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System der Sittlichkeit

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System der Sittlichkeit

Let us dive into a rich, obscure, poetic and suggestive passage by Hegel written in the winter 1802 to be delivered as a lecture, while he was living in Jena:

The first level [*Potenz*] is natural ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*] as intuition [*Anschauung*] – the complete undifferentiatedness of ethical life [*Differentlosigkeit derselben*], or the subsumption of concept under intuition, or nature proper [*eigentliche*].

But the ethical is inherently [*an und für sich*] by its own essence a resumption of difference into itself, reconstruction; identity rises out of difference and is essentially negative; its being this presupposes the existence of what it cancels. Thus this ethical nature is also an unveiling [*Enthüllung*], an emergence [*Auftreten*] of the universal in the face of the particular, but in such a way that this emergence is itself wholly something particular – the identical, absolute quantity remains entirely hidden. This intuition, wholly immersed in the singular, is feeling [*Gefühl*], and we will call this the level [*Potenz*] of practice.¹

Following a rather opaque Introduction and a note on absolute ethical life based in relationality, this is the opening passage of Hegel's first attempt to write a *System of Ethical Life*. It was found among Hegel's *Nachlass* and the publication of the complete text did not occur until 1913. What is remarkable to me about this opening is its prescience. There are secret conversations going on here between Hegel and Schleiermacher², who's *Speeches* he had read and even commented upon in his doctoral dissertation, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* (1801), and Hegel and Schiller, who's book *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) Hegel greeted as "ein Meisterstück".³ We're going to put those conversations to one side. What is significant and prescient in these paragraphs is the emphasis upon process, the transformative dynamics of being in relation, potency [*Potenz*]⁴, emergence and the primacy of intuition [*Anschauung*] and feeling [*Gefühl*].

¹ *System der Sittlichkeit. Reinschriftentwurf* in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 5, *Schriften und Entwürfe 1799-1808*, p.281. *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, ed. and trans. H.S.Harris and T.M. Knox (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979), p.103.

² The conversation, I suggest, concerns the relationship between intuition and feeling. Unlike in Fichte and Schelling, where intuition remains intellectual, Hegel, like Schleiermacher is able to develop a notion of a 'real' intuition because of the natural conditions from which it emerges: immersion in what is sensed and subsequently felt. In the later Jena lectures Hegel abandons the use of 'intuition', immediate experience cannot be immediate enough and so he employs the term *das Bekannte* (the familiar, popular, personally known) and the conversation ends.

³ Letter to Schelling, April 16th, 1795, cited in Steffen Schmidt, *Hegels System der Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2007), p.25.

⁴ I am not denying that this word is taken from Schelling where it has more that meaning of 'level' as the translators recognize, but given operations dominate Hegel's thinking that, later, were explicitly framed in Aristotelean terms of 'potentiality' and 'actuality', I think 'potency' is clearly involved. *System der Sittlichkeit* is itself divided into 'levels' one and two (the first concerning nature and the second treating infinity, ideality and form, nevertheless there is a relation operative between them. There is no dualism in Hegel's understanding of relations (*Verhältnisse* – living relations - not

Here is an account of a certain genesis, the emergence of form through the process of transformation (*umzuformen* – in Schiller’s language). And the emergence begins in a sensuous immersion in the material that is ‘felt’. Intuition, *Anschauung* – a verbal noun, emphasising movement towards that which appears [*Schau*] or a seeing-towards, emerges from an unveiling [*Enthüllung*], or contemplation – issues from the immersion. Ethical life begins here, with this emergence from what is sensed [*Sinne*] in the given environment to what is felt, not just perceived [*Empfindung*] but what is experienced [*Gefühl*]. In Hegel’s German, the individual disposition to what is sensed [*Sinne*] is *die Gesinnung*. Ethical life is completed only with the completion of history itself and so what *Sittlichkeit* is at any given moment, what is ethical in any particular action, cannot be pre-judged.

There is much here philosophically that can be deepened by epigenetics and an investigation into sensing itself. Sensing is not passive. It might seem so in Hegel, but since the mid 1960s and the pioneering work of the environmental psychologist James J. Gibson, we recognise the senses as aggressive, searching mechanisms.⁵ Receptors on the membrane of a cell change “shape, switching back and forth between any number of predominant configurations, all the while vibrating and swaying rhythmically to some as yet unknown melodic key.”⁶ To go beyond or behind the primary sensing and the ocean of feeling in Hegel, then, we have to look forward – first, to the end of *System der Sittlichkeit* when Hegel breaks off just as he approaches the governance, the state and absolute religion; second, to more developed notions of *Sittlichkeit* in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807]. For what lies ahead and just about mentioned in this treatise, absolute religion, is what lies also at the beginning: the doctrine of the Trinity.

