

The Final Antithesis:  
Experience and Knowing in Hegel's  
*Phenomenology of Spirit*

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## Introduction

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a book about everything that pertains to Western culture and philosophy, in so far as it fits into his account of the progression of the collective intellectual world, or the World-Spirit, toward complete self-knowledge and the grounds for finding pure philosophical truth, or absolute Knowing. Almost everyone we read on the St. John's College Program, plus a variety of cultural phenomena from history, has a place in Hegel's account. Moreover, Hegel shows a great deal of respect for these previous ways of looking at the world, in so far as he believes that they were all absolutely necessary and that they all contain real truth (though it may be more or less manifest). He does not appear to take a reductionist approach, picking and choosing secondarily important aspects of each in an attempt to build a coherent whole; nor does he simply find a common thread through them and discard everything else. Rather, he takes up each one successively, considers its primary, defining aspects, and describes the experience consciousness has of *living* it.

These experiences are crucial to the development of Spirit; as a matter of fact, many times throughout the book, a consciousness knows something intellectually but has not yet experienced it in actuality (i.e. in the real world), and Hegel refers to this state as “empty.” He even explicitly states that “it must be said that nothing is *known* that is not in *experience*” (802<sup>1</sup>). Nevertheless, the goal of the whole enterprise, absolute Knowing, or Spirit knowing itself according to its Notion (i.e. pure concept), is something intellectual—and it is not empty, but full of truth, according to Hegel. While it is a shape of Spirit that appears in the world in actuality (as Hegel himself, at least), it does not involve any experience of anything occurring in the world other than intellectual activity. So what is the relationship between experience and Knowing in

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1 Unless otherwise marked, all quotations are from: Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, © 1977. All Bible quotations are from the King James version.

Hegel's system, both through the progress of Spirit and at the end?

One of the most important experiences that both Spirit and individuals encounter in the *Phenomenology* is love. Based on a passage in the section on revealed Religion (772), we can define love as the resolution of an antithesis through the immediate recognition of oneself in another; it is one form of Spirit. Specifically, this is how that reconciliation is *experienced* before it is known. Once the recognition is comprehended in thought, it is no longer immediate but rather is mediated through that thought itself. While Hegel does not explicitly give this definition, it seems to fit, and I will explore its applicability in each of the sections addressed in this essay. If the definition is accurate, it would seem that love should appear in Hegel's account quite frequently—whenever there is a reconciliation between two sides of an antithesis that does not occur in absolute Knowing, for example between two people. However, in the prime example of this, the forgiveness of conscience, Hegel does not mention love at all, even though the experience of conscience is central to this section. Does this definition of love apply to this event? If so, what implications does this have for the whole?

Divine love plays a very important role in Christianity, and Christianity plays a very important role in the *Phenomenology*: as the revealed Religion, it contains the truth of absolute Spirit and is only one step away from the final absolute Knowing. But love is not a major element of Hegel's account of Christianity. The question therefore arises: To what extent does this mean that Hegel's account of Christianity is inadequate? That is, it is entirely reasonable that Hegel would interpret Christianity, like every other phenomenon, in a way that would fit with his account as a whole; we cannot object if, for instance, he says that all of the elements of Christianity are metaphors for things that Christians would strongly object to. But Hegel's goal goes beyond mere interpretation: he wants to show that Christianity is essentially correct, though thinking in metaphors ("picture-thinking") instead of directly conscious of the truth behind its

beliefs. This means that there must not be any important portion of Christianity that does not reflect a comparably important truth in Hegel's account. If that account minimizes the importance of love, we must ask: To what extent does Hegel miss what is essential to Christianity? There is more at stake in this question than to what extent Hegel has offended Christians. While it does not matter to Hegel whether Christians or another group believed the truth, it does matter that Spirit appeared in this shape at this point in history and revolutionized the thinking of the world in the way that Christianity did. If the truth that Hegel is claiming is behind Christians' picture-thoughts turns out to be too far removed from—or contradictory to—the immediate content of those beliefs, then Christians are really believing falsehoods, and Hegel cannot claim that the revealed Religion actually occurred in the way he requires.

Finally, in the chapter on absolute Knowing, Spirit seems to have entirely superseded all experience (including love). Is the mediated thinking of oneself and loss of otherness that it achieves in return a “better” version of love? Or is there something valuable in experience that it has lost? To put this question another way, the World-Spirit was not satisfied with the empty thinking it had earlier on in its progress. Through having experiences (or making them for itself), it transformed this empty thinking into absolute Knowing. Is it satisfied now? What would “satisfied” even mean at this point? However, World-Spirit is not reading the *Phenomenology*, at least not directly—individuals are. According to Hegel, since absolute Knowing has “come on the scene” already for us, we can participate in it. This would involve reading (and comprehending!) the *Phenomenology* alongside the study of the perspectives on the world that have appeared throughout history that he refers to (something like the St. John's Program)—and vicariously experiencing the things the World-Spirit did, through the intellectual medium of books. Then, once one had achieved absolute Knowing with Hegel, one would begin studying the rest of philosophy with this as its basis, as Hegel did in his later works. Hegel does not claim

that his system will tell us how we ought to live our lives, but the above would be how to live life in accordance with his philosophy—we can choose absolute Knowing, or lead a life that has no larger significance whatsoever. But it was necessary, in order for the world to progress, for World-Spirit—and individuals—to actually *live* the experiences through the book. Would a simply intellectual grasping of this whole be satisfying to an individual? If not, how might Hegel’s account help us find something that would be satisfying, both intellectually and through the experience of our lives?

### **Conscience (632-671)**

Let us begin to address the role of experience in the World-Spirit’s journey toward absolute Knowing by examining the reconciliation of conscience. Conscience is the third form of Spirit, after the ethical and the moral Spirits. Like all Spirit, it comes out of what was before it, and then undergoes the movement through three moments: being, negation, and reconciliation. But to understand its reconciliation, we must first understand how it got to that point, beginning with its development from moral consciousness.

Moral consciousness could not act because it was concerned with pure duty, and this was incompatible with the individuality of any action it might take, since every action is a specific action by an individual with particular interests. Inasmuch as it had to act, it was aware that it was acting based on nonmoral (and therefore immoral) contingencies of the situation; so it “places so-called pure morality outside of itself into another, holy being and takes itself to be unholy” (636). The transition to conscience occurs when this consciousness realizes that in thinking pure duty it is itself pure knowing, while “what is supposed to lie beyond *actual* consciousness is nothing else than pure thought, and thus is, in fact, the self” (632). In becoming

conscience, moral self-consciousness supersedes the division between the in-itself and the for-itself, between “pure duty *qua* pure purpose” and “reality *qua* a Nature and sense opposed to pure purpose” (634). But this contradiction *is* its self, “a simple *self* which is both a *pure* knowing and a knowledge of itself as this *individual* consciousness” (638). Conscience is therefore the source of its own moral validity, and it is aware of this: its definition is “Spirit that is directly aware of itself as absolute truth and being” (633).

Conscience knows the truth is “in the *immediate certainty* of itself,” its “*immediate individuality*,” that is, the doer’s “*own conviction*” (637)—and this is the content of its duty. As conscience, consciousness first has this content, so it can act and be made manifest in the actual world while still remaining moral—that is, it really exists for the first time. But how does conscience know what counts as duty without some external law of duty to guide it? It gets its content from its “*natural* consciousness, i.e., impulses and inclinations,” which, as “self-certainty[,] is the pure, immediate truth” (643). We might object that this allows people to act on petty, self-serving motives and claim them as pure duty; but pure duty is theoretically capable of having any content. As long as conscience is acting from a universal purpose that would apply to everyone—for instance, “to increase one’s wealth as much as possible, in order that one might preserve one’s life and make oneself useful to others”—it could cheat and steal out of pure duty. A more universal content (e.g. the categorical imperative) would not help, because it would be opposed to duties to oneself, and thus it would be just as particular; conscience does not get involved in weighing duties against each other, but just acts from its self-certainty (645). Similarly, it is impossible to try to act morally but fail; the only criterion is that if the act is done with conscience’s conviction of its dutifulness, it is moral (640). Since conscience can fill duty with any content, it is absolutely powerful with respect to the law it follows, or has absolute “self-determination,” which “is without more ado absolutely in conformity with duty” (646).

We have seen what conscience is; now we must see how it is negated. Once any action is done, it is no longer in conscience (where it is under its own law) but in the world—and it is specific, so it might contradict the law of someone else’s conscience, and therefore not be universally acknowledged. Therefore the relation of consciences is a “complete disparity” (648). Another conscience cannot judge from my actions whether I am actually acting as a conscience or not. As a matter of fact, other consciences have to take my actions as evil, because they have to preserve themselves as the sole source of good. For this reason, an antithesis has appeared in the relation between two consciences—they are equal and want to be acknowledged as universal, but neither will do so for the other, because they oppose each other in their particulars. This is the antithesis that will be resolved in this section, and Spirit will appear in the relation between the two consciousnesses.

