HEGEL AND THE IMPERATIVES OF LOVE

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Hegel argues in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion that the notion that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) well expresses the self-developing infinitude of being. As such, love expresses the unity of difference and is, therefore, the “representation” (Vorstellung) of reason (Vernunft). This requires, however, transcending the abstract notion of the perfect God that stands over and above finite reality. At the same time love has a subjective dimension, embodied not only in mutual recognition but in the experience of the highest forms of unity with otherness. This ultimately requires of the individual that he or she embrace the nothingness of his or her being and yet also engage responsibly in ethical life (Sittlichkeit).

In his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Hegel characterizes love as both the highest religious feeling a believer can have and as a representation of the God of the “Consummate Religion” (Die vollendete Religion)—consistent with the definitive claim that “God is love” in the First Epistle of John. Hegel claims in the 1827 lecture, “When we say, ‘God is love,’ we are saying something very great and true.”¹ He also sometimes speaks of love more philosophically as synonymous with reason (Vernunft). Hegel’s abundant study of love in the Lectures, meanwhile, contrasts sharply with his circumspect attitude toward love in the Phenomenology of Spirit. Indeed, immediately after insisting that substance must also be subject, Hegel says, “[T]he life of God and divine cognition may well be spoken as a disporting of Love with itself; but this idea sinks into mere edification, and even mere insipidity, if it lacks the seriousness, the suffering (Schmerz),

the patience, and the labour of the negative."² This is not to say that Hegel has returned to the utopian praise of love he made as a young man in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*. Since, as we shall see in some detail below, Hegel directly links anguish with love in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, his concern is less with the potential insipidity of the notion of love, but with the insufficiently philosophical understanding of what love is. One “speaks emptily of it," if one does not understand that “love is both a distinguishing and sublation of the distinction…the simple, eternal idea." (VPR 3, 202–203/276) In other words, Hegel does not hold that “God is love" first and foremost because it is an edifying notion likely to promote belief in the non-philosophical Christian, but because it is a rigorous statement of what Spirit is in its deepest sense.

While for Hegel love is restricted in the *Philosophy of Right* to family feeling, the love of the consummate religion plays a much more comprehensive role. It follows from the notion that God or Spirit is love that it is also an imperative in ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) to surpass mere particularity in favour of a full commitment to family, civil society and state, for “Ethical life, love, means precisely the giving up of particularity, of particular personality, and its extension to universality." (VPR 1, 211/285–6) This means that for Hegel there is not only a very tight link between religion and philosophy but also between metaphysics and ethics. Let me thus repeat that Hegel can claim to have proven the philosophical rigour of the signature metaphysical/ethical essence of Christianity, referred to above, “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8)

We will begin by outlining the argument that God *is* love and work from there towards showing why, as Holy Spirit, knowledge of God leads to the real world imperatives of ethical life. Then, in section two, we will begin with the “natural consciousness" of the individual and show why its “drive" is a pilgrimage by which the individual learns that he or she must learn to love such as to unify him or herself with God.

² G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), 14–15, tr. by A. V. Miller as *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §19. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PG. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the German original, then to the paragraph number of the English translation, as in this case PG, 14–15/§19.
God is Love

For Hegel, religion engages with the truth in the form of representation (Vorstellung) and feeling, while philosophy engages with the same content except in the form of rigorous speculative thought. The fully realized person thus engages quite wholeheartedly in both, for even “In philosophy itself,” Hegel says, “the resolution is only partial.” (VPR 3, 96/162) The philosopher, that is, requires the conviction and passion of a fully engaged human heart and should feel the full power of the “unio mystica.” (VPR 1, 89/180) Needless to say, the purely religious experience of feeling and representation falls short as well, and requires philosophy to complete and justify it. Religious representations and feelings, then, can be said to have two functions in Hegel. The first function is to provoke a “certainty” in the non-philosophical believer that is grounded both in the compelling nature of stories and doctrines that give rise to a conviction in feeling that is best summarized by the word “faith.” (VPR 1, 237–38/336–37) However, representations must also be measured against the standard of philosophy: “It must be observed,” Hegel says, “that a deep speculative content cannot be portrayed in its true and proper form in images and mere representations, and hence cannot be portrayed in this mode without contradiction.” (VPR 3, 42/105) The second function of religious representations and feelings thus characterizes what we might call the emotional content of philosophical truth for the philosopher, but if and only if the representation stands the test of philosophy. A religious representation can thus either meet the first criterion and fail to meet the second (at times quite pathetically), or it can meet both. Hegel thus generally praises most of the representations of Lutheran Christianity as generating faith in the believer, but has quite varying judgments as to whether they are worthy of the philosopher. Our key point here will be to show that because Hegel shows the rigour of the claim that “God is love,” “love” meets both criteria.