There has been much attention drawn recently to Hegel’s development of *Sittlichkeit* or ethical life from the so-called non-metaphysical interpretation of Hegel’s work that began with Klaus Hartmann’s 1972 essay in a collection of essays on Hegel edited by Alasdair MacIntyre.⁷ Hartman is only continuing a line of neo-Kantian sociological theory that wished to drop Hegel’s notion of the ‘absolute’ spirit while retaining Hegel’s commitment to social and cultural transformation. Nevertheless, for the English speaking world, volumes and essays developing this interpretation and specifically associating it with the sociality of reason (Terry Pinkard⁸) or ethical rationalism (Robert Pippin⁹) appeared throughout the late 1980s and 90s. Both Charles Taylor’s early book on Hegel¹⁰ and Allen Wood’s book *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*¹¹ put the case boldest: Hegel’s contributions to social, political and ethical thinking can only be relevant today if they are severed from his metaphysical concerns. Well, I disagree, and such a disagreement is a very tall order

Beziehungen – formal connections). Each of the ‘levels’ in *System der Sittlichkeit* indicate an incomplete part which has to surrender itself to the sublation that both negates it as a part and raises it towards a greater recognition of the whole.

⁵ James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1966). Later he produced his more famous book *The Ecological Approach to Perception* in 1979. For an evaluation of the importance of Gibson’s work see Mrs. Edward S. Reed *James J. Gibson and the Psychology of Perception* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁶ Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotion*, p.84.

⁷ ‘Hegel: A Non-Metaphysical View’ in Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *Hegel - A Collection of Essays* (Garden City, New Jersey: Double Day Anchor, 1972), pp.101-24.

⁸ *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁹ *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

¹⁰ *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹¹ *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

to detail because Hegel was concerned with all the various aspects of *Sittlichkeit* throughout his writings. It would take a book, probably a thick book, to outline why I disagree and initiate a reading of Hegel that resists the non-metaphysical, pragmatic interpretation.¹² But the late Gillian Rose puts the case in her usual succinct fashion: “[T]he ‘absolute’ is not an optional extra, as it were. . . Hegel’s philosophy has *no* social [and therefore ethical] import if the absolute is banished or suppressed, if the absolute cannot be thought.”¹³ All I wish to advance here is that the Trinity, and its eschatological operations, are key to Hegel’s understanding of *Sittlichkeit*. He provides a theology of ethical life upon which we can build.

The *System der Sittlichkeit* is a preparatory text for the study of speculative philosophy.¹⁴ The early 1802/3 lectures were given shortly after the completion of some of his important early theological essays (like ‘The Spirit of Christianity’) and his doctoral dissertation. The lectures probably follow an earlier course Hegel delivered on natural law in which he announces, though does not demonstrate phenomenologically, that “there is posited a relation of absolute ethical life which would reside entirely within individuals and be their essence, to relative ethical life which is equally real in individuals.”¹⁵ They were given while he was writing one of his most important essays of this period, ‘Faith and Knowledge’, and probably revising his essay ‘On the German Constitution’. ‘Faith and Knowledge’ will culminate in Hegel’s infamous and much debated conclusion: that what must be “re-established for philosophy [is] the Idea of absolute freedom and along with it the absolute Passion or the speculative Good Friday that was otherwise the historical [*der sonst historische*] Good Friday. Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness. Because the happier [*Heitere*], superficial [*Ungründlichere*], and more individual style of the dogmatic philosophies as well as the natural religions must vanish, the highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection, encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the happiest freedom of its form [*die höchste Totalität in ihrem ganzen Ernst und aus ihrem tiefsten Grunde, zugleich allumfassend und in die heiterste Freiheit ihrer Gestalt auferstehen kann und muss*].”¹⁶ Elsewhere I have advanced my own reading of this famous passage¹⁷, what is important for this argument is that Hegel’s early approach to a *System der Sittlichkeit*, and its expansive revision in *Phenomenology*, cannot be separated from Hegel’s theological (and metaphysical) ruminations on nature, law and logic.

We can see this quite clearly in the four-fold (rather than the later triadic) structure of Hegel’s system in these early Jena lectures. Karl Rosenkrantz, auditor,

¹² See my article ‘How Hegel Became a Philosopher: Logos and the Economy of Logic’, *Critical Research in Religion*, 1/3 (December 2013), 270-92.

¹³ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), p.45.

¹⁴ For an excellent Introduction to the text and its biographical context see, H.S. Harris, ‘Hegel’s System of Ethical Life: An Interpretation’ in *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, pp.3-96.

¹⁵ ‘Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts’ in *G.W.F.Hegel Werke: Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807* Band 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p.489. Trans. *Natural Law. The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, T.M.Knox (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1975), p.99.

¹⁶ ‘Glauben und Wissen’, in *G.W.F.Hegel Werke: Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807*, Band 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), pp.432-3. My translation. The German language performs a progressive movement: from ‘happier’ to ‘happiest’, from ‘superficiality’ or ‘the lack of grounds’, through the deepest ground to resurrection. There is a translation available: *Hegel: Faith and Reason*, eds. and trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (New York, SUNY Press, 1988).