Before the consciences can begin to resolve anything, they must each know what the other thinks of both of them. As we saw, in order for an action to be dutiful, conscience must have “conviction that it *is* duty, through the knowledge of oneself in the deed” (650); so what matters to this conscience, and what it wants acknowledged, is that the action came from this self-knowledge—it does not care what other consciences think of its action in its being in the world, only what they think about it itself. So it uses language: “Language is self-consciousness existing *for others*, self-consciousness which *as such* is immediately *present*, and as *this* self-consciousness is universal” (652). Language reveals the inner self to another: it can separate from itself and be an object to itself, be transmitted still as itself to other consciousnesses, and is heard by the speaking consciousness the same way as by the listener. The content of the language is this self-certain Spirit, conscience itself; the words mediate between the listener and the speaker as self-consciousnesses. All conscience must do is declare its conviction of the dutifulness of its deeds, and this makes them valid as duty—because the action, once performed,

does not matter to conscience, only the conviction that it was a duty. In addition, it is impossible for conscience to lie about this; whatever ulterior motive we suppose the consciousness actually acted from must have been its will, and duty can contain any content. As long as the consciousness says that it is acting from *some* duty, it is showing that it is a self-certain conscience, and that it has declared its will to always be right.

Moreover, conscience knows its “inner voice”—its source of self-determination—to be divine. This is because it is not only thinking the good (duty) and doing things it knows are good, but because it is the *source* of goodness that is actually manifest in the world—that is, it is creating things and seeing that they are good, which is what God does. Its contemplation of this divinity within itself is therefore divine worship; and when this conscience gathers in community with other consciences who affirm and celebrate each other’s conscientiousness, the community is worshipping the divine as well. In this worship, conscience is withdrawn into a pure contemplation of itself in its identity, and the moments making it up—being-for-itself and being-in-itself—have become entirely pure and empty. This, the “beautiful soul,” is the dialectical or negative moment of this shape of consciousness: a being (conscience) has become empty nonbeing. “This absolute *certainty* into which substance has resolved itself is the absolute *untruth* which collapses internally” (657). Consciousness is always an antithesis of itself and its object; but here its object is itself, so this antithesis collapses—each side loses itself in the other. This collapsing, we recall, happened before in the Unhappy Consciousness, where it was manifest as the feeling that God was dead; and it will happen later in the revealed Religion, in the picture-thought of God as Jesus literally being dead. Here, it occurs because conscience realizes it has been getting its content from itself, and it cannot reconcile that necessary particularity with universal duty. It cannot act at all without sinning, and yet it feels compelled to act.



Even its declaration of its purity to another conscience is no longer satisfying to it: “The absolute certainty of itself thus finds itself, *qua* consciousness, changed immediately into a sound that dies away, into an objectification of its being-for-self; but this created world [sic] is its *speech*, which likewise it has immediately heard and only the echo of which returns to it” (658). This is reminiscent of the account of the creation of the world from the beginning of Genesis, “And God said, ‘Let there be light’: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good” (1:3-4), and of the beginning of the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). Yet since the beautiful soul is still divided within itself, its creation of language that reflects itself is an empty creation, unlike the content-rich world created by the God of the Bible. The self of the beautiful soul is not in essence present in its speech, nor does the self have an outer existence. It cannot externalize itself and act, for it believes that action would corrupt it. So it flees to abstraction, which is empty; with no real foundation, this consciousness loses itself, “its light dies away within it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air” (658).

Has our beautiful soul died? Not really—at least not necessarily. But we will not understand why until we consider this motion of consciousness from the actual, acting side, as an individual opposed to other individuals. The disparity between pure duty and individual purpose (which the beautiful soul could not reconcile) also manifests itself outside of conscience, in the relation between two actual consciences as people. One, whom I will refer to as “the sinner,” has simply acted (he does not even need to break any laws) and is thus sinful or “evil.” He holds the two moments within himself, the self and the in-itself, to be unequal in value, with the self more important and the in-itself only a moment. Opposed to him is “the element of existence or universal consciousness, for which the essential being is rather universality, duty” (660). This person, whom I will call “the judge,” is judging the sinning consciousness, and also holds the

two moments to be unequal but the other way around. When the judge confronts the sinner, he judges the sinner to be evil (because he is non-universal) and hypocritical (because the sinner is claiming to be acting out of pure duty while he is actually being determined by himself as particular). The sinner knows that he is claiming to be doing pure duty, and he knows that he is getting the content from himself, but he does not realize that this is hypocritical—he is not aware (unlike the beautiful soul) that this is an antithesis that must be resolved. Moreover, the resolution of this hypocrisy does not happen through either of these consciousnesses continuing to act the same way. By declaring the universal consciousness to be wrong in his judgment, the sinner is in effect admitting to being evil: inasmuch as he is acting according to his own inner law, he is acting against the universal and everyone else, and thereby wronging them (662). But this does not convince him to change, for the sinner will not admit to opposing himself to the universal; rather, he claims to be acting according to pure universal duty. Similarly, when the universal consciousness judges the sinner, he is appealing to his own law, which appears as a particular law opposed to the sinner's particular law (663). Acting according to a particular is exactly what the sinner was doing; hence he can accuse the universal consciousness of hypocrisy in turn.

The hypocrisy of the sinner is resolved as follows: he sees himself in the universal consciousness in two ways. First, the universal consciousness does not act (as opposed to the sinner), but “remains in the universality of *thought*” (664) while he judges. Therefore, for both consciousnesses, “reality is distinct from the words uttered” (664): the universal consciousness may judge well, but he never acts according to his judgment, so he is hypocrisy as well. Second, the judge cannot deny that the sinner's action was from duty, because duty admits of any content—so that very action is universal as well as particular. But the judge also explains the action as coming from another intention—selfish motives—and this is correct as well, because any action

can be seen from this point of view as well (*some* motive must have been the source of the content). Therefore “the consciousness that judges in this way is itself base, because it divides up the action, producing and holding fast to the disparity of the action with itself” (666).

When the sinner recognizes himself in the judge—sees the judge as “identical with himself” (666)—he somehow is moved to confess this to the other, expecting that the judge will give him a reciprocal confession. This confession is not a thorough self-denial; the sinner only confesses because he expects that the judge will do the same thing. If the confession were “an abasement, a humiliation, a throwing-away of himself in relation to the other” (666), it would “establish a disparity” (666) between them—as between a universal and a particular consciousness—which would not lead to the resolution of the antithesis between them as equals, but an establishment of an unbalanced relationship between them. Besides, it would be absurd for the sinner to submit himself to another consciousness that he has just realized he is equal to.

But when the sinner confesses, the judge does not reciprocally confess: he “repels this community of nature, and is the hard heart that is *for itself*, and which rejects any continuity with the other” (667). The “heart” is a metaphor for consciousness in so far as it is being-for-itself and immediately experiencing; and the things it experiences could include those things we call “emotion” and “certainty,” those things that are “*felt to be true, ... inwardly revealed, ... believed,* or whatever other expressions have been used” (802). It may be opposed to the “mind,” consciousness in so far as it is being-in-itself and mediately knows objects through thinking; its activities also include judging, contemplating, and eventually absolute Knowing. (There do exist “immediate thought” and “mediated experience,” which I will mention when they come up; but they are not the true forms of thought and experience.) It is clear what the role of the heart is here: it is the heart that refuses “community” with the sinner. But it is not clear why the heart comes into play. We will return to this question once the two consciousnesses are reconciled.

In any case, “the situation is [now] reversed” (667): the sinner knows the judge to be entirely in the wrong, while the judge still thinks he is beautiful and the sinner is wicked. This is “the rebellion of the Spirit that is certain of itself” (667)—the judge is opposing his pure Thought to the sinner (who has already renounced his being-for-self and made himself universal by confessing), while retaining his “same uncommunicative being-for-self” (667). In this, he “is forsaken by and [himself] denies Spirit” (667), and he is the beautiful soul which we saw pine away for itself, “entangled in the contradiction between [his] pure self and the necessity of that self to externalize itself and change itself into an actual existence” (668). If the heart of the judge remains hard, this will bring him into identity with the sinner, but “only negatively, as a being devoid of Spirit” (668): as he “wastes [himself] in yearning” (668), he loses his precious being-for-self, but at the expense of becoming non-spiritual pure being.

According to Hegel, there is, however, an alternative: “The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightaway vanishes” (669). Both consciousnesses were only moments of the whole; the sinner superseded his individual point of view, and so must the judge. “Just as the former exhibits the power of Spirit over its actual existence, so does this other exhibit the power of Spirit over the specific Notion of itself” (669). What actually happened (behind this beautiful but vague language) is that the judge did see himself in the sinner: in asking forgiveness, the sinner superseded his particularity and made himself a universal, and this is where the judge recognized himself. Consequently, he does forgive the sinner, renounce himself, and acknowledge action to be good.

But this raises two big questions: What was the cause of the change in the judge? And what is the mechanism by which he changed? Hegel does not give us any answer to the first

question. It seems that the judge just might happen to continue judging forever, in which case the reconciliation is accomplished in his loss of Spirit; or he might change his mind—or “suffer” a change in heart, if that is the right word—in which case he forgives the sinner. To the extent that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is simply a description of the shapes that consciousness moves through, it seems somewhat fitting that Hegel would not explain why a particular consciousness made a particular decision. Nevertheless, I would like an account of it, if it is possible to give one. This is an extremely important resolution of an antithesis, and one that serves to show the importance of experience in the development of Spirit.

