

Religion and Self-Knowledge in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

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I. Introduction: Knowledge and Religion

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* of 1807 (*PS*),¹ Hegel investigates a series of flawed attempts to gain knowledge and concludes that religion, included among them, not only presents a final failure, but also makes particularly transparent the more fundamental defect in the very nature of the quest. This paper aims to explain the basis for this outcome of Hegel's analysis.

Knowledge attribution can take one of two forms, first and third person. In the case of third person attribution, one attributes knowledge to another, while in the first person case, one claims knowledge for oneself. On a set-theoretical construal,² in the first

¹ Throughout this essay references to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* use the abbreviation *PS*. Citations give the page numbers of the translation by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and of the German text: G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and H. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), vol. 3. When citing *PS*, I use the abbreviation "M" when citing Miller, and "MM" when citing the German text. Thus, if page 10 of the Miller translation corresponds to page 20 of Moldenhauer and Michel, then the citation will appear as follows: M:10/MM: 20. In general, I follow Miller's translations, but in some cases I make emendations of my own.

² The use of "set-theoretical construal" here does not entail a commitment to using the conceptual and technical apparatus or the symbolic notation of mathematical set theory. Its more modest aim is to exploit the ensemble of ordinary notions of class or set, class member or member of a set, and class characteristic. Thus, the class characteristic governs class membership: instantiation of the class characteristic is necessary and sufficient for class membership or inclusion, while the class characteristic is not itself reducible to any particular member of the class. As applied in this case of knowledge attribution, knowledge is the class characteristic, and attributing knowledge to an epistemic agent is to claim that he instantiates the characteristic and hence is a member of the class of knowers.

person case, anyone who claims to know asserts about himself that he is a member of the class of knowers. In doing so, he implies that 1) he knows the class characteristic that determines class membership, and 2) he instantiates it. Every case of third person knowledge attribution has the analogous two implications: 1) that the attributer knows the class characteristic, and 2) that the other to whom he attributes knowledge is a member of the class of knowers. To know this class characteristic is to know what knowledge is, and to possess such knowledge is to have a successful theory of knowledge or epistemology. A successful theory of knowledge, if it is to provide knowledge of what knowledge is, has to satisfy two conditions of adequacy: 1) The epistemology must be sufficiently comprehensive so as to make a place for itself as an instance of knowledge, and 2) to meet this demand for self-referential inclusiveness, it has to supply an account of self-knowledge. Thus, a theory of knowledge that satisfies these conditions of adequacy will be one that includes an account of knowledge as self-knowledge and shows that the knowledge about knowledge that it actually conveys conforms to the very conception of self-knowledge it offers. In short, an adequate epistemology ultimately will have to be self-knowledge of self-knowledge. Thus, in the first-person case, the epistemic agent who in fact justifiably self-ascribes knowledge will, by that fact alone, also legitimately lay claim to possession of this self-referentially inclusive epistemology of self-knowledge.

When the *PS* turns in Chapter VII to its examination of religion, it defines the latter generically as the self-consciousness of spirit.³ Hegel first introduces the term “spirit” (*Geist*) in Chapter IV, entitled “Self-Consciousness,” with the clarification that it means the “I that is we and we that is I.”⁴ “Spirit” designates this royal we, and

³ M: 410-11; MM: 495-96.

⁴ M: 110; MM: 145.

when one says “we know,” the royal we stands in for every knower, each of whom is a member of this class or participates in it. Religion, understood as a type of spirit, is thus an I claiming to be a we, all of whose members likewise take themselves to belong to this privileged class.

As the self-consciousness of spirit, religion aims to be spirit knowing itself. In so characterizing religion and for phenomenological purposes examining it as an epistemic project, Hegel exploits the traditional view of divine omniscience. Although he does not always use the term “god” (*Gott*)—he often uses, for example, the more formal expression, “absolute essence” (*absolute Wesen*)⁵—it is perfectly sensible to say that according to Hegel’s phenomenological construal, the uniquely religious claim to know is two-fold: it is a claim to know god, the perfect knower, and at the same time a claim that this knowing is a self-knowing. Not only does the claimant to religious knowledge hold that he shares membership in the very same class of which god is the exemplary member. He makes a more ambitious claim, which amounts to identifying himself with god.

