentence, or concept has three main uses. We must distinguish,

1. a general use with 'infinite' content in generic reflections on whole species, types or forms of beings or processes,

2. their 'finite' empirical or indexical application resp. manifestation in perspectival appearances and singular instances, and, finally,

3. the relevant particularization by which we treat these singular cases as objective, i.e. accessible from some other perspectives.

The idea of God now turns into a counterfactual imagination of 'all possible perspectives' on all 'possible cognitions' and their objects, i.e. of the ideal concept of all truth and real reality, including silent thinking and intention of the mind or soul or in the head or heart, as the metaphors say.

Of course, all this contains the insight that understanding presupposes abstraction from merely subjective perspectives and intuitions. This involves the eternal task of finding out how the same things are expressed by different words and how different subjects can or might access them from different perspectives. As a result, the usual fight about words belongs to a kind of underdeveloped, still youthful, understanding – and to an overestimation of merely superficial appearances. This gets most dramatic in religious matters. Religion should bind us to personal universality or universal personhood.

Unfortunately, religions can have the opposite result when we focus too much on differences of articulation and rites. It is therefore necessary to be tolerant with all the different confessions and religious sects, practices, teachings, and liturgies – and focus on their general equivalence and function, even though not all religions and world-views before and after the era of scientific enlightenment are in all respects equally 'good'. I.e., some of them may contain 'wrong' orientations in their scripts for an allegedly good personal life. This holds for nationalist (misunderstanding of) religions as well as for all versions of naturalism. The first deny the universality of personhood, for example by denying the universal identification of their local gods with moments of the one God or with the unity of a divine spirit as an ideal entity of reflecting on the whole (human) world we live in. The second reduces personhood to the subjectivity of animal life in some way or other. Humans appear as animals that are only a little bit more intelligent than higher animals, allegedly on the ground of their relatively larger brain. The interesting incoherence of such naturalism consists in a presumptuous cosmic view from nowhere that results in some desperate self-devaluing.

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