As for how the change actually took place, Hegel’s language give us a clue to one possibility. The state of the judging consciousness before the change was a “hard heart”; the process of changing was “healing,” and both confession and forgiveness showed the “power of Spirit.” It is tempting to identify this power as *love*—it would fit all these (almost religious) images. At first this seems absurd: the sinner did not lovingly sacrifice himself to the universal in confessing, but only recognized the mutual equality of the two consciousnesses in baseness and hypocrisy, admitting to be evil only as far as the judge was. (Saying to someone, “You’re right; I am a bad person, just like you” is hardly loving.) Similarly, the judge does not forgive for the sake of the sinner, but because he comes to see that the sinner was right.

Upon closer examination, however, love does seem to apply here. According to the definition of love that I mentioned in the introduction, love is the resolution of an antithesis through the immediate recognition of oneself in another. This “immediacy” means that the antithesis between self and other was originally imposed upon the self from beyond and is disappearing in the recognition, as opposed to a “mediation” in which whatever separation between the two has been posited by the self and remains the same through the recognition. Hence, love usually appears in experience, because experience is usually immediate. According

to this definition, it seems that there must have been love in the judge's forgiveness. If his recognition of himself in the other was a mediated recognition in thought, the forgiveness would be intellectually necessary; the judge would have forgiven the sinner as soon as he had confessed, whether he had a "hard heart" or not. Since a state of his "heart" was keeping him from the recognition, the recognition must be a matter of the heart, or an experience. Since mediated experience is not applicable here (it will be the recollection of the forms of Spirit by absolute knowing), this experience must have been immediate, and therefore it is love.

What are the implications of fitting this empty definition to this phenomenon? I believe that this definition, in addition to being consistent with Hegel's use of the word, actually describes the experience we call love. Any talk of "becoming one with" the beloved—whether intellectually or otherwise—signifies the resolution and disappearing of the antithesis between lover and beloved, which is also what happens between the sinner and the judge. As we know from our experience with love, this uniting of self and other cannot be comprehended purely intellectually: if it could be, the judge's hard heart would not have come into play, and more importantly, Hegel would have been able to explain the reconciliation fully without needing to refer to experience. The necessity for consciousness to experience love for the reconciliation to be present to it will be very important when we get to absolute Knowing.

But there is a more direct result of this reconciliation as well: "the word of reconciliation is the *objectively* existent Spirit, which beholds the pure knowledge of itself *qua universal* essence, in its opposite, in the pure knowledge of itself *qua* absolutely self-contained and exclusive *individuality*—a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* Spirit" (670). That is, the words "I forgive you" are absolute Spirit as actual being in the world. If the resolution of this antithesis is still love when it is within a single conscience, as it should be if its internal reconciliation is reflected properly by the reconciliation between the sinner and the judge, then

this “reconciling *Yea*” (671) is an expression of that love as well. Jesus said of himself as Holy Spirit that “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). This corresponds with Hegel’s claim that the reconciliation between a repenting sinner and a forgiving judge actually *is* “God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge” (671). The existence of a community with God as Spirit among its members is the foundation of revealed Religion.

### **Revealed Religion (754-787)**

Absolute Spirit has been brought into existence in the forgiveness between two members of a community; but it simply exists, not knowing itself. The revealed Religion, as Hegel calls Christianity, is the intermediate step from conscience to absolute Knowing. Here, absolute Spirit is the object of the religious consciousness’s knowing, but it does not yet know that this object is itself. Hegel’s section on revealed Religion is an account of how Christianity provides picture-thoughts of absolute Spirit—its picture-thoughts are correct, though they are still only images. He is not trying to explain how Christianity came to be historically—it does not seem to matter to him whether there actually was a historical man Jesus, just that Christians believe there was. Instead, Hegel is interested in showing how going through this process of picture-thinking eventually leads Spirit to come to know explicitly, through thoughts that are not pictures but literally true, that its object is Spirit, even though it is still convinced by its picture-thoughts that this object is beyond it. In the final step, absolute Knowing, Spirit will leave behind all the picture-thoughts and come to know itself as itself according to the Notion of Spirit.

All Spirit is the union of the movements of two sides, each becoming the other. Hegel gives the following definitions of Spirit: “the knowledge of oneself in the externalization of

oneself” (759) and “the being that is the movement of retaining its self-identity in its otherness” (759). There are many ways to say it, and of course Spirit appears in many forms throughout the *Phenomenology*; but in every case there are two sides opposed to one another, and then each side becomes the other side while remaining itself. The motion of becoming is Spirit, not just the grouping-together of the two extremes. Many of these pairs of opposites are resolved throughout the book—for example, God versus Man, Subject versus Object, and Duty versus Inclination—and in each case Spirit appeared as their union. At the end of the section on Morality, the antithesis was between Substance, a being-in-the-moment substantial existence, and self-consciousness, or human nature in so far as it is self-contemplation. The motion on the former side is “the externalization [or kenosis] of substance,” that is, that “substance alienates itself from itself and becomes self-consciousness”; in the latter, “self-consciousness alienates itself from itself and gives itself the nature of a Thing [or substance], or makes itself a universal Self” (755). These two motions were manifested in two individual consciences, and “their true union has come into being” (755) as the community at the end of that section. To use a metaphor that Hegel will return to later, this Spirit “has an *actual* mother but an *implicit* father,” because it “abandoned the form of Substance [the “father” element] and enters existence in the shape of self-consciousness [the community, or the “mother” element]” (755). This abandoning is not a motion from Substance to self-consciousness, as it might sound, but Spirit simply manifesting itself as self-consciousness.

But “in so far as self-consciousness one-sidedly grasps only its *own* externalization,” even though “it knows all existence to be spiritual in nature,” it is not yet complete—because “Substance, has not equally, on its side, *implicitly* externalized itself and become self-consciousness” (756), that is, Spirit has not manifested itself as Substance. “Spirit is in this way only *imagined* into existence” (756), but in order for the world to be actually spiritual and not



just imagined so by self-consciousness, its existence “must *originally* appear in consciousness as stemming from the Notion and must come forth in its necessity” (757); that is, it must be immediately present to self-consciousness, not a dialectical abstraction. These three elements—Spirit appearing in the world, its having an actual mother and an implicit father, and the community imagining Spirit as immediate—“now appear... as the *belief of the world* that Spirit is *immediately present* as a self-conscious Being, i.e. as an *actual man*” (758), Jesus. This is the “simple content” of revealed Religion, the content of Christian belief.

This picture-thought is correct because it holds that God is Spirit, not an objective Being that keeps itself distant from all things human. In this picture-thought, Spirit is revealed—which does not mean “miraculously given by an external God” as in “revelation,” but that “what it [actually] is, is known”: namely, that it is Spirit. In contrast to Christian doctrine, however, “by thus *coming down* [from on high, Spirit] has in fact attained for the first time to its own highest essence” (760). In other words, God was not fully God before the Incarnation—since only when Spirit is most pure is it immediate, actual, and hence revealed as Spirit through this belief. So what is the truth behind this picture-thought? Self-consciousness, Man, *is* the “unity of Being and Thought,” and its thought is also of the unity of absolute Being (God) and immediate Essence (Man), so “God is *revealed as He is*” (761) as the unity of these two sides, or Spirit. That is, “God” actually means Spirit, the motion of antitheses that produces truth, not a static Being in some Beyond, for that God would already be dead.

Since God is Spirit, and knowing is also spiritual (as Hegel will explain in the chapter on absolute Knowing), “God is attainable in pure speculative knowledge alone and *is* only in that knowledge, and is only the knowledge itself” (761). Hegel’s language here seems to be a reference to the beginning of the Gospel of John “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1), with the emphasis on the third clause. Yet this

knowing is not an abstract, purely intellectual event, but a matter of the heart as well, at least at this stage: “the hopes and expectations of the world up till now had pressed forward solely to this revelation, to behold what absolute Being is, and in it to find itself. The joy of beholding itself in absolute Being enters self-consciousness and seizes the whole world” (761). Is this joy a form of love? It seems so: it is the immediate recognition of self (human nature) in other (God), and Christianity’s belief of this is the resolution of the antithesis between the two. This joy is a powerful experience for consciousness because it is the fulfillment of consciousness’s *longing* for union with the divine—this longing for God is not love, but its consummation is. However, Meno’s question of how it is possible for someone who does not know the truth to recognize it still stands: the religious community does not yet understand the truth behind what it is believing, but it nevertheless believes in the true picture-thought of Jesus, so it seems it must recognize this belief as true on some level. Maybe, since its picture-thought is actually about itself, in some uncomprehended way it “senses” the correspondence of the content and itself, and its experience of this non-intellectual recognition is emotion. Hegel does not address this question, nor do I know what this “sensing” might consist of.