¹⁷ ‘How Hegel Became a Philosopher’.

disciple and biographer of Hegel, in his *Hegels Leben*, refers to this:¹⁸ First, there is Logic or the Science of the Idea – where science refers to the development of consciousness itself; secondly, the philosophy of nature in which the Idea is embodied and realises itself; thirdly, ethical life as Spirit; and, finally, Religion as the perfection of the whole and the return to the primitive simplicity of the Idea. Religion, at this point then, is quite clearly, “the highest synthesis of theoretical and practical cognition...the culmination of the whole system.”¹⁹ Hegel had himself made the same point with explicit reference to the Trinity in *Difference*: “the original identity must now unite both in the self-intuition of the Absolute, which is becoming object to itself in completed totality. It must unite in the intuition of God’s eternal human Incarnation, the begetting of the Word from the beginning.”²⁰

Now this is far from being transparent, especially to those who are not initiates of Hegel-speak. But before I start to unpack it, we need to understand a series of distinctions and I am going to explain why straightaway. Hegel’s early theological essays focus on Christology. In these essays there is a distinct importance given to the Gospel of John, particularly the Prologue – we give hear the reference in the passage I just cited. There is also a concern with the ‘life’ that proceeds from the Logos and the Spirit of Christianity. *Sittlichkeit* is I think best translated as ‘ethical life’ because it is associated with social ethics, customs, traditions of common decency or *Anstand* (good manners), and in this way it is distinct from two other terms (all three are to be found in Kant): *Sittenlehre* (ethical teaching or moral philosophy) and *Moralität* (morality).²¹ In other words, I want to argue that *Sittlichkeit* is the lived out ethical life announced in and as Christ the Logos and disseminated through the Holy Spirit.²² This does not mean we can, as Christians, discard moral philosophy or morality. There is no pure ethical life available outside Christ and the Spirit. As David Kelsey has recently argued: given the complex interrelationships between Christians and the distinctive ‘host cultures’ which they inhabit then at the very human level “theological ethics engages and appropriates arguments from secular ethics and information from secular analyses of morally problematic social situations.”²³ But above and beyond this engagement and these appropriations, something deeper moves: our formation in the goodness of God.

¹⁸ Karl Rosenkrantz, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegels Leben* (Berlin, 1844 reprinted Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), pp.179-93. The relevant passages from the book are translated in *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, pp.254-65.

¹⁹ H.S. Harris, ‘Hegel’s System of Ethical Life: An Interpretation’ in *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, p.6.

²⁰ *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie* in *G.W.F.Hegel Werke: Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807*, vol.2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), p.112. *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, tr. H.S.Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: SUNY Press, 1977), p.171.

²¹ Recently, the moral philosopher (of a certain Kantian persuasion), Ronald Dworkin has used an example of lane-swimming to point up the difference between ethics and morality.

²² There are at least two other recent Hegel scholars who have recognised the Christo-logic behind Hegel’s thinking. Martin Wendt has explored some of these issues with respect to what he calls the ‘Chalcedonian’ formula in *Gottmenschliche Einheit bei Hegel: Eine logische und theologische Untersuchung* (Berlin: de Gruyter., 2007), pp.2-9. Nicholas Adams: *The Eclipse of Grace*, takes up Wendt’s observations: “Hegel’s project is – in my conception – an attempt to render Chalcedonian logic available once again” (p.38). But Adams rightly warns us that the logic form that Hegel develops, especially concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, are not “themselves doctrinal formulations” (p.10). But, for Hegel, this ‘logic’ is lived – whatever its doctrinal formulation.

²³ David Kelsey, *Excentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, volume one (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.7.

This is where, I would argue, communities of living Christian faith have much to learn from Hegel's conception and analysis of *Sittlichkeit*, even while accepting that there are certain heterodox moments in Hegel's theology. These occur, primarily, around the relation of Christology and creation. Although I certainly think there is more ambiguity in Hegel's theology than my friend Cyril O'Regan argues for in his book *The Heterodox Hegel*.²⁴ With ambiguity there is room for other interpretations. I am far then from announcing, like another friend, the Irish philosopher and one time President of the Hegel Society, William Desmond, in his book *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?*²⁵, that it's time for philosophical theologians to bid him farewell.