This most bold assertion—tantamount to the first-person assertion, I am god—characterizes religion in its culminating form in the *PS* as the religion of revelation. The assertion comprises three interrelated propositions about consciousness in the shape of religion: 1) it knows what god is, namely that god is self-knowing spirit: god is the successful epistemologist; 2) it knows of a human being who knows himself to be the incarnation of god; and 3) its knowledge of that incarnate god is the attainment of self-knowledge. The claim of the religion of revelation, in other words, is that the religious knower is itself the self-knowing god incarnate. In the form of the religion of revelation, with its claim to be the self-

⁵ M:410 and following; MM: 495 and following.

knowledge of the self-knowing god-man, religion in effect asserts that it has gotten hold of the holy grail of epistemology. The *PS* reaches the conclusion that religion fails to meet this self-imposed challenge. What is the reason for its failure?

II. Hegel's Phenomenological Project

Hegel's treatment of religion in the *PS* stands apart not only from the many texts in his corpus that address in one way or another the matter of religion—for example, various youthful writings, a short philosophical treatise like *Faith and Knowledge*, essays, occasional pieces such as reviews, and remarks in the *Science of Logic* or *Philosophy of Right*. It also differs from the presentation of religion in his *Encyclopedia*.⁶ This is not so much because the latter offers only a skimpy outline of the category of religion; for that is filled out by extensive unpublished materials, both from Hegel's own hand and in sets of detailed students' notes, documenting the four different occasions when Hegel lectured on the topic of religion, from the early 1820's until his death in 1831.⁷ Whatever they share in their treatment of religion, one should expect there to remain an essential difference between the phenomenological and encyclopedic accounts, reflecting Hegel's more global commitment to the division

⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Encyclopedie*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bände*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and H. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), vol. 10, paragraphs 553 and following. Much has been written on Hegel on the topic of religion. A good starting point remains Fackenheim's *The Religious Dimension of Hegel's Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

⁷ For an informative account of the disposition and content of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of religion, see the Editorial Introduction in *G.W.F. Hegel: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, one-volume edition, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-71.

of labor between phenomenology and systematic philosophic science proper.⁸

Phenomenology is, according to its subtitle, a science of the experience of consciousness: it observes the efforts of a series of candidates, each of which Hegel calls a “shape of consciousness,” as each tries to justify its specific claim to know. Religion, which is treated in the next to last of the eight chapters of the *PS*, enjoys the unique advantage of invulnerability to the particular disabilities hobbling each of its defeated competitors; yet, its comparative superiority is not enough to immunize it against failure. In uncovering the special difficulties found to afflict religion, Hegel’s analysis also makes fully manifest for the first time precisely what is congenitally flawed about the very quest for knowledge under the auspices of consciousness.

II.1 Primary Rationale and Basic Features—The special function of *PS* is propaedeutic, and thus subordinate to systematic philosophy, of which the philosophy of religion is a part. Hegel’s primary rationale for deferring philosophy proper in favor of phenomenology is ultimately for the sake of philosophy itself. Without such a preparatory phenomenological investigation, the natural assumption will prevail that every effort to gain knowledge must operate within the framework of what Hegel labels the “opposition of consciousness.”⁹ “Consciousness,” as Hegel uses it, means something much more specific than awareness or

⁸ For Hegel’s statements concerning this division of labor, its nature and rationale, see the Preface to *PS* (M: 20; MM: 38-39). For commentary and discussion of these passages and related statements in the introductory portions of his *Science of Logic*, see most recently Richard Winfield, *Hegel’s Science of Logic: A Critical Rethinking in Thirty Lectures* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 36-43, which also includes citation and discussion of William Maker’s earlier work on this issue in his *Philosophy Without Foundations: Rethinking Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

⁹ M: 52-53; MM: 76.

wakefulness. Its primary sense is cognitive, or even more precisely, epistemic: it is held to be the privileged basis for knowledge. Knowledge is taken to be of an object. In construing consciousness as a structure of opposition, the crucial contrast is between the object in its relation to the subject who claims to know it, and the mind-independent object, the object as it is apart from that relation.¹⁰ But talk of consciousness is equivocal: while naming the structural contrast just described, the term is also used to refer to the knowledge claimant, the subject pole of this opposition. As the *PS* aims to show, every epistemic endeavor undertaken within the framework of consciousness turns out to be, on its own terms, doomed to failure. The prevalence of the natural epistemological assumption—that the framework of consciousness is the absolutely necessary condition for knowledge—thus stands in the way of philosophical knowledge, and it must be eliminated to open the way for philosophy proper.