Of course, the Notion Spirit has of itself, at the level of picture-thinking and religion, is immediate and not yet developed; it must appear as mediated, or thought through, as well. Spirit as Jesus is an individual, which is in antithesis to the universal and therefore must be reconciled with it—since Spirit being this individual Self does not mean that all Selves are Spirit. The first (immediate) form of universality is not the Notion itself, but “the ‘allness’ or totality of the selves,” all the people in the community. It comes to be as follows. Since Jesus is an actual person, he dies and “his ‘*being*’ passes over into ‘*having been*’” (which is the negative moment of the motion); “now He has arisen *in the Spirit*” (763), having completed the movement of Spirit. Jesus becomes “the *universal self-consciousness* of the [religious] community,” the Holy

Spirit. Here, Jesus is a picture-thought for self-consciousness, an individual man: “not [any particular] individual by himself, but together with the consciousness of the community and what he is for this community, is the complete whole of the individual as Spirit” (763), so that this self-consciousness has become universal in its community. However, since the community is picture-thinking, it is “burdened with an unreconciled split into a Here and a Beyond” (765)—the Beyond would include the Christian Heaven, but more generally it could just be God being beyond the self. To resolve this split, it has to “equate its consciousness [as community, how it thinks of itself] with its self-consciousness [as Holy Spirit, how it thinks of God] *for itself*” (765); and in order to do this, it must come to know itself, since God *is* the self-knowledge, the Spirit, of this community. This will be the task of Spirit for the remainder of the book.

Spirit knows itself in three moments: as *pure substance* (which contains “the movement of descending into individuality”), in picture-thinking (“the consciousness of [that] passing into otherness”), and as self-consciousness (“the return from picture-thinking and otherness”) (767). Even before these three come on the scene, we have Spirit knowing something it does not know is Spirit at all in the Unhappy Consciousness and in the believing consciousness of the world of culture; but as the religious community it is first its substance (768). (Knowing itself as substance does not mean an empty intellectual affirmation that Spirit is substance, but that it actually considers Spirit to be its substance.) As substance, absolute Being is essence; but this is abstract, so it is a negativity, and instead of being-in-itself is being-for-self, or objective (769). This necessary production of an objective being by substance appears in the picture-thought of God’s creating an ‘other’ (all of God’s creations, not only Jesus). But absolute Being returns into itself from the ‘other’ and shows itself as Spirit, which is the motion to the second moment. The other “is the word which, when uttered, leaves behind, externalized and emptied, him who uttered it, but which is as immediately heard, and only this hearing of its own self is the existence

of the Word” (770), unlike the empty words of the Unhappy Consciousness. In the second moment, the religious consciousness knows that absolute Being is Spirit, but it picture-thinks God and Jesus as Father and Son; so both sides appear as something alien to it, and it does not recognize itself in it. It even picture-thinks itself, the middle term of Holy Spirit, as a dove or tongue of flame—or, less concretely, as a separately-existing third form of God. Because the religious consciousness does not recognize itself, the picture-thought becomes “a historical pictorial idea... [which is] only the purely external element in belief that is retained and as something therefore that is dead and cannot be known; but the *inner* element in faith has vanished” (771). Despite this dead externality, “the relation of the eternal Being to its being-for-self [its ‘other’] is the immediately simple one of pure thought” (772), because thought of the other moment of itself is an “othering of itself.” This is the third moment of Spirit’s self-knowledge. Yet since its “beholding of itself in the ‘other’” is simple, it does not see it as other, but it “in pure thought, is immediately *no difference*”; so this is the third moment, “a *loving* recognition in which the two sides, as regards their essence, do not stand in an antithetical relation to each other” (772).

This is the passage from which I derived the definition of love as the resolution of an antithesis through the immediate recognition of oneself in another. Hegel seems to be contrasting “a *loving* recognition,” one in which the other is immediately recognized as identical to the self and thus they cease to be opposed to each other, with some other sort of recognition of self in other, for instance that between the two individuals fighting to the death (187), in which the two sides very much continue to remain in antithesis to each other. A third type of recognition of self in other would be a *mediated* one, as in absolute Knowing where the object is known to be the same as the self through the mediation of Thought. But this is not love: although their antithesis is resolved and the only difference between them is in Thought, simply thinking “self equals

other” shows that the two are being distinguished in thought, and this separation remains through the recognition of their unity.

According to this definition, Love is Spirit—the reconciliation of antitheses—except with the recognition of itself immediately “in its heart” rather than known according to its Notion. It might be a correct picture-thought of a sort to say “God is Love,” in so far as love is the word for a lower version of what God is. So then why does Hegel not explicitly mention love more frequently—why does he not call all immediately-reconciling forms of Spirit “love”? In the Preface (19), Hegel says that “the life of God and divine cognition may well be spoken of as a disporting of Love with itself, but this idea sinks into mere edification, and even insipidity, if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative” (19). He seems to be saying that “love” is too *happy* a concept to encompass the suffering that the World-Spirit must experience in order to be actual. In itself, God is in “untroubled equality and unity with itself” (19); but without the for-itself side, namely its form in actuality, it cannot be Spirit. That is, the World-Spirit moves through both the division of self (the “othering”) and the reconciliation of the separated parts. Since “love” means a resolution of an antithesis, we can only use the term to describe the latter movement—and only those reconciliations that are immediate, which excludes the final one in absolute Knowing. It would therefore be more accurate to say that love is only one aspect of the movement that is God.

Hegel goes through the three moments of Spirit knowing itself in more detail. The pure thinking of other that God was doing “is itself rather the ‘*other*’ of its simple, unitary nature” (773), so it becomes the opposite of the simple universal, or comes into actual, immediate existence. “Accordingly, [God] *creates* a world. This ‘creating’ is picture-thinking’s word for the Notion itself in its absolute movement” (774). Without the world, God is “simple being,” empty and unreal because not actual. Nature is the universal manifestation of God in the world: in a

crude sense, natural (especially living) things are opposed to each other and occasionally are “reconciled” through various physical processes. But the individual aspect, “this Self[,] is equally present in the world: it is the *existent* Spirit, which is the individual Self which has consciousness and distinguishes itself as ‘other’, or as world, from itself” (775), namely Man (or Adam in the picture-thoughts). This creation does not yet know itself as Spirit—“it can be called ‘innocent’ but hardly ‘good’” (775); to be Spirit it must be other to itself, which in its case is “the withdrawal *into itself*, or self-centredness [and necessarily non-universality or evil], of knowing as such” (775). “Because the thought stems from immediacy or is *conditioned* thought, it is not pure knowledge, but thought that is charged with otherness and is, therefore, the self-opposed thought of Good and Evil” (775). The religious consciousness picture-thinks this as having happened in the Garden of Eden story—it is pretty close to the truth, in that the fall consisted in Man obtaining the knowledge of Good and Evil and thus becoming fully other than the universal God. Since Man is internally self-opposed, the picture-thought declares him to begin as evil (though in truth, both sides are in Man in so far as he is Spirit, and he is only evil as an individual opposed to the universal), and therefore picture-thinking believes in a “*good* consciousness opposing it” (776)—Good must enter actuality as opposed to the evil in Man, which occurs in the Incarnation (777). Since the genesis of good and evil, like all the truths behind these picture-thoughts, occurred in the pure Notion or “the primary realm of Thought,” Christians picture-think the Fall as originating in Heaven, where “the very first-born Son of Light [Lucifer] himself... fell because he withdrew into himself or became self-centered” (776). We can split up Spirit into more parts, e.g. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, good Angels, fallen Angels; but this counting business that religious consciousness tends to do really makes no difference in understanding its nature according to Hegel—it is “Many in a One” (776), not specifically “Three in One.”

We must be careful not to misinterpret these picture-thoughts Hegel is describing; he does

not believe that they are literally true. He is explaining how all the primary picture-thoughts of Christianity reflect the truth of Spirit, not giving theological accounts for why “the *real* God” acted in the way He did as described in Christianity. For example, he is saying that Christians picture-think God as creating the world because the Notion of Spirit has a motion from essence to existence, not that the Christian God actually exists and that He created the world in order to make manifest this motion of Spirit. Nevertheless, the latter is a very tempting interpretation, since it would allow us to understand the deepest mysteries of existence, even those that Christianity only hints at solutions to. Hegel is also not trying to demonstrate that Christianity must believe certain things, for that would require an account of how Christianity came to have this truth. Instead, his goal is simply to show that the content behind the picture-thoughts that Christians *happen* to believe is true.

The antithesis between fallen individual Man and universal God, “the alienation of the divine Being,” is the division between the two moments of Spirit, “the Self of Spirit and its simple thought” (778), or being-for-self and being-in-itself. As with conscience and the judging consciousness, Man and God hold these two moments to have unequal worth, each taking one of the sides to be essential and the other momentary; and each of these must resolve itself on its own. Since the movement of reconciliation is “intrinsic,” it is initiated by the being-in-itself side (God), which, in the picture-thoughts, “alienates itself from itself [by being born as Man], yields to death, and thereby reconciles absolute essence with itself” (779). This side shows itself as Spirit because it has superseded its individual existence and become universal; and “this death is, therefore, its resurrection as Spirit” (779), or Holy Spirit in the picture-thoughts. In truth, this is “the establishing of a community which, ... [while still] picture-thinking, now returns into itself as the Self”; it has reconciled the particular with the universal because it is made up of particular people, but is a universal whole for them. “In doing this, Spirit passes over from the second

element constituting it, i.e. from picture-thinking, into the third element, self-consciousness as such” (780).