Now let me return to those gnomic sentences in Hegel's doctoral dissertation that point to the highest synthesis and consummation of science in the life of the Trinity. He actually ascribes them to Schelling's system, but that is a sleight of hand. He is discussing Schelling at this point in the text. By "the original identity" Hegel means the relating of both subject and object that overcomes their dichotomy. Consciousness arises out of a necessary splitting within this original identity, where the I encounters the other. The evolution of self-consciousness, which logic both describes and performs, is a return to this original identity in the Absolute "which is becoming object to itself in completed totality."²⁶ What is important for Hegel is that the emerging self-consciousness, whose knowledge is a matter of finite contingency, is not dissolved as such in returning to the Absolute. Hegel does not understand the science of logic as prescribing a situation "where everything finite is drowned in the infinite."²⁷ That would be Fichte's position, Hegel says. Certainly it would be Spinoza's. Hegel rejects such a "[m]ystic rapture [the word used is the Pietistic *Schwärmerei*] [which] holds fast to this colourless light."²⁸ Hegel rather views the science of logic as prescribing not the annihilation of the subject-object difference, which would be the eclipse of all conscious knowledge, but rather its suspension: "In the absolute identity subject and object are suspended, but because they are within the absolute identity they both have standing too. This standing is what make knowledge possible."²⁹ That is why it is a "self-intuition of the Absolute, which is becoming object to itself in completed totality." In the culminating sentence Hegel transposes the philosophical idiom into a theological one: "It must unite in the intuition of God's eternal human Incarnation, the begetting of the Word from the beginning."³⁰ The 'It' is the "self-intuition of the Absolute" which must now be united in the Logos as "intuition of God's eternal human Incarnation." In this way conscious, finite knowledge is maintained for it participates in the Word of God and the Word of God is the human incarnation of God's own self-intuition. In the words of Irenaeus: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the word of God...became what we are that he might make us what he is himself."³¹

Just one more elucidation: the nature of that participation in the Logos. Finite consciousness participates in the Logos because the object of that consciousness, the object galvanising the very process of that consciousness towards knowledge, is the Logos itself. As Quentin Lauer puts it, in describing the same story of consciousness

²⁴ *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

²⁵ *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

²⁶ *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*, p.112. *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, p.171.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 95/156.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.112/171.

³¹ *Adversus Haereses v.*

in the *Phenomenology*: “in the consistently sustained experience of the object the object reveals itself more and more as what it truly is.”³² The Logos is, then, both the object of the consciousness’s “self-intuition of the Absolute” and the object of God’s own self-intuition – that is why they can be united. The Logos as object of consciousness is appropriated through the logical development of consciousness and its object in the experience of consciousness itself. In that way, Logos as the object of consciousness is immanent to consciousness itself. It is also the Word that is transcendently begotten of God.

Now before I go on to elaborate this Trinitarian framing for the sciences of logic, nature and ethical life, let me point something out here: the order of the philosophical and the theological. Famously, in the closing sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel reverses this order. Religious representation is ‘pictorial’ and this is sublated by the philosophical in a higher operation of self-consciousness in which there is self-consciousness of self-consciousness itself. This is the knowledge of Spirit returning to itself. Absolute knowledge. What is happening in these two accounts of the order of philosophy and theology, separated by six years?

In the first account, what does explicit reference to Trinitarian procession enable Hegel to do? I would suggest that it enables Hegel to maintain finite knowledge of subjective contingency within the Absolute in contrast to the dissolution of such finitude in Fichte, Spinoza and Pietistic *Schwärmerei*. His analysis of the emergence and development of self-consciousness, the logic, is not then arbitrary but necessary for this is the nature and operation of the Logos itself: the Logos as “God’s eternal human incarnation.” I will have much more to say about that phrase in a moment. For now, let’s continue with the order of philosophy and theology. To some extent the explicit reference to the Trinity in *Difference* is proof of the validity of the system as a whole; it is valid because recognised to be a necessary corollary of Trinitarian procession. What is an immanent process of an evolving consciousness coming to self-conscious understanding of itself is given a transcendent referent. Now it might appear, read this way that the transcendent referent is only a regulative rule for understanding the immanent process. But that is far too Kantian. For the statement is also claiming that Trinitarian procession is the highest conceptualisation of what Houlgate will call “the structures or fundamental determinations of thought and being.”³³ And so the transcendent is operative constitutively within the immanent. Hence, when Hegel gives his account of the development of religion and the relation of Christianity to other faiths, as with Schleiermacher, Christianity will be the consummate religion. For Hegel it is the consummate religion on two grounds: a) because of this Trinitarian conceptualisation that makes a shadowy appearance in other religions but its clearest manifestation in Christianity; and b) not unrelated to a), it is revealed. Hegel always adds the adjective ‘revealed’ to Christianity.

There are three degrees of religious expression that inform a community’s *Sittlichkeit*: *natürliche Religion*, *kunst-Religion* and *offenbare Religion*. Thus in Hegel’s *Lectures of the Philosophy of History*, he defines the “axis on which the History of the World turns” as: “Christ has appeared – a Man who is God – God who is Man.”³⁴ It is not that these other forms of religion do not bear some analogy to what

³² Quentin Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), p.40

³³ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth, and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, second edition 2005), p.48.