Before exploring that theme directly, however, let us look briefly at two examples of religious representations that meet or fail to meet the two criteria—the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. The notion that God is “father” and Jesus is “son” is an example of a representation that meets the first but not the second criterion. Hegel says that, “The relationship of father and son is drawn from organic life and is used in representational fashion. This natural representation is only figurative and accordingly never wholly corresponds to what should be expressed.” (VPR 3, 276/283–84) Hegel is still more blunt in 1824. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit structure of the Trinity “is a childlike
relationship, a childlike form. The understanding [Verstand] has no other category, no other relationship that would be comparable with this in respect of its appropriateness. But we must be aware that this is merely a figurative relationship; the Spirit does not enter into this relationship.” (VPR 3, 127–28/194) Hegel is plain that “father/son” fall short for the philosopher. The Trinity may be preserved for the philosopher, but only in a highly transformed way. God the Father is a universal that must particularize himself in Jesus Christ, which is then made singular in the Holy Spirit. In short, the orthodox notion of the Trinity might serve everyday believers, but certainly not philosophers. The latter can uphold the Trinity only in its highly modified form.

The Incarnation is another interesting case. Here, Hegel upholds philosophically the incarnation of God in one human person, Jesus Christ, but has concerns from the point of view of the religious believer. The key to the Incarnation is that it shows believers, through the crucifixion of Jesus, that they are “at home” worshipping a God who, like them, has suffered and died. The salvation of the believer subsists not beyond her finitude but in and through a transfigured grasp of that finitude. Hegel notes divine “incarnation” is common in many religions. But the Lamas of Asian religion, for example, actually function to exclude the everyday person, for the incarnation is reserved to a particular elect and thus excludes the vast majority of everyday people. To be truly universal, therefore, the representation must be singular, must be in one person, “This individual is unique; [there are] not several [like the Lamas]. In one [all are encompassed]; in several, divinity becomes a distraction. [This individual appears] utterly and exclusively other over against them all, in order that they might be reconstituted.” (VPR 3, 49/114) Hegel seems to conclude in glowing terms, “The consummation of reality in immediate singular individuality [is] the most beautiful point of the Christian religion. For the first time the absolute transfiguration [of finitude is] intuitively exhibited [so that everyone can] give an account of it and have an awareness of it.” (VPR 3, 49/115)

We know, however, that Hegel also had worries about the representation of the Incarnation. Hegel says in the Phenomenology of Spirit that since the incarnation is only a representation “its satisfaction thus itself remains burdened with the antithesis of a beyond. Its own reconciliation therefore enters its consciousness as something...in the distant future just as the reconciliation which the other Self achieved appears as something in the distant past.” (PG, 514/§787) For this reason the reconciliation for the non-philosophical believer is restricted to his or her heart, it is “an eter-
nal love which it only feels but does not behold in its consciousness as an actual immediate object. Its reconciliation, therefore, is in its heart, but its consciousness is still divided against itself and its actual world is still disrupted." (PG, §787) The philosophical believer, on the other hand, knows that finitude is internal to God not because of the representation of Jesus but because of philosophical argument, and thus also knows for philosophical reasons that it applies universally to all individuals. The philosopher does not need the representation and thus is not “burdened with the antithesis of a beyond.” (PG, §787)

However, Hegel argues that love meets the criteria of the believer and of the philosopher. Immediately after criticizing the representation of the Holy Trinity, Hegel affirms the abundant way in which the representation of divine love meets the first criterion, “‘God is love’...is present to sensation; as ‘love’ he is a person, and the relationship is such that the consciousness of the One is to be had only in the consciousness of the other.... This is spiritual unity in the form of feeling.” (VPR 3, 126/193) However, we also claim that love is a philosophically rigorous term. I will give but one indication of that here, for it is the burden of the rest of this essay to demonstrate that point. Immediately after criticizing the notion that “father” and “son” is a “childlike” representation, Hegel actually says, “‘Love’ would be more suitable, for the spirit [of love] is assuredly what is truthful.” (VPR 3, 128/194) Let us then examine this claim with some care.