Picture-thinking did acknowledge “that the divine Being takes on human nature,” even “*from the beginning*”; however, it does not understand “that this evil existence [man] is not *in itself* something alien to the divine Being” (780). Picture-thinking thinks of evil as either apart from God or “*as the wrath of God*,” but this is stretching picture-thinking to its limits (777). In truth, God would not be Absolute Being if there was something ‘other’ to it, or “if there were a ‘fall’ from it” (780), so what we call evil must somehow be a part of God: evil is *being-within-itself*. We have known, at least since conscience, that being-for-self is evil, and Spirit must contain both elements of being-in-itself and being-for-self. But the idea that God is evil as well as good is difficult to grasp, partly because we tend to use the word “God” to refer to the universal, Good aspect of Spirit as opposed to fallen Man. This idea that both elements are part of God does appear in the picture-thought of “the externalization of the divine Being who is made flesh,” but this is immediate and not comprehended, not spiritual. It becomes spiritual only when picture-thinking sees Jesus’ sacrifice as the reconciliation with the thought of otherness—that is, Jesus taking the sin of the world upon himself and it being forgiven in his dying on the cross. However, to say that Evil is the same as Good would be going too far. This is only true in a negative sense: though in their Notion they are both “self-centered being-for-self” (780), by the same token they are completely opposed to each other. “Neither the one nor the other has truth; the truth is just their movement” (780); simply equating the two sides with “is” is a lifeless unity, not Spirit. Thus Hegel would say that God is not simply good, but the motion between evil and good. “The difficulty that is found in these Notions stems solely from clinging to the ‘is’ and forgetting... [that] the moments just as much *are* as they *are not*—are only the movement which is Spirit” (780). This spiritual unity is what “has become explicit for the picture-thinking



consciousness” in the death of Jesus, and therefore “self-consciousness has ceased to think in pictures: the movement has returned into self-consciousness” (780). This is a bit confusing, because the religious consciousness continues to think in pictures until the end of the section; so evidently Hegel means that self-consciousness has finally found a picture-thought that is *literally* true—that God is Spirit—not that it knows the Notion behind all its previous picture-thoughts (which will happen in absolute Knowing).

The community, “universal self-consciousness,” is this third element of Spirit. It has to go through its own movement and show itself as Spirit: its movement consists in its reconciliation with its natural existence. As a thing in nature, it is necessarily individual, and in this it is opposed to the universal and therefore evil. But its withdrawal into itself is the knowledge of its evilness, and this knowing is the “first moment of reconciliation” (783) (as it was in conscience’s confession). Hence it is “*in itself* [not completed] the reconciliation of Spirit with itself” (784). In picture-thinking this is Jesus’s death, which, as “*abstract* negativity” (the kind of negativity that actually does destroy the thing), destroys his natural individuality and makes him naturally universal. Moreover, Jesus’ death is the transition of Spirit from the particular individual of Jesus to the Holy Spirit, the “*universality* of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected” (784). The last part of this sentence clearly is describing a movement of Spirit that occurs in the community on a daily basis, but it is not clear whether Hegel means to be referring to actual deaths and births of individuals, sin and its reconciliation between consciences, both, or something else. It is worth pointing out that Hegel would think the picture-thoughts of Christianity would better reflect the truth of Spirit if at the moment of Jesus’ death, the Holy Spirit had descended upon the apostles—and there was no Easter Sunday. Hegel does a very good job of explaining almost all the images of Christianity in his terms, but he does not speak about what it would mean for Jesus to be resurrected as Man first, then ascend to

Heaven in union with God the Father, and *only then* for God to take the form of Holy Spirit.

The picture-thought that Jesus' death brought about his reconciliation is one of those true picture-thoughts that brings the religious self-consciousness to know itself, although the religious community does not have to “actually *die*” to be reconciled, because it is reconciled when “its particularity dies away in its universality” (785) as a *community* consciousness. Since it is manifest to itself as Spirit, the transition from picture-thinking to self-consciousness in the community is explicitly complete. Both sides of Spirit are reconciled with each other: each Man, “this *particular* being-for-self[,] has become a universal self-consciousness,” while the community, which was “*universal*[,] has become self-consciousness” (785) in that it is knowing itself through its correct picture-thoughts. In addition, the religious self-consciousness no longer sees God as *beyond* it, since it believes God is within it as Holy Spirit. This “death of the *abstraction of the divine Being* ... [was] the painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that *God Himself is dead*” (785); by this point in the development of Spirit, it is a “Knowing” that God is dead, not just a feeling. In both cases, it is “the loss of substance and... its appearance over against consciousness,” which is why it is painful, but it is also “the pure *subjectivity* of substance, or the pure certainty of itself which it lacked when it was object, or the immediate, or pure essence” (785), which is why it is necessary.

Spirit has therefore come to know itself, since its content is a version of the Notion of Spirit: namely, that Spirit is “the movement... which forgives evil and in so doing abandons its own simple unitary nature and rigid fixity, or as the movement in which what is in an absolute antithesis recognizes itself as the same as its opposite, this recognition bursting forth as the *affirmative* between these extremes” (786). But Spirit (in the community) still does not know itself as itself: the thing that it is knowing is fully itself, but it does not know this. It thinks that reconciliation and “pure inwardization of knowledge” brings it closer to God because God has

commanded it to do so, and it does not understand that this is actually how “the *abstract* divine Being” (787) is brought down from abstraction and turned into Self. It thinks of any unity “with the essential Being” it could achieve as external, and thus “remains burdened with the antithesis of a beyond” (787), something far in the future (i.e. Heaven or the Second Coming) like the Incarnation was far in the past. We will find out later that the consciousness gets rid of this beyond once it has “given up hope of overcoming” its alienation from God in an external way (803), and we might say that the task of self-knowledge that Hegel believes Spirit has is a getting rid of all beyonds. Why are Christians—and for that matter, atheists who in effect worship the beautiful, intricate mysteries of the entirely physical world and call this worship “Science”—so concerned with a beyond? Without anything beyond, there can be no τέλος to strive for; and there is nothing to love, because in order for the recognition of oneself in another to be experienced as emotion, the other must not already be known fully as oneself. So why is Hegel so interested in superseding otherness? It may be impossible to achieve absolute Knowing without having gotten rid of all Beyonds, but why is that so desirable? In short, why is Truth the Good, rather than Love (or a combination of the two)? In one sense, the answer is simple: for Hegel, the dialectical unity of Being and Nothing in Becoming is the foundation of philosophy and the world. But we can ask whether the results of Hegel’s system make a sufficient case for it as a whole, which is one of my chief purposes in this essay.

To complete the section, Hegel returns to a metaphor from its very beginning: “Just as the *individual* divine Man has a father *in principle* and only an *actual* mother, so too the universal divine Man, the community, has for its father its own doing and knowing, but for its mother, eternal love which it only *feels*, but does not behold in its consciousness as an actual, immediate *object*” (787). This is love because it is an immediate recognition of itself as Spirit in another, God; but it is only love and not knowing because it does not really know its object, but still sees

God as other. “Its reconciliation, therefore, is in its heart, but its consciousness is still divided against itself” (787): it still sees the natural world around it as not reconciled with God, but it knows that “the world is indeed *implicitly* reconciled with the divine Being” and that God “recognizes the object as no longer alienated from it but as identical with it in its love” (787). The “immediate consciousness” of the community, how it looks at the world around it, is divided from its “religious consciousness,” which nonetheless says they are not divided; therefore their unity is still implicit and not yet realized.

### **Absolute Knowing (788-808)**

Absolute Spirit came into existence in the reconciliation between the sinning and judging consciousnesses; it was the object of the religious consciousness’s picture-thoughts, though imperfectly thought as something outside itself; and in absolute Knowing, Spirit will come to truly know itself as Spirit, that its object is in fact itself. The experience that an individual has when reading the chapter on absolute Knowing (after reading and comprehending the rest of Hegel’s book) *is* the transition to absolute Knowing for that individual. Since I would like to call into question the intellectual and emotional satisfaction of absolute Knowing, we must follow the account and gain our own mediated experience of this motion.

The religious self-consciousness (which may be either an individual in the religious community or the community as the whole, since unlike in the last two shapes of Spirit, absolute Knowing may be achieved by an individual) already has absolute Spirit for the content of its thought, but the form of that content, namely picture-thinking, must be superseded. That is, the task of this consciousness is to come to know that its object, what it has been calling God, is itself. The way it will recognize this is by understanding that it and God are not just both Spirit,

for any reconciliation of the two sides of an antithesis is Spirit, but that they are both Spirit “made of” the same moments, those which when reconciled make absolute Spirit. Now, consciousness itself is a kind of Spirit: its motion is the grasping of an object in thought and its knowledge that the object, as thought, is the same as itself. So the next step is for this consciousness to “relate itself to [or grasp] the object in accordance with” each of the object’s determinations; this totality of determinations means the object is spiritual as well.