³⁴ *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trs. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Books 1956), p.324.

is revealed in Christ as the Logos. Indeed they do, and it is the long task of Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* to detail the intimations of the consummate religion in what is translated as all other ‘determinate religions’ (*bestimmte Religionen*). Furthermore, the evolution of self-consciousness and knowledge, when related to Trinitarian processions, that is, to the creation of all things through the Word, is not simply an exercise in epistemology. The logic it announces, the Christologic because it is an unfolding of the Logos, is an ontological logic – the unification of both “thought and being”. The rational (which for Hegel is never separable for the embodied, the social, the historical, the political and the economics) is lived, is life. Another Johannine passage, which Hegel cites in his earlier theological writings, comes to mind: “I am the way [*odos*], the truth and the life.” So what is the reversal of order about in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*?

First point: recognition of this ontological logic is absolute knowing. This is the concluding section of the *Phenomenology*. It follows the account of Revealed Religion and opens by announces a further step or sublation that it must now itself undergo: “The Spirit of the Revealed Religion has not yet surmounted its consciousness as such... its actual self-conscious is not the object of its consciousness.”³⁵ As I read this, Hegel is not announcing that philosophy supersedes the theological, but rather that the philosophical sublation makes clear the essence or logic of Christianity. This final sublation makes absolute knowing available. Now listen then to how that section on absolute knowing concludes: “So although this Spirit starts afresh and apparently from its own resources to bring itself to maturity, it is none the less on a higher level. The realm of the Spirit which is formed in this way in the outer world constitutes a succession in Time in which one Spirit relieved another of its charge and each took over the empire of the world from its predecessor. Their goal is the revelation of the depth of Spirit, and this is the *absolute Notion* [*Ihr Ziel ist die Offenbarung der Tiefe, und diese ist der absolute Begriff*]”³⁶ I give you the German because it does not say the “depth of the Spirit” but “the depth” and for those, like Hegel’s readers, steeped in Luther’s translation of the Bible this language would have brought to mind two texts. The first is *Romans* 11.33: “O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God... who has know the mind of the Lord.” The second is *1 Corinthians* 2.10: “For the spirit searches everything, even the depth of God... no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” Note Hegel’s little throwaway observation that the evolution of consciousness makes these sublations in coming to absolute knowing “apparently from its own resources”. For what it understands in “the Spirit knowing itself as Spirit” is that the origin of its becoming lies in the “depth”. So that what takes place in absolute knowing is “alike the inwardizing and the Calvary [*die Erinerrung und die Schädelstätte*] of absolute Spirit, the actuality, truth, and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone.”³⁷ The German again in clearer: “the recollection, the remembrance, and the place of the skull”, which once more have echoes of Luther’s translation of the Bible.

Several observations follow from this exposition. First: philosophy is not the sublation of theology or a higher way. Philosophy as a phenomenology of consciousness comes upon that which is revealed Trinitarian truth. It does so in and

³⁵ *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in *G.W.F. Hegel: Werke* Band 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p.575. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.A. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.479.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.591/492.

³⁷ *Ibid.*.

through an immanent process, but as it approaches absolute knowing it recognises that its immanent becoming was transcendently resourced. We can liken what takes place here to the movement of the *cogito* in Descartes *Meditations* where Descartes too, beginning from thought only, comes to understand the idea of God within his mind. Only, for Hegel, the process undertaken is much more finely grained in detail, concerns not the single *cogito* but the history of human kind in all its cultural manifestations, and the God revealed is not Descartes's single and frozen deity, but Trinitarian, dynamic and life-giving. The last book Hegel was preparing for publication was on the ontological argument for the existence of God.

Secondly: there is both a unity and a knowledge of that unity. The unity here is only another way of phrasing what Hegel has already said in his dissertation: it is "the objective Truth and [of] the knowing Self in an immediate unity."³⁸ There is no dissolving, although Hegel through the syntax in the closing lines of the *Phenomenology* blurs the distinction between human and divine in describing this unity. In his vocabulary he will never use the German *die Einigkeit*, that is union. There is no union between the human and the divine. The word is always *die Einheit*, the being at one. If there is a knowing then there cannot be a dissolving of difference and an object must remain even in absolute knowing. Houlgate identifies this in his own interpretation: "absolute knowing still has an object or *Gegenstand*... Yet this object is understood not just to be an *object* and so to be fundamentally *distinct* from consciousness, but to be *identical* in form to consciousness."³⁹ This is very important and challenges certain theological readings of Hegel that view the absorption of all human *Geistes* into the divine *Geist*. There is a distinction and there is an identity. Houlgate does not press this in a theological direction, but to my mind what Hegel is describing here as absolute knowing is what St. Paul describes in *1 Corinthians 13.12*: "now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known." Many commentators have observed that the *Phenomenology* orchestrates a journey into self-discovery.