The obvious objection to this argument for a preliminary phenomenology is that it commits a glaring *peititio*: it simply assumes the impossibility of consciousness-based knowledge, and thus presupposes the systematic philosophic standpoint that its outcome is first supposed to enable. To preempt that objection, phenomenology must begin by granting in principle the possibility of knowledge of the truth within the framework of consciousness. The task Hegel then sets himself is to carry out a completeness proof by considering in an orderly fashion—from the most simple to the most complex—the distinct ways that consciousness-based knowledge might be achieved, and to determine whether success can in fact be attained or not. The phenomenological enterprise can overcome the opposition of consciousness, but only if it results

¹⁰ M: 52-53; MM: 76-77.

precisely from the very attempt to obtain knowledge of the truth from within that framework.¹¹

To conduct this thought-experiment, Hegel structures the investigation so that it relies upon a set of four differences or contrasting pairs. One of these, the phenomenological difference, contrasts the internal perspective of consciousness, the participant, with the external perspective of the phenomenologist as the inquiring observer.¹² Consciousness aims at knowledge of the truth as its single-minded end. The phenomenologist, on the other hand, refrains from taking part in the competition for knowledge. His sole concern is rather to track this project consciousness undertakes.

The other three contrasting pairs, which can be referred to as the epistemic, normative, and teleological differences, combine to conceptualize the perspective of the participant in its consciousness-based quest for knowledge. The epistemic difference fixes the already-mentioned meaning of consciousness as a structure of opposition: thus, the object as it is in itself, independent of its relation to the knowing subject, is the truth, and is distinguished from the object as encountered by the subject claiming to know.¹³

This epistemic difference between knowing and truth provides the basis for the normative difference, which contrasts the content of any knowledge claim with the norm or criterion used to determine whether that claim is justified.¹⁴ Consciousness assumes that knowledge requires the justification as well as the truth of what

¹¹ This view that *PS* does not commit this *petitio* concurs with the thesis, stated on page 274, that Michael N. Forster defends in *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹² M: 52, 53-54, 56; MM: 76, 77, 79. In his *Die Logik der Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1974), Johannes Heinrichs labels this difference the "hermeneutic difference," and provides an analysis of its significance for Hegel's phenomenological project.

¹³ M: 52; MM: 76.

¹⁴ M: 52-54; MM: 76-78.

it claims to know. In seeking to justify its claim to know, it operates with two interrelated criteria. On the one hand, it constructs a pre-conception of the truth. On the other, it insists that its claim accurately represents that truth, that is, the object as it is in itself; but in thus asserting its claim as a faithful representation of the truth, it appeals to a criterion of justification as accurate representation, so its claim to know is justified, provided that its content corresponds to the pre-conception of truth that it brings to bear.

Finally, the distinction between the claim to know and its justification can be viewed as a teleological difference between a potential and its actualization. Starting from its potential for knowledge in the form of its knowledge claim, consciousness aims to establish that it actually knows by winning justification for its claim. In considering whether consciousness is capable of traversing that teleological distance, the phenomenologist restricts himself to an external point of view, playing no role in furnishing the criteria needed in the process of justification. Consciousness, in contrast, adopts the internal point of view in attributing knowledge to itself, taking full responsibility both for its own criteria of truth and justification that together constitute its theory of knowledge, and for assessing its cognitive representation in their light. The phenomenologist bears witness to the project of first-person epistemic self-evaluation carried out within the framework of consciousness.¹⁵

Were consciousness immediately successful by its own lights, there would be no need to consider a series of attempts, each defined by a novel criterial conception of truth. But what the

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of the limited descriptive role the phenomenologist plays, see Kenley R. Dove, "Hegel's Phenomenological Method," *Review of Metaphysics* 23, no. 4 (1970): 615-641.

phenomenologist observes proves to be a succession of failures, the “history” of an ordered set of shapes of consciousness, whose relations to one another Hegel famously came to call the “dialectic of experience.”¹⁶ Diagnoses of those failures reveal a typical pattern: they progress from the weakest to the strongest versions of the knowledge claim under scrutiny, where the comparative measure of strength consists in the ability of the successor to avoid the errors of its predecessors. Within any one shape, this means overcoming obstacles to correspondence that derail previous efforts, while maintaining allegiance to the same preconception of truth. In the transition from one shape to the next, one theory of truth is abandoned in favor of a new one. Consciousness never simply repeats a mistake; its errors are always novel and shape-specific.¹⁷

II.2 On the Way to Religion—Considered as a whole, this progression of shapes, comprising Hegel’s phenomenological argument in its entirety, divides into two main phases of unequal length. The first, shorter argument moves from the consideration of shapes of consciousness, all of which seek knowledge of an object taken to be other than the knowing subject, to the shape of self-consciousness, in which for the first time consciousness begins from the premise that knowledge consists in self-knowledge, and correlatively, that consciousness itself is the proper locus of truth. The advent of self-consciousness is pivotal: once introduced, this restriction of knowledge to self-knowledge serves as the abiding

¹⁶ M: 50, 55; MM: 73,78.