The object is partly three things, each corresponding to something in consciousness: first, immediate being or a Thing, which corresponds to immediate consciousness; second, othering of self, *being-for-an-other* and *being-for-itself*, or determinateness, which corresponds to perception; finally, Essence or form of the Universal, which corresponds to Understanding (789). As a whole, the object is both the movement through these moments from universal to individuality, and vice versa. When consciousness sees this dual movement in its object, it will know the object as itself—though not yet know the object’s Notion or that it is Spirit, only its moments. But these three moments are just the shapes of consciousness that we have seen throughout the book; it had to experience each of these shapes before it could come to know each one, and what it is doing now is recollecting them from this higher point of view. First, as the object is immediacy, consciousness was “Observing Reason”: it found itself in this indifferent being (its body), and was conscious of its action as external and the object as immediate. It even said “that the *being of the ‘I’ is a Thing*” (790); as body it is indeed a “sensuous immediate Thing” (though when it called itself *soul* it was not really considering itself a thing). Second, in the judgment that “*The Thing is ‘I’*” (791), the Thing is superseded, and only has meaning through the ‘I’. We saw this as “pure insight and enlightenment,” in which “things are simply *useful*” (791) for the Self. The self-alienated Spirit found the Thing as itself; since “it still retains its own self in it,” it knows that the Thing is only being-for-an-other, that it is “something that

*exists on its own account*” (791). It believes that sense-certainty is absolute, though this means that it is also vanishing. Third, the object comes to be known as essence in moral self-consciousness: “it knows that *being* is simply and solely pure willing and knowing; it *is* nothing else but this willing and knowing” (792), and everything else lacks intrinsic being. It alternates between letting “*determinate being* go free from the Self” in its consciousness of pure duty, and taking it back into itself in its actions in the world. Then, as conscience, this alternation has been superseded, and it knows that its existence is its pure self-certainty; even its objective action is its pure self-knowledge.

The last of these moments is the unity of them, and “binds them all into” a reconciliation with Spirit (793). This self-certain Spirit (conscience) exists as self-knowledge: its actions are done (and declared to be) from conviction of duty, it is faced with the particularity—the “distinction and dichotomy” (793)—of the actuality of its actions, and in forgiveness this is surrendered. Even its *immediate existence* is a pure knowing, and moreover *determinate existence* (what is opposed to the self) is a knowing, “partly of this purely individual Self, partly of knowledge as universal” (793). Hence the two sides of the third moment, duty and action, are both knowledge, and they resolve the empty antithesis between themselves into “the knowledge of ‘I’ = ‘I’; this *individual* self which is immediately a pure knowing or a universal” (793), which is absolute Spirit. The motion through the three moments is complete, and therefore the self-consciousness (the individual on his way to absolute Knowing) knows that its object is consciousness. It recollects its former shapes so that it can go through them and comprehend their unity as consciousness—as we just did, and as we have been doing throughout the book. This recollecting is a sort of experience, but instead of being *actual* experience each element is being thought—so we can call it *mediated experience* to distinguish it from ordinary immediate experience.

Next, this self-consciousness must be reconciled with its object, consciousness. This happens from both sides: from self-consciousness, and in the object or ‘other’, consciousness itself. When the picture-thought of religion returned into self-consciousness, and the religious consciousness had the correct picture-thought of God as Spirit, this unification from the self-consciousness side occurred in principle, but not in the proper form: this self-consciousness was still divided between its belief of its unity with God, its “religious aspect [which] is the [static] aspect of the *in-itself*,” and its experience of still being distanced from God as an individual, “the [spiritual] movement of [its] self-consciousness” (795). What is missing is the Notion of this reconciliation. But up till now its Notion appeared as just “a particular shape of consciousness like all the other moments” (795): we already saw it, and it was the “beautiful soul.” It knew that “pure knowledge of *pure inwardness*” is Spirit; it was “the Divine’s intuition [but only intuition] of itself” (795), which is what we have been looking for. But its Notion did not want to be realized, so the “beautiful soul” vanished even while it externalized itself and “move[d] onward”; it “cease[d] to cling to the *determinateness* of the Notion” (795) and let it be fulfilled. In recollecting this shape of consciousness, the self-consciousness gains universality and the true, realized Notion, and is reconciled with consciousness from its side.

This Notion was fulfilled from the side of consciousness (the object) in conscience: before the movement of conscience is manifested between two people, it already existed in principle, as the reconciliation between the two moments of essence (or inwardness) and existence (or outwardness). The moment of existence “stems from the purity of the Notion, for this is absolute abstraction or negativity”; while the Notion gets essence from pure knowledge or simple immediacy (just as the sinning conscience did). The “reflectedness into self out of pure knowledge” (796) is evil, so it withdraws into itself and does not act (like the judging consciousness). Finally, since the Notion contains both sides of the antithesis, “the pure

knowledge of essence has *in principle* renounced its simple unity” (796) and is reconciled in principle. Then, as we saw in the conscience section, the reconciliation “that is already posited *in principle* now therefore repeats itself as consciousness’s knowledge of it and conscious act” (796) between two people. Through this movement, Spirit comes to exist as pure universality of knowing; only as action in the world is Spirit “*really there*,” existing in the actual world. Self-consciousness is now reconciled with its object from the side of the object. This completes the retrospective task of self-consciousness, which has been to “*gather together* the separate moments” that each exhibit the whole of Spirit, to experience them mediately through recollection, and to show them in accordance with “the form of the Notion” (797). This consciousness has therefore achieved absolute Knowing.

This last shape of consciousness is Spirit whose content is the *form* of the Self, which has realized its Notion and remained in it. Absolute Knowing is “Spirit that knows itself in the shape of Spirit, or a *comprehensive knowing* [in terms of the Notion]” (798). In it, truth is identical with certainty, and truth appears to it as self-certainty as well, for it is self-knowledge. The Notion is now in existence, and it is the form through which objects exist for consciousness. Absolute Knowing “is a pure *being-for-self* for self-consciousness” (799); it is my ‘I’ and also a mediated universal ‘I’, in so far as Notions may be grasped by anyone. Its content is differentiated from itself, so it is consciousness; its content is the movement of superseding itself, which again is the spiritual ‘I’. Since it is reflected into itself, it comprehends itself in the Notion; its content is “Spirit that traverses its own self” (799) and knows that to be itself in its Notion—it is thus fully Aristotle’s “thought thinking itself.”

Spirit in absolute knowing “*is Science*” (798). This is not the Science of natural laws of the physical world, which was back in the section on Reason, or even “the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance” (808), the Phenomenology of Spirit. Instead, it is the philosophical



Science that Hegel pursues in the rest of his writings, *knowing* wisdom rather than merely *loving* it (with both thought and experience mediated rather than immediate): it consists of comprehending the pure concepts of Philosophy according to their Notions. Hegel's Science appears in Time and as a shape of the "World-Spirit" once the consciousness we have been following has attained this absolute Knowing; the first consciousness to achieve it (i.e. Hegel) is not itself World-Spirit, but brings absolute Knowing to the world.

But there is one more antithesis to resolve, that between consciousness and substance: this in-and-for-itself consciousness knows itself absolutely, but it is not yet identical with Substance. Actually, *knowing* substance exists before "its form or its Notion-determined shape" (801), for substance is this same Notion even when it was "as yet undeveloped *in-itself*... [and] does not yet *exist*" (801). Back then, the only substance that existed was "the still undeveloped simple and immediate" (801), or anything that could be picture-thought. Cognition, since it is only aware of the existence of things that are in themselves, has a worse object than substance: cognition only sees substance as self-certainty, so at first "only the *abstract moments* of substance belong to *self-consciousness*" (801). But these moments move themselves through the book all the way until self-consciousness has taken the "structure of the essentialities of substance" (801), i.e. the forms of Spirit, from abstract consciousness into itself, manifesting these abstract antitheses in actual relations among people in the world, and then produced them and returned them to consciousness. In this way, as a shape of consciousness, the whole (though not comprehended) appears as cognition before its moments do; while as far as the consciousness in absolute Knowing knows, the moments appear earlier than their unified whole. "Time is the Notion itself that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition" (801); that is, Time is the Notion spread out into its moments, made manifest as different from itself, as well as what the Notion appears to consciousness in. Spirit appears in Time as long as it has not

“grasped its pure Notion, i.e. has not annulled Time” (801). Once it does, it “sets aside its Time-form” (801) and comprehends this intuiting of things in Time. Physical time does not actually end, but the progress of the forms of Spirit does, once their totality is comprehended. Time is necessary for Spirit that is not yet complete, because it needs to “set in motion the *immediacy of the in-itself*” and “to realize and reveal what is at first only *inward*” (801).

Hegel gives an answer to the question of the place of experience in relation to absolute Knowing: nothing is known that is not in experience, that is not “*felt to be true,*” “*inwardly revealed,*” sacredly “*believed,*” “or whatever other expressions have been used” (802). This is because, according to the definition of experience that Hegel gives here, it is the state of consciousness such that its “content—which is Spirit—is *in itself* substance” (802). But substance is only “truly *Spirit*” during the motion through the forms of consciousness, the process of coming to know itself. Until Spirit has shown itself in all of its moments through History, the World-Spirit “cannot reach its consummation as self-conscious Spirit” (802). Religion, for example, is able to declare what Spirit is before it is complete, but it only achieves true self-knowledge in Science because it still has to supersede the moment of religion. But does this mean that once it achieves absolute Knowing, it is no longer Spirit? We will look at this question once Spirit is complete.