Thirdly: all things come from and return to the mind of God. Hegel announces a profoundly participative account of the becoming or determinativeness of material culture as the dialectical and collective outworking of human consciousness in God. It is the nature of that *panentheism* that we need to understand.

Panentheism

Let's begin with a definition and a distinction. *Panentheism* is that all things exist in God; unlike *pantheism* in which all things are God or are modifications of God. Both are committed to the immanent operations of divinity. Now there is strong New Testament backing for panentheism. It seems to define Paul's own account of participation in Christ. The question with Hegel, as a number of philosophers and theologians have read him, is whether the immanent operations of God are all there is about deity. *Letter to the Ephesians 4.6* speaks of "one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all". But the three prepositions are important here. God "in all [*en pasin*]" but this is only because God is "above all [*epi pantōn*]" . By being above, God does not simply indwell all things, but God acts "through all [*dia pantōn*]" . I have already said that absolute knowing is not union but being at one with. *Pantheism* announces union; *panentheism* does not necessarily. Of course, moving as

³⁸ Ibid. p.598/491.

³⁹ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, p.64.

Hegel does through a phenomenological analysis of the evolution and purification of consciousness, he is committed to articulating an immanent process: the discovery of the structure and determinations of the Logos intimately within oneself. Augustine will make a similar move in *Confessions*. But in order to understand that Hegel is not collapsing God's transcendence into a purely immanent operation we have to return in the *Phenomenology* to the point where understanding becomes reason and reason become Spirit. For we have to be clear here: human beings acquire spirituality, they realise the Spirit working within them – which already puts a question mark against a univocal use by Hegel of *Geist* with respect to the human and the divine. Entry into the Spirit is participation of human understanding in divine Reason. It is also participation in a Christic kenosis that surrenders itself as ego in ethical life. This life is described in *System der Sittlichkeit*, and all other accounts of ethical life in Hegel up to and including *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), first as family, then as civil society and finally as State. There is only one Spirit. Human beings have the potential, in their ability to think and understand, to become Spirit and to recognise the Spirit that dwells within them is absolute Spirit.

The Spirit, which is the very entry into *Sittlichkeit*, only appears in part six of the *Phenomenology*, following a long examination of Reason in part five, which itself follows an analysis of understanding and self-consciousness. The move towards Reason takes place when consciousness experiences its unhappiness. Why does it experience unhappiness? Because it both recognises something about the character of Reason itself and recognises its own alienation from it. What it recognises about the perfection of Reason is that it is Unchangeable, whereas the dialectic within consciousness and self-consciousness is committed to the vicissitudes of change. The Spirit will drive self-consciousness towards its unity with that pure Reason, towards, that is, absolute knowing. But it is the characterisation of the perfection of thought and being as the Unchangeable that is interesting and gives us a clue to the continuing transcendence of the divine in Hegel's analysis.

The word in German is the noun form of the adverb *unwandelbar*. God as unchanging and yet given to change is a core theme in Augustine's work. In *Confessions* he declares in Book I, which treats the nature of God's transcendence and immanence, God is "unchangeable, and yet changing all things." The Latin for unchangeable is *immutabilis*. God is immutable, while also being the God from whose depth the Spirit emerges (a more Trinitarian language would use 'proceeds'), as Hegel describes it at the end of *Phenomenology*. Now there were no German translations of Augustine's *Confessions* when Hegel was writing. There was no need because Hegel, and others interested in Augustine, read Latin fluently. But, when a German translation did appear in 1888, by Otto F. Lachmann then that phrase of Augustine's from Book 1 was translated "*unwandelbar und doch alles wandelnd.*"⁴⁰ If this is Hegel's conception of the divine, then his evident panentheism – which would issue on the same grounds as the observation by Aquinas that we never treat what God is in Godself, we can only treat the operations of God in the world – does not compromise the immutability of the divine who is "above all things". Participation of human thought and being in divine thought and being, absolute knowing, not only then announces a distinction between the knowing self and the object that is being known, it also announces a depth and an immutability of the divine that can never be appropriated or known. In Hegel's words: "it will behold itself as it is" and this is

⁴⁰ Otto F. Lachmann, *Die Bekenntnisse des hl. Augustinus* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1888). It is still the German translation most available today.

“[p]ure self-recognition in absolute otherness.”⁴¹ Only the absolute otherness of God prevents Hegel’s system from collapsing into subjective idealism, which would conflate the object of consciousness with consciousness itself.