¹⁷ M: 55-57; MM: 78-81. Thus, within the first shape, consciousness as understanding overcomes the difficulties that plague sense-certainty and perception, while preserving commitment to their common conception that truth resides in what is other than consciousness. The transition to the new shape of self-consciousness, in contrast, is proclaimed with the announcement that for the first time consciousness has entered the “native realm of truth,” since truth is now located in consciousness itself, with the implication that from this point forward the knowledge to be attained is self-knowledge.

premise of the long argument encompassing the rest of the series of shapes, all of which are subsumed as subshapes of reason. Religion is the last of these subshapes before the final one, “absolute knowing.” As reason, consciousness permanently cements the reduction of knowledge to self-knowledge by its defining appeal to the principle of idealism, expressed by its ontological claim “to be all reality.”¹⁸ Starting from this idealist axiom that consciousness constitutes all reality, if consciousness succeeds in knowing that reality, its knowledge will necessarily be self-knowledge. But if, like all its predecessors, religion fails to attain its epistemic goal, it must do so within the idealist bounds set by its character as a subshape of reason.

III. Hegel’s Diagnosis of the Failure of Religion

III.1 The Reductio Argument—Assuming that Hegel’s conception of religion is of a shape of consciousness claiming to be a kind of self-knowledge, a diagnosis of its failure can be reconstructed in the form of a two-stage *reductio* proof. Stage one, drawing on the basic features of Hegelian phenomenology, brings together several of its knowledge-related propositions to yield a contradiction; in the second, shorter stage these same premises are applied to religion to show why it fails.

According to the general argument of stage one:

- i.** The epistemic difference between the object as it is for the knower and the object as it is in itself is assumed from the start, along with the related proposition that knowledge is of an object.
- ii.** The traditional view of knowledge involving truth and justification is also presupposed.

¹⁸ M: 140; MM: 179.

iii. Conjoined to these first two features is the thoroughgoing internalism of first-person epistemic self-evaluation. In order to evaluate whether its self-attribution of knowledge is warranted, consciousness, the epistemic protagonist, operating with its own criteria of truth and justification, must establish from its internal point of view that the object as it encounters it corresponds to the object as its pre-conception of the truth presumes it to be.

iv. Truth, as consciousness understands it, is mind-independent, so that being known is not an essential property of the object. In this sense, the object is other than the claimant to knowledge.

v. Self-knowledge is, as knowledge, of an object. Thus, to achieve self-knowledge, consciousness has to verify that its representation of itself as object corresponds to or is the same as what it is according to its criterial pre-conception of itself as truth. To carry out its self-evaluation, this pre-conception of truth, precisely as a conception of truth, must present the object, in this case itself, as essentially unrelated to and so other than itself.

vi. Yet, self-knowledge implies that the knower, in representing itself as its object, knows its object as the same as itself.

vii. Self-knowledge within the framework of consciousness implies, therefore, the contradiction that the object of self-knowledge both is and is not the same as the knower, or equivalently, both is and is not other than the knower.

viii. This contradiction yields the conclusion that self-knowledge within the framework of consciousness is not possible.

Applying this argument to religion, in stage two:

i. The crucial first premise is but a reminder that religion is a shape of consciousness, which puts forward a specific claim to self-knowledge.

ii. Thus, religion is subject to the same contradiction that surfaces in the more general argument, leading to the specific conclusion that self-knowledge in the shape of religion is impossible.

III.2 Objection: the Reductio Argument Omits Spirit—If the *reductio* argument just rehearsed is valid, it proves too much. For, the general result of stage one, namely, that self-knowledge within the framework of consciousness is impossible, implies that Hegel should have terminated his phenomenological investigation much earlier with the turn to self-consciousness and the reduction of knowledge to self-knowledge in the first place. It should never have progressed beyond self-consciousness to reason, not to mention its subshape, religion. And yet, it does! In fact, one might take further exception, explaining that the second stage of the *reductio* moves too quickly to its self-defeating conclusion due to its omission of a crucial feature of religion: religion is not simply a shape of self-consciousness, but much more specifically the self-consciousness of spirit. Spirit is precisely what allows consciousness, initially aspiring to attain self-knowledge in the shape of self-consciousness, to avoid terminal self-destruction; for it holds out the promise of an alternative construal of self-knowledge that escapes the strictures of epistemic difference so essential to the *reductio*. It provides consciousness a life-line so that despite the disabling difficulty it faces in the shape of self-consciousness, it can continue its pursuit of self-knowledge, albeit in a different configuration, namely that of reason, whose subshape, spirit, immediately precedes religion.