This consciousness makes one last recollection of its forms to reconcile itself as Subject with Substance. Substance is “the unity of abstract essence and the Self” (803), and this consciousness has seen both sides of this in various forms throughout its development. Way back in Observation it comprehends things in existence and thereby also finds existence in its thought; hence it expresses substance as the “*unity of Thought and Being*” (803). Later, it replaces Thought with Extension for the “essence” term, but then realizes that this has left out the self; it “recoils in horror...from this *self-less* substantiality, and against it affirms individuality” (803).

Once it has pursued its individuality all the way through the beautiful soul, it affirms that essence is pure self-identity, 'I' = 'I'. But this is equally pure difference from itself, which is expressed actually as Time; and the opposite of this difference-from-self, the set of all things which do not contradict the existence of each other, exist simultaneously in extension, or self-identity. Therefore, the two moments of essence (self-negation or Time) and Self (self-identity or Extension) are united as Substance; but these two moments are also what make up the consciousness of absolute Knowing, so consciousness is Substance.

Yet Spirit is self-consciousness at neither of the extremes of pure inwardness nor substance, but “*this movement*” (804) in which Self becomes substance and Subject comes out of substance into itself, destroying the difference between them. The outward movement is “the Notion’s separation of itself from itself, the withdrawal into itself and the becoming of the pure ‘I’” (804); since it is self-identity, it necessarily exists, and on its own account. But this existence on its own account is also the *immanent* (inward) movement, “down into the simple substance, which is Subject only as this negativity and movement” (804). The movement that “shaped” Spirit is complete: the difference of consciousness from its object is overcome. The ‘I’ need not “cling to itself in the *form of self-consciousness*” (804), and be afraid of externalization, because Spirit is the same in and for itself; it is not an empty Absolute but a living self-contemplation. Spirit has its Notion, and its content is immediately itself. Its content is not being-in-itself, but is constantly negated, so negativity is also the Self (805).

Negativity seems to be a sort of first principle for Hegel, since it can generate an ‘other’ from itself, a universe out of a void. Absolute Self-Knowing would then be the only way to put a stop to the otherwise endless cycles of negation, in that this self-knowing does not have an ‘other’ outside itself but is entirely self-contained; so it becomes the *τέλος* of the motion. But if this self-knowing is only an abstract self-identity, “I Am who I Am,” it would be an empty self-

reference, as good as not existing. It would collapse into itself as nothing, and then be generated anew, so the cycle would repeat; and this ever-moving, *spiritual* existence would be what it comprehends. Hegel is not satisfied with this account of the nature of God. Instead, he claims that its self-knowing is not empty but filled with the recollection of the moments it has gone through on the way to self-knowledge. Because it has a source of content within itself and contains its otherness, it does not collapse into itself. But the comprehending of the whole of its motion is just the first step within absolute knowing; that is the place of this book, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in Hegel's work as a whole. Once Spirit knows itself fully, it can begin to think through "*specific Notions* and... their organic self-grounded movement" (805)—the Forms, as it were. There is no danger of error: during the progression of Spirit as it was actually occurring, "each moment is the difference of knowledge and Truth" (805) and the overcoming of that difference; whereas in Science, objective Truth and the knowing Self are immediately united.

But how is this thinking still Spirit, if it is no longer self-opposed and it is contemplating eternal things? According to Hegel, its content is spiritual, and therefore its thinking of that content is so as well. He says that "knowing is this seeming inactivity which merely contemplates how what is differentiated spontaneously moves in its own self and returns into its unity" (804). It is "freed from its appearance [as the shapes of] consciousness," no longer moving back and forth from picture-thinking to self-consciousness and vice versa. Instead, "its pure shape... depends solely on its pure determinateness" (805)—its movement is through the interrelations of the pure ideas of Philosophy. Spirit is still manifest in every "abstract moment of Science" (805); even once it has comprehended all Notions, its comprehending of the spiritual motion in those Notions is how it is Spirit. But it is only Spirit in so far as it is thinking this motion, because it itself, as being, is no longer spiritually moving. As World-Spirit, then, it is still

Spirit when it is complete; but as an individual person in absolute Knowing, it is still divided within itself, heart from mind. Its thinking is the purest, most abstract truth, while its experiences have even less coherence than before because they are no longer toward an end. This division does not exist in its thought, for there it has superseded experience and grasps its own Notion as a human being; but it still feels its experience divided from its thought when it experiences the particular contingencies of life.

But the World-Spirit goes one step farther than absolute Knowing. When Spirit achieves absolute Knowing according to its Notion, it “is the immediate identity with itself which, in its difference, is the *certainty of immediacy*, or *sense-consciousness*” (806)—the direct contemplation of Notions is as immediate to it as sense-certainty is to us, or in other words, it has *immediate thought* (intuition) of itself. The last time we saw immediate thought was in the love between the Father and the Son before the creation of the world in revealed Religion (772), or the pure (empty) relation between being-in-itself and being-for-itself—which is “the beginning from which we started” (806). Therefore it no longer needs to think itself, and it can get rid of the idea of Self: this is the “release of itself from the form of the Self... [which is] the supreme freedom and assurance of its self-knowledge” (806). Spirit has moved from immediate thought (empty unity before it began), to immediate experience (ordinary, “true” experience of its forms), to mediated experience (recollection of its forms), to mediated thought (absolute Knowing), and has finally returned to immediate thought. Has it made any progress through this motion? Yes and no: on the one hand, if it ever doubts itself, it can simply descend back into absolute Knowing and know itself mediatedly (or descend to recollection, and remind itself of all it went through). On the other hand, it was Spirit the whole time: its nature has not changed, and what it emptily thought itself as at the beginning was, after all, correct.

But, according to Hegel, this externalization is still incomplete: because the object is

connected with it in its self-certainty, the object is not free. Therefore, this Spirit in absolute knowing, since it knows its negative, knows how to sacrifice itself. It does so when it externalizes itself through its process of development as “*free contingent happening*” (807), such that its Self is Time and its Being is Space. This is *Nature*: “living immediate becoming,” or “this eternal externalization of [Spirit’s] *continuing existence*” (807). It would be accurate to say that Hegel believes Nature is God, insofar as He is manifested in time and space. Its other side—Nature as already having become—is *History*, or “Spirit emptied out onto Time” (808). The word “emptied” here creates a contrast to other conceptions of God, in which He is *manifest* in and through time but really exists beyond it. Instead, in Hegel’s system, as we have seen, Spirit only exists where it is made manifest as the resolution of antitheses; there is nothing esoteric, for that would be a Beyond. In History, we see a succession of “Spirits”—Spirit in all of its shapes through the book—and the succession moves “slowly just because the Self has to penetrate and digest this entire wealth of its substance” (808). Spirit must *experience*, as well as comprehend, the whole; for, as we saw earlier, “nothing is *known* that is not in *experience*” (802). At every stage it knows itself more or less, withdraws into itself, and “gives its existential shape over to recollection” (to history); then it is reborn transformed as a new shape of Spirit. As an immediately existing consciousness it has to start over, but its past has been preserved in it inwardly by recollection, so it begins on a higher level than before. (Since this recollection is a non-conscious knowing of something that one already knew in a previous state of existence, and that helps one progress faster in the present, is Hegel speaking of the same sort of recollection that Socrates was in the *Meno*?) This new Spirit takes “charge” of the “empire of the world” (808) from its predecessor, and continues its progress toward the goal of self-revelation in the absolute Notion. The “path” to absolute Knowing is the recollection of the procession of Spirits: this is History as Spirit’s “free existence appearing in the form of contingency,” actually in the

world; but as “philosophically comprehended organization,” it is the Phenomenology of Spirit, the “science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance” (808). Together, they form the inwardizing and exhibiting of absolute Spirit, the two sides whose still-ongoing reconciliation in the world is God.

## **Conclusion**

Is this the kind of God I can believe in? In one sense, the answer is of course no—because Hegel would say that I should know Spirit, not merely believe in it. But I still have the choice to accept or reject Hegel’s account; and, at least at first, I must consider both what I think of it and how I feel about it, that is, the extent to which it is intellectually and emotionally satisfying. (If it turned out to be entirely intellectually satisfying but emotionally unsatisfying, Hegel might say that I must supersede the moment of experience and allow myself to enter absolute Knowing fully—or in other words, that I should just get over it.)

Intellectually, Hegel’s system is the most complete, coherent philosophical system that I am familiar with. Hegel has developed a system to explain the world—based on the single first principle of negation—that seems to be even more successful than that of Aristotle. He has outmatched Socrates by going beyond the love of wisdom to σοφία itself, and he has removed the basis for Kant’s philosophical system by resolving the antinomy between subject and object. His accounts of most of the other phenomena that appear as shapes of Spirit satisfy me: providing an explanation for a way of looking at the world from outside of it, with the results of the explanation matching its content as best we can tell, is in itself evidence for the truth of the explanation. This is one way we treat ideas in experimental science: if we somehow arrive at a natural law, we judge the law on how well it describes the phenomena, even if we do not

understand the basis for the law any more than we understood the phenomena to begin with. Even Hegel's account of Christianity is sensible, since he at least gives *some* explanation of its deepest mysteries—more than Christianity itself or any other philosopher I know does.