With the recognition of the Unchangeable within the changeable, the Unchangeable even within one’s own mutability, then consciousness engages with Reason rather than just understands. And as I said, the engagement with what is truly rational and therefore universal is an engagement with Spirit. The *telos* of the work of Spirit is the overcoming of the alienation within consciousness that is summed up, as we have seen, with knowing even as I am myself known. Hegel: “reciprocal recognition... is Absolute Spirit [*ein gegenseitiges Anerkennen, welches der absolute Geist ist*]”⁴² at work in all the shapes of human self-consciousness that compose “the shapes of the world” (*Gestalten einer Welt*).⁴³ That is: its laws, its cultural life (*Bildung*), and the substance of its faith (*Religion*). These spiritual outworkings of the pursuit of the Unchangeable, the pure reason, the absolute knowing is *Sittlichkeit*. In the mutual recognition it fosters lies what Hegel calls “absolute freedom”. Hegel: “In this absolute freedom... all social groups or classes which are the spiritual spheres into which the whole is articulated are abolished; the individual consciousness that belonged to any such sphere and willed and fulfilled itself in it, has put aside its limitation; its purpose is the general purpose, its language universal law, its work the universal work.”⁴⁴

Trinitarian Living

Allow me now to sketch *Sittlichkeit* from within this Trinitarian, and not simply triadic, frame. Because we live the Trinity, because all our thinking is inseparable from being and all our material, cultural and religious histories are the outpouring (*kenosis*) and consummation (*plerosis*) of eternal life, then ethics is associated with *ethos*. The ethics governing social and cultural life are not in accord with a deontological morality of duties. This separates ‘is’ from the ‘ought’, establishing public norms many of which can be embodied in law. Law is important to Hegel, but it has to emerge from and be an expression the community’s *Sittlichkeit*. The is/ought distinction divides potentiality from actuality, in part because time and change have no bearing upon it. Hegel’s dialectic converts potentiality into actuality or rather moves from one state of actuality to another in an unfolding of all that is potential and, for him, indeterminate within the Godhead. But in the absolute idea, as Hegel recognised, there is no distinction between thought and being. So, in the realm of becoming, all will be realised. In an individual’s immersion in what is, in their rational progress towards that which is perfected in Christ as Logos, then because God is good we will live out that goodness. The virtues emerge from a deepening mutual recognition (being known even as I am known, in Pauline terms). For example, humility and love emerge from a dialectic of confession and forgiveness worked out within concrete social and cultural praxes.

It is in this way that a moral community is formed, sustained by an ongoing process of reconciliation. Although, on the scale of world history, there is a dark, tragic side to this progress. In the *Lectures of the Philosophy of History*, as I said, the

⁴¹ *Phänomenologie des Geistes* p.29/14.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.493/408.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.326/265. For an analysis of Hegel’s notion of ‘shapes of the world’ see Marco Haase, *Grundnorm, Gemeinwille, Geist* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp.239-272.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.433/357.

incarnation is the axis of time itself, and yet history is still described as a “slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals has been sacrificed”.⁴⁵ Hegel was not interested in history as such; only the slow and sometimes painful unfolding and development of a divine action in which a theological understanding of eschatology is conflated with a philosophical understanding of teleology. But the theodicy that emerges is still very much open-ended.

Here I only wish to distinguish a Trinitarian *Sittlichkeit* from other forms of *Sittenlehre* and *Moralität*. In doing that we can observe that, with *Sittlichkeit*, there cannot be a distinction between fact and value because there is a moral ontology. And yet such a distinction lies behind both utilitarian and consequentialist ethics where the facts are themselves neutral and given values by the way we employ them *for the best*. But this separation suggests that empirical facts (about things and situations) are all that is. This is the truth about the way things are. For Hegel there is no Spirit in facts. For Hegel a ‘fact’ is at best an indeterminate and immediate effect: like a sense perception. A thing *is*. But this in itself is not only an empty tautology it is not the truth of what *is*. A perception is registered in consciousness, but once it becomes conscious of itself then the complex relation of what *is* and the beholder of what *is* begins to unfold. Until eventually, with the entry into Reason, there is Spirit. As and in Spirit, material facticity as such is more than sensory data because ultimately everything is a manifestation of God’s Logos written into all things, governed by the universal law of Reason, and evoking the evolution of human consciousness. While then *Sittlichkeit* does become enshrined in the laws and customs governing a people, they are laws and customs that increasingly make manifest a mutual recognition that is at the heart of not only Trinitarian operations, but also the Trinity in itself.

Sittlichkeit traces and articulates this moral ontology, while duty to the law (in the Kantian sense of duty) is only *Moralität*. At best this can function as conscience, but conscience is still too ego-bound and subject to the ego’s choice. The law has to be within and lived before it appears as legislation. It is in this way that we must understand what Hegel writes in the conclusion of his *Lectures of the Philosophy of History*: “we must understand the state to be founded upon religion”⁴⁶ and the conclusion of his *Elements of a Philosophy of Right* where the *telos* of the state in the coming down of the kingdom of heaven upon earth.⁴⁷ They are analogies of the orders of creation itself, rooted in and issuing from the nature of the Creator Himself. They participate in the unfolding of the Trinity. They are not arbitrary; they are profoundly rational. They are not simply there to restrain the people. They exist to make evident to the people the justice and the goodness of the Creative Logos and the dynamic movement of the Spirit in all the concrete particularity and historical materialism of a community.