As noted earlier, the formula for spirit, “the I that is we and we that is I,” receives its debut in the introductory discussion to the decisive move to self-consciousness.¹⁹ There Hegel uses his brief

¹⁹ See Footnote 4. An individual who shares membership in a group with others is like the class member whose membership is determined by its instantiating the class characteristic that defines the class. In this way, the set-theoretical concepts of class, class member, and class characteristic may be extended to articulate the idea of spirit as the I/we relation, but there are all-important differences between class members enjoying class membership in virtue of sharing a class characteristic, and membership of I’s in a we in virtue of what those I’s share in

account of some of the features of spirit to disentangle the specific problems that consciousness confronts in its particular shape of self-consciousness from the more general matter of self-knowledge. This in turn allows him to argue that the impossibility of self-knowledge in the peculiar shape of self-consciousness is no warrant for generalizing immediately to the impossibility of self-knowledge altogether. As a we, spirit essentially involves a plurality of individuals who are members of a class.²⁰ Their possession of the class characteristic that determines their membership is a function of their interaction with one another. In the paradigm case of the ethical community (*Sittlichkeit*), which Hegel describes in chapter VI on spirit, the members of the we share common characteristics by virtue of their willing conformity to the law, which codifies the rules that both govern their various interrelations and define their role-identities. The spiritual class characteristic is, consequently, not an intrinsic, but instead relational property of an individual, an artifact of law-guided interaction. The class members know themselves in and through their relations to one another, precisely because who they are, spiritually, is determined by the same set of rules they all accept.

III.3 The Reductio Argument Revised—Self-knowledge, according to the first stage of the original *reductio* proof, is impossible because it implies the contradiction that such knowledge is of what is both same and not the same, of what is other and not other. This outcome resulted from failing to combine consistently the formal structure of the opposition of consciousness and the

common. These differences are of decisive significance for thinking self-consciousness (and self-knowledge) independent of the epistemic difference that defines consciousness. In the immediate sequel they will be highlighted in the formulation of an improved version of the *reductio*, although doing so will not suffice to avoid even this revised objection's negative result.

²⁰ Since set theory permits a null set or singleton, a we cannot be a class in strict set-theoretical terms.

requirements of self-knowledge. The conception of spirit outlined above, however, suggests an alternative way to conceptualize the dichotomy of same and other that does not tie it essentially to the epistemic difference of consciousness, the crucial source of the contradiction. In an I/we relation, a plurality of individuals, who relate to one another according to jointly accepted rules of conduct, come to share the identity-constituting characteristics that their rules define. They know one another as members of the same class, and hence know themselves in one another, yet each is an individuated instance, hence differentiated member of the same. The concept of spirit implies a same/other dichotomy, but it is not an inconsistent pair of the sort that results from conceiving self-knowledge on the presupposition of epistemic difference. Thus, the concept of spirit does not present the obstacle to self-knowledge that it would be were the opposition of consciousness an ingredient essential to the spiritual relation.

If consciousness in the shape of spirit maintains the potential for self-knowledge, and religion has a spiritual shape, Hegel must be offering a different diagnosis of the failure of religion than the original version of the *reductio* argument proposed. If religion were an unalloyed type of spiritual self-knowledge, it would be completely free of the inconsistency that follows directly from the conjunction of self-knowledge and the opposition of consciousness; but, because religion is a shape of consciousness, a new inconsistency emerges in the attempt to synthesize spirit, not only with self-knowledge, but with the opposition of consciousness as well. The fundamental difficulty for religion is that it is the self-consciousness of spirit, and hence a shape of consciousness, which as such cannot avoid the taint of the opposition of consciousness. This sheer residue of epistemic difference is responsible for the inconsistency to which it inevitably succumbs in trying to gain self-knowledge. Religion fails, according

to this revised version of Hegel's diagnostic argument, for the sole reason that it is logically impossible to embed spiritual self-knowing within the formal opposition of consciousness. Spiritual self-knowing as a shape of consciousness is self-contradictory.

IV. Religion and its Subshapes

IV.1 Religion as Self-Consciousness of Spirit—At the point of entry to the late treatment of religion in the *PS*, Hegel recalls a distinction, to which he had alluded earlier, between a narrow and a wider understanding of religion. The phenomenologist is reminded that in bearing witness to the epistemic adventures of consciousness up to this point, he has along the way referred to appearances of religion, which were entitled to the label based on their characterization as the “consciousness of absolute essence.” Absolute essence is the inner reality beyond all appearance; it is other than, because without any essential relation to, consciousness, so that knowledge of it, were it forthcoming, would not be self-knowledge at all.²¹ “Religion” in this loose sense is not to be conflated with the distinct shape of religion properly so-called, which is different not only from each of its predecessors (consciousness, self-consciousness, reason, and spirit), but also, as the penultimate shape, from its immediate successor, absolute knowing.