But there are a few ways in which Hegel's revealed Religion does not accurately describe Christianity, even on the intellectual level—not to mention the emotional level (where his treatment of Christianity might be described as “ruining” it). There is no Easter Sunday for Hegel; he would have preferred it if Jesus was immediately resurrected as Holy Spirit instead of coming back to life as an actual person first. Hegel might say that the Resurrection as Man is a superfluous picture-thought that really represents the same thing as the image of the Holy Spirit coming down on the disciples, namely the loss of individuality and reconciliation with the whole of man in a community; but this is a major difference in one of the most central teachings of Christianity. Further, Hegel denies the existence of any real ‘beyond’ to the world, which rules out a transcendent God, the Christian Heaven, and miracles; and this is inconsistent with the actual existence of a man Jesus who did approximately the things described in the Gospels. Even the teachings of Jesus—which could, after all, have been proclaimed by an ordinary man, if Hegel was worried about the supernatural—have no place in Hegel's system. Literal truth thus being out of the question, Hegel gives no other account of how Christianity came to have all this truth, so he is left with the vague claim that this shape of Spirit simply “dawns” on the world, mysteriously arising hundreds of years after those Greeks who took Aristophanes seriously and, like the Unhappy Consciousness, realized that God was no more than human (744). Maybe, in some way, Christians recognize the esoteric truth of their beliefs, in so far as the truth behind their picture-thoughts reflects their internal natures, and they perceive this recognition as faith welling up from inside them. If this is how they “knew” what things to believe, then why do they believe groundless picture-thoughts like the Resurrection as Man as well? How about the



Christian mystical tradition? It is one thing for Hegel to claim that beliefs boil down to true picture-thoughts, but since he cannot allow for anything actually supernatural, he would have to say that claims of visions or miracles were either lies or lunacy. Such incorrectness seems to contradict almost any explanation for how Christians came to picture-think the truth.

Furthermore, it is one thing for Hegel to stretch Christians' beliefs into an interpretation; but once he stretches them so far that they become their opposites—for example, “Grace, an external gift from God given out of love, exists” as opposed to “There does not exist a God beyond the world, and the most advanced form of God in the world does not deal with anything as low as love” —we have to wonder what could *not* be stretched into Hegel's interpretation, and thus what truth that leaves in Christianity. Then, if actual Christianity was not revealed Religion, Spirit did not actually appear in the shape Hegel describes in the world, and this runs the risk of undermining his entire system. After all, the basis for Hegel's claim of the correctness of his system is that his system produces an account of the progress of the World-Spirit that lines up with what actually happened in history.

But let us go back a bit. Why does Hegel want to get rid of all Beyonds? If the goal of the entire book—not to mention human history—is to achieve absolute Knowing of oneself according to the Notion, and it turns out that in so far as the self is thinking, the self is everything, then it would be valid to say that denying any Beyond is in fact the goal of the book. Why did Hegel not just stop at Christianity, accept knowing Spirit less fully, but still have God beyond the self? Hegel would probably say that the Notion led him beyond Christianity to absolute Knowing, that it is inherent in the nature of Thought that the object be oneself. This leads us to ask the opposite question: why are Christians—and individuals in general—so attached to the idea (or picture-thought) of a Beyond? Believing in a good world-state beyond us—whether Heaven or just a better Earth—lets us strive to live as if we were one of those graced

with salvation, or to live in harmony with the world and its inhabitants, or if one prefers, to live in such a way that we would deserve salvation: in any case, to have something to live for.

Believing in a God beyond us—or even in the goodness of other individuals beyond us—lets us have hope that we may be graced by good things that we do not deserve, and most importantly, allows for the possibility of loving and being loved. Love is impossible without the object being beyond oneself, since a mere separation between subject and object in thought is a mediated knowledge, not an immediate recognition, of the self in the other.

Absolute Knowing also means giving up experience, in addition to love. In so far as an individual is participating in absolute Knowing, he is only thinking and not experiencing. An individual who achieves absolute Knowing does not become a disembodied mind and stop experiencing the world; any bodily experiences he has may be as personally meaningful to him as they would have been if his mind was not participating in Spirit, but those experiences are philosophically insignificant. We might object—is not knowing an experience? I do not think Hegel would say it is. In the Preface, he speaks of “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour” (19) that Spirit must go through—*experience*—in order “*to be for itself*,” to actually exist in the world. If Spirit simply knew itself as being-in-itself, this “abstract universality” would be empty; unless it is both for-itself and in-itself, it is not Spirit. But in absolute Knowing, it is only knowing itself as Spirit, not experiencing itself as Spirit. It does have vicarious, *mediated* experience of itself in recollecting all its previous shapes; but it is not actually *experiencing* itself as Spirit at the same time that it is Knowing itself as Spirit—it has none of that “suffering,” as it did for instance in the reconciliation of conscience.

We might object again: the individual who is in absolute Knowing must be participating in one or more communities, and therefore experiencing Spirit in his life nevertheless. But the shapes of Spirit do not simply build upon one another, but *supersede* one another, with the

previous ones losing their value as absolutes. For instance, there may be people now who practice religion in the form of art, but their experience has no real significance according to Hegel, and at least it certainly is not compatible with absolute Knowing. While the individual in absolute Knowing is still Spirit in so far as he is knowing, he is not so as an individual still living his particular life: the motion of the forms of consciousness has ceased, so the individual's experience can have no place in Spirit. The individual is reconciled with himself in thought—in so far as he is absolute Knowing and grasps his Notion—but he does not *feel* this reconciliation in his experience.

Therefore, even if Hegel's account was entirely intellectually satisfying throughout the book, this state would not be emotionally satisfying at the end. Hegel would object—he would say that grasping the Truth, not emotional satisfaction, is the goal of philosophy. I agree—but the latter has an effect on the former. On the one hand, to the extent that Hegel's absolute Knowing is simply an account of how things are, it achieves ultimate perfection of knowing at the cost of denying that the other side of human nature, experience, can be united with it. On the other hand, to the extent that Hegel's goal is to transcend human nature, and absolute Knowing is a prescription for how to accomplish that, he has failed at transcending the whole of human nature if he leaves the other side of us behind to experience the world as we always have! This is intellectually unacceptable and emotionally absurd: Truth may be a Good, but not if it can only be purchased at the expense of the other Virtues, my life, and my very essence. As long as I am a human being, experiencing “the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour” of life, the final antithesis between experience and knowing is not resolved in me—and as we know from Hegel's system, an antithesis is never resolved with the domination of one side over the other. Absolute Knowing would need Absolute Experience—a true, immediate, experience of itself as the whole of Spirit—to be complete and unified.

But this is just what the World-Spirit has. Hegel says that when the World-Spirit “grasps itself[,] it sets aside its Time-form” (801); so we might want to say that its actual experiences of its shapes—its experience of sacrificing itself, being “emptied out onto time” as Nature—are indeed simultaneous with its absolute Knowing, in so far as the latter is outside of time. If the World-Spirit is outside of time, does this mean it is an entity beyond the physical world as well as in it? Hegel would deny this, of course, because he has posited a Time within our world that measures the World-Spirit’s progress and which it transcends at the end.

But let us leave Hegel aside for a moment: what if the World-Spirit had that relation to the time of our physical universe, existing beyond time as well as manifesting itself in it? It would be a true *spiritual being*: it would know itself as ever-reconciling Spirit, but appear to its as-yet-unreconciled individual parts as absolute Being. The Christian picture-thoughts would be more literally true, and we could take each of Hegel’s accounts as an explanation of the real truth of each of them. For instance, God would have created all of us and the world that we live in by othering us from Himself. Detached from the universal, we would be the evil, being-for-self side of Spirit, while the in-itself side of God remaining beyond the world would be entirely Good. Then, the being-for-self aspect of God’s immediate thought of Himself could have been actually manifested in His incarnation as a man: Jesus could have taught, performed miracles (since this is no longer a problem), and suffered and died—because without suffering, reconciliation is empty and not truly experienced. Personally reconciled with God, Christ could have risen again as a man to show the world the truth of Spirit, and left the Holy Spirit on earth to be manifest in any reconciliation of individual with universal (like that between the two consciences).

But while I believe the implications of this idea would be more consistent with Christianity than Hegel’s system is, this would not be an entirely Christian account of the world. God would have *needed* to create the universe, in order to provide Himself with a content for His

immediate thought of Himself, so that He would be actual and not empty. Time would be the process of God coming to know Himself, and the end of time would be the happy reconciliation of everything—in the actual world as well as in the Notion, in experience as well as in Knowing—with itself as God. Unlike Hegel's system, this spirituality would give our lives a meaning: our task would be to come to know ourselves as fragments of God, and we could have hope that all our experiences would lead us to this end as well. The final antithesis between experience and Knowing would be resolved, and we could be wholly satisfied.