The keys to understanding the relationship between *Sittlichkeit* and divine life are: to understand the relationship between what was later called the immanent and the economic Trinity; the nature of our participation in God; and the construction of an analogical, rather than either univocal or equivocal, account of divine *Geist* and human *Geist*. In a developing examination of these keys we will be employing distinctions that Hegel either ambivalently or sometimes altogether failed to employ. For example, (and I did say I would return to it) let’s take his description of the Logos

⁴⁵ *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p.21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.417.

⁴⁷ *Elements of a Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.380.

as “God’s eternal human incarnation.” There is a Scriptural basis for such a description. *Revelation* 13.8 talks about the Lamb of God being slaughtered from before the foundations of the earth. But Hegel’s phrase is awkward because it fails to make a Christological distinction. In the words of Tertullian: “The Father is distinct from His Son [in his humanity] not from [the Son in] his divinity.”⁴⁸ It is the distinction – and we have got to proceed carefully with how far we can push such a distinction because it cannot be an ontological divide – between the eternal Logos and the historical Christ. It is a distinction founded upon the priority of one over the other. The Logos as “God’s eternal *human* incarnation” fails to make that distinction and leaves open a possible confusion, which Hegel does develop at times, between Christ and Creation that renders creation as eternal.

But just to demonstrate the theological ambivalences here, let me pursue this a little further. As noted, human thinking about the Godhead can only treat what God has revealed of Godself, in Christ and in the Scriptures that bear witness to and disseminate the Christ-event – Scriptures which have been shaped and arranged by the Spirit-led reflections of the church. For Hegel, Christ’s appearing is ‘revelation’ (*die Offenbarung*), and that is why Christianity is the revealed religion (*die Offenbarungsreligion*). Christ’s appearing is not a disclosure (either *die Enthüllung* or with after Heidegger *die Erschlossenheit*) of God on what Deleuze would call a ‘plane of immanence’.⁴⁹ We treat then the operations of God revealing Godself in the world; we cannot transcend the world and the finite categories we have cultivated for understanding and creating our conceptions of that world. If we attempt peer into the nature of the Trinity beyond these operations, then we have to proceed through theological inferences made on the basis of these operations. God created us. We are as we are by God’s design and desire. Though creation is not an emanation from God (and therefore necessary to God), creation must be an expression of the Godhead. Otherwise the understanding we have of God in Christ, a God who is love, does not correspond to the way we use the word God. A God for whom creation was not an expression of God’s design and desire is omnipotent but not loving. This God can create but what is created has only an arbitrary relationship to such a God. That is not how Christians use and understand the word ‘God’. In and through our creation God establishes a relation. Creation is a communication of Godself. Given this then there must be in God a relation to humanity.

My intention is not to proclaim an orthodox Hegel, but rather to challenge, through a close reading, those who are too quick to announce his heterodoxy. I have only treated his work between 1801 and 1807 – the lectures on the philosophy of religion are much later when Hegel is in Berlin and faced with Schleiermacher. It has also been my intention to present a case for why Hegel still remains an important resource for an engaged systematic theology – though a resource which would need to be supplemented by the Christological and Trinitarian distinctions of the Alexandrian and the Cappadocian fathers, and Augustine. There are three reasons why he remains an important resource.

First, there is his commitment, on the basis of the incarnation, to what has come to be called cultural materialism – that is, the materialisations of human thought and desires in social, political, economic and cultural praxes. Only Augustine matches such a commitment. The Logos Christologies of the Alexandrian School, for example, are much more abstract.

⁴⁸ *Adversus Praxean*, 29.

⁴⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Urzone, 2001), p.27.

Secondly, there is the relation, on the basis of a Trinitarian theology, between the historical processes of this cultural materialism and the operations of God with respect to creation.

Thirdly, there is the relation, on the basis of a Logos Christology, between a Christo-logic and embodied human reasoning, Hegel's "determinate being."

The salvific implications of these three important aspects of Hegel's work are summed astutely by Stephen Houlgate who acknowledges Hegel's critical reasoning is "Christ-like": "logic is thus a continuous process of conceptual revision and redefinition that demands of us the greatest willingness to be transformed and challenged by thought."⁵⁰ Hegel's logic is therefore ontological in two senses: it is concerned with the identity of thought and being, which becoming desires to recognise; and it is itself, in its exposition of thought's development, an exercise in becoming – a participative pedagogy. Christ as the Logos, from whom and by whom and in whom all things were created is the immanent structure and economy of true thinking. Put this way Hegel's system provides both an account and a discipline for what Gregory of Nyssa would call our endless *metanoia*, what St. Anselm adjudged to be faith seeking understanding, and what Luther understood as the process of our sanctification – not just as individuals but as individuals within social and political communities who recognise the truth of Christ in each other.

⁵⁰ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel*, p.41.