As self-consciousness of spirit, religion proper rejects the very idea that what it aims to know is an absolute essence utterly other than itself. The phenomenological construal of religion strictly speaking incorporates the main results of the two immediately prior developments of the overarching shape of reason: with its embrace of reason's idealist principle of being all reality, and the principle of

²¹ M: 410; MM: 495.

spirit asserting the unity of self and world,²² the we of religious spirit must be unrestricted in its inclusiveness. Religious self-knowledge must be of a self whose essence is absolutely universal by being, and knowing itself to be, the self of all the members of the class of self-knowers. Religion holds itself out as a type of spiritual self-knowledge in which the individual, in his relation to others, knows himself in them, and they in him, because they all interact according to the law—as it were of true epistemology—transcending all other rules that would otherwise sort those selves into diverse kinds of class membership.

The scrutiny of the worthiness of this claim that gives overall definition to religion follows the general pattern of the phenomenological inquiry. As a new subshape of reason, religion has built-in invulnerability to the epistemic frailties that have disabled spirit, its immediate predecessor. The investigation of the shape of religion itself moves from the weaker versions of natural religion and the religion of art, to the strongest, the religion of revelation. Once it fails in this final configuration, the quest for knowledge consciousness undertakes in the shape of religion is exhausted altogether. The key to the failure of religion in Hegel's *PS* lies, therefore, in the defect unique to the religion of revelation. Despite its immunity to all the problems that undermine each of its predecessor shapes, the self-consciousness of spirit as the religion of revelation cannot make good on its pretension to self-knowledge for the sole reason that it retains the oppositional form of consciousness as such.

IV.2. Natural Religion and Religion of Art—The inadequacies of natural religion and the religion of art depicted in the *PS* help to isolate the special difficulty facing the religion of revelation. To justify its claim to spiritual self-knowledge, the object that religious

²² M: 263; MM: 324.

consciousness encounters must itself be self-knowing spirit, if it is to correspond to the criterial conception of truth defining religion. Natural religion fails on both counts.

As the first form of religious consciousness, natural religion claims that objects of nature—Hegel mentions light, flowers, and animals—embody self-knowing spirit. In fact, however, such objects do not have spiritual properties and so lack entirely the minimal character of spiritual selfhood that absolute essence or god must possess to be self-knowing spirit; consequently, they cannot pass the correspondence test.²³ From the subject side as well, Hegel argues, natural religious consciousness is pre-spiritual. Natural religion attempts to deal with this double difficulty by introducing the laboring artisan, who displaces the natural objects by fashioning a reality stamped with properties of his own making, with which he can stand in a self-relation; but since the artisan as such is not a member of a law-bred community, he is himself prespiritual. At the same time, in bestowing a shape on his material, he is attempting to overcome the separation of the natural and artificial, parallel to the separation between consciousness, which assumes the immediacy or givenness of the truth, and self-consciousness, which assumes the identity of truth with itself. But as long as his labor depends on nature for its stuff, he will never succeed in eliminating the residue of natural determinacy, and unless that difference is eliminated, there can be no reconciliation between consciousness and self-consciousness.²⁴

The figure of the laboring artisan working up an artificial world does, however, supply the transition from natural religion to the religion of art. The artisan shows that self-knowing spirit must,

²³ M: 416 and following; MM: 503. While the architectural forms of pyramids and obelisks, the phenomenologist comments, point beyond nature, they do not instantiate self-knowing spirit. M: 421 and following; MM: 508.

²⁴ M: 423 and following; MM: 511.

to be spirit, bring about by its own doing the very self that is to be known; but the products of the artisan, while they are not simply the givens of nature, do not replicate the living labor that would alone allow the artisan to know himself in them. This task is left for the religion of art. Religious consciousness in this form is no longer the pre-spiritual artisan (*Werkmeister*), but the artist (*Kunstler*), who is a member of an ethical community, that is, of a we constituting itself through ethical law; and his product, which is a work of art in the proper sense (*Kunstwerk*), is supposed to embody his creative activity that produces it, so that it can claim to have the shape of self-conscious activity. The phenomenologist's three-fold division of these works of art into abstract, living, and spiritual, is grounded in the artist's search for the adequate embodiment of such self-expression.²⁵

The inert object, for example, the statue of the human form, which constitutes the abstract work of art, does exhibit human design rather than merely imitating nature; but, while it is supposed to express for the members of the community the divine ground of their shared spirituality, that depends entirely on the meaning and evaluation they bestow upon it. In addition, while it is supposed to embody the artist's creative act, and so enable his self-knowledge, it abstracts from the activity responsible for its genesis, and leaves the artist either alienated from his own work, or from himself as a member of the we.²⁶

To get beyond these defects of the abstract work of art, the focus of creative activity shifts from designing and making things to performance—the ritualized conduct of cults, devotion to the deity through song, sacrificial offerings, feasts, mysteries, or dance festivals. Such a living work of art is not cut off from its creative

²⁵ M: 424 and following; MM: 512 and following.

²⁶ M: 427 and following; MM: 517.

origin, and the members of the community engaged in cultish ceremony are neither alienated from the independent products of their artistic selves, nor from the deity they make present through these forms of worship.²⁷ But there is a problem, on the one hand, if a diversity of cults stands at odds with the comparative universality of the class characteristics the members of the ethical community share with one another through their common law. If, on the other hand, their ritual enactment succeeds in embodying the universality of living spirituality, it threatens to highlight its difference from the comparative parochialism of the divine source of the law that determines the particular identity of the community. These important shortcomings displayed by the living work of art motivate the step beyond it to the spiritual work of art produced by the poets, in the forms of epic, tragedy, and comedy.²⁸

The demand for universality affects the poet's mode of expression as well as the form and content of his work. He sings to the members of his own community the epic tale of its relation, individualized in its heroes, to the gods, organized hierarchically into a polytheistic pantheon. This tale carries a claim to satisfy the requirements of universality; yet, the objection to the epic form is that if the poet's narrative does not instantiate the human story as such, if the heroes' actions do not depict human virtue, if divine action does not reveal the nature of the beautiful and the good, if both divine and human are subject to some superior, unlimited power of fate, epic poetry will not suffice as a spiritual work of art. On the other hand, if the epic does measure up to those universal criteria, it loses the unique content that mirrors the peculiar identity of the community to which it should speak.²⁹

²⁷ M: 432-435; MM: 521-525.

²⁸ M: 439-453; MM: 529-544.

²⁹ M: 440-443; MM: 530-534.

Tragic poetry claims to remedy the deficiencies of epic by replacing the narrative perspective with that of the individual performers who, through a pretense acknowledged by all, act out the community's own drama, presented directly to itself. But even if a dramatic presentation includes the community's common sense, as represented by the chorus, it will not pass the universality test unless the tragic hero and the gods are as all-encompassing in what they are supposed to represent as fate itself. The analysis of tragedy uncovers two additional problems for the spiritual work of art. First, if the community knows itself in the staging of its own story, then it now knows what the phenomenologist already made evident in the account of *Sittlichkeit* in Chapter VI: there is an irreconcilable conflict between divine and human law, governing respectively, the family and city, and this thwarts the attempt by members of the community to achieve self-knowledge in religious form.³⁰ The community's knowledge of the performers' pretense, furthermore, implies their admission that the poet is providing but a fiction, not the reality of spirit knowing itself as a real, divine presence.³¹

Comedy, the final form of the spiritual work of art, concedes all of this, making a mockery of dramatic poetry. The comic poet pulls away the curtain, removes the mask, and addresses his audience: the poets have created both the gods in the image of man and the outsized heroes to whom they relate. The performers enact a double lie, since they pretend to be the characters on stage, while also pretending that the characters are not merely the make-believe of poetic invention. And the audience plays along, knowing that its serious reception is its contribution to a willful deception.³²

³⁰ M: 266-267, 279-284; M: 327-329, 342-348.

³¹ M: 443-450; MM: 534-541.

³² M: 450-453; MM: 541-544.

The comic's deflationary reduction of the spiritual work of art, and with it the religion of art as a whole, has several important implications. By deliberately acknowledging the dramatic frame of the comic work, the comic consciousness in effect claims that the sole reality is that of actual self-consciousness. All talk of god or gods is so much poetic fancy: there is no reality other than human reality, and hence nothing divine.³³ And without divinity there can be no religion. Due to the generality of its debunking perspective, comic poetry transcends the confines of the ethical community whose seriousness it lampoons and with which it can no longer seamlessly identify. It even blocks the attempt by rational thinking to save religion by appeal to the ideas of the beautiful and the good as the highest beings, which possess a permanence that conventional morality always lacks. This attempt, the comic poet charges, is nothing but making new gods, poetry in disguise, and such an effort only compounds poetry's fraud with the false promise of a civil religion of reason to replace the community's belief in the divine basis of its law. For that belief, once promoted by poet-legislators, has been discredited as groundless in the cold light cast by comedy. The rational thinkers do have a rejoinder at the ready: comedy is parasitic upon the city and its reflection in tragic drama. The ideas that reason postulates sustain comedy by rescuing the city from the comic's disillusionment, destructive of the city's supposed divine foundation. Is the comedian too serious after all to appreciate the rational thinker's sense of humor in displaying his civic virtue and playing the poet for the sake of the city and perhaps also his own good?³⁴ The question that now arises, in any case, is whether

³³ M: 455; MM: 547, where Hegel writes that "Gott ist gestorben." Compare Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 143.

³⁴ On the accusation against Socrates for making new gods, see Ronna Burger, *Philosopher and Seer: the Problem of the Holy in Plato's Euthyphro*, (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung—forthcoming).

religion can be restored in the face of its comic demolition. Once this restoration is found in the guise of the religion of revelation, why is religion, despite its new beginning, too weak to escape a final failure?

IV.3 The Religion of Revelation—Through comedy, the religion of art has been reduced to self-consciousness, with a claim to be the sole source for all putative divinity, and thus the sole absolute essence. Taking that claim with utter seriousness, religious consciousness makes the following inference: if the actual, individual self is the absolute essence, then god is an actual, living self-consciousness.³⁵ Incarnation is the punch line of the comic's joke—at his own expense! This is perhaps the most audacious claim to emerge in the entire development of religion. Comic poetry has enabled the religion of revelation, according to which god manifests himself to all as a real human being.

The believer of the religion of revelation uniquely makes two claims that define this culminating subshape of religion. First, in asserting the thesis of incarnation, the believer takes god, understood not merely as a self but as self-conscious spirit, to be a given object immediately present to him as a sensory object. Second, because god is so determined, the representative of religious consciousness claims to know himself in and as god, since he too is just such a self, precisely another instance of the same. If religious consciousness can make good on these claims, it will also have shown that it is able to reconcile its consciousness of an object, which follows from its claim to know, with its self-consciousness, implied by the claim that its knowledge, because the object is itself, consists in self-knowledge.³⁶

³⁵ M: 456-460; MM: 548-553.

³⁶ M: 459 and following; MM: 552 and following.

Consciousness runs into trouble justifying its claim that it knows god and thereby itself and itself as god, because the object immediately given to it, which it claims to be god, is a single, living human being, instantiating natural, not spiritual properties, subject to the vicissitudes of space, time, and natural decay, an object thus undeniably other than itself. It dies and yet religious consciousness lives. With the death of the would-be divine man, he is no longer available to others, who initially lose hope that they too can enjoy the epistemic achievement that religion promises. Eye-witness assertions are replaced by hearsay. Yet, the faithful quickly realize that their unhappiness assumes the mistaken premises of natural religion, and instead of persisting in that backsliding error, the members of the spiritual community resort to the cognitive medium of representation, a “mix of thought and sensation,” contemplating—which is presumably not poetizing—a being with sensory properties, whose essential properties are nonetheless spiritual, in order to establish their cognitive relation to the absent god. This leads religious consciousness to seek god through historical inquiry, attempting to recover the lost presence by tracing it to its past. In doing so, it combines the use of naturalistic imagery—the relation of father and son, for example—with a moralizing account, which moves from a story of creation, loss of innocence, expulsion, and evil, to alienation and suffering, death, and finally resurrection. In all of this it is still attempting to construct a model to depict the dynamic relation of self-knowing spirit, in which individuals differentiate themselves as individuated members of the same class,³⁷ not, however, by conceptualizing the logic of self-relation, but by fashioning the representation of self-knowing spirit.³⁸ Maintaining their representation of the departed incarnate god as

³⁷ M: 462-473; MM: 555-568.

³⁸ M: 460-462; MM: 554-555.

the measure of spiritual self-knowledge, members of the faith community acknowledge the difference between their actual existence and that of god, while aspiring to liken themselves to his image, looking with hope to a future in which they too will undergo the same transfiguration. Until that time, or rather until time is extinguished, the once incarnate god remains beyond, an other not constituted through interaction with the fellow members of the class and not one with whom they can identify. Thus remaining unknown, this god leaves religion bereft of a justification for its signature claim to self-knowledge.³⁹

Absolute knowing, which immediately follows religion and brings Hegelian phenomenology to its close, consists precisely in its appreciation of this diagnostic insight that no new shape of consciousness could possibly improve upon religion. Because the etiology of the failure of religion turns on the very structure of consciousness, the assumption of that framework as the ultimate *sine qua non* for knowledge must be abandoned altogether.

³⁹ M: 473-478; MM: 568-574.