Why is the claim that “God is love” one that the philosopher can fully embrace? Hegel’s argument is too complex to be adequately summarized in this context, but for the sake of making his point concisely, I will focus on his analysis of the two key and overlapping technical themes in his philosophy. The first is the concept of the “finite” and the “infinite,” which is articulated in abstract terms in the Science of Logic and in the context of religion in the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion in 1824 and 1827. Second, Hegel’s analysis of religion relies heavily upon a distinction between the concreteness (Vernunft) and the abstraction of the understanding (Verstand), “[T]he principle of understanding is abstract identity

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with itself, not concrete identity." (VPR 3, 208/283) The understanding’s capacity to differentiate and oppose makes it the form of thought that identifies mere finitude. Finite identities, for the understanding, always exclude other identities. The understanding, in short, is at home in finitude—it draws distinctions and oppositions such as to mark out determinate differences between things and grasp them in their finitude. For the understanding, then, God is inevitably “beyond” the finite. However, it is only reason (Vernunft) that can grasp that it is the very nature of finite things to be beyond themselves. This means that reason shows us how otherness is always already intrinsic to the identity of each finite thing. Reason demonstrates, in short, that each finite thing is part of a self-related, infinite totality. Herein, we already have a clue as to why God is love. If it is the very nature of the reality that each finite thing that is has its being only in and through an infinite relation of others, then love is the fullest realization of the nature of self-as-other. Let us look at these issues of finite and infinite, understanding and reason, much more closely.

The understanding is what the philosophical tradition readily, and mistakenly, identifies with thought in general. Yet it is the understanding which correctly states that my cat or this bowl of cherries are “not” God, and conceives of God and the world as separated by a limit. The understanding “de-fines”—renders “finite.” Thus it is finitude that constitutes the abyss between the world and God, “for the understanding there are, in the mediation, two actual beings: on this side there is a world and over yonder there is God.” (VPR 1, 316/424) The logic of finitude, Hegel argues, is to posit a limit, beyond which is the non-finite, the void, the empty (Leeren). Yet if this empty, non-finite void shares a boundary with the finite then it too is finite. “Because,” Hegel says “this infinite, which stands apart, is itself restricted... the limit arises. The infinite has vanished and the other, the finite, has stepped in.” (WL, 21.128/112) The new finite also has a beyond, which itself turns out to be finite because it too shares a boundary, and so on ad infinitum—this is the “bad” or “spurious” infinite. Hegel says this argument can also be addressed to “ordinary consciousness,” for “finite things have the characteristic of perishing—their being is the sort that directly sublates itself. Accordingly, we have at first only the negation of the finite. The second [determination] is that this negation of the finite is also affirmative. There is a spurious affirmation that consists in the repetition of the finite,” indeed, a “tedious repetition.” (VPR 1, 315/422)

Yet Hegel is famous for the decisive insight that spirit is beyond any limit that it posits for itself, “inasmuch as we know something as
a limit, we are already beyond it." (VPR 1, 317/425) The beyond of the limit of finitude, however, is not the pure, simple negation of the finite, for upon closer philosophical inspection we see that it is the nature of the finite thing itself to be beyond itself. The spurious or bad infinite “yields, then, the scandalous unity of the finite and the infinite—the unity which is itself the infinite that embraces both itself and the finite—the infinite, therefore, understood in a sense other than when the finite is separated from it and place on the other side from it...each is within it.” (WL, 21.132/115) Each finite thing has, as its own identity, that which is beyond it, for it is its own nature to be beyond its own limit. This truth is only implicit for plants and animals, but for humanity it can be explicitly self-conscious. Qua spirit my identity as a finite being is to be that which is beyond me. But equally, all the other finites are beyond themselves and it is their nature to be me. The totality of finites is internally related to itself and thus forms as a whole an infinite self-relation. Since it is one, self-differentiated totality it is “absolute.” This absolute totality is God, “[but] the infinite alone is; the finite has no genuine being, whereas God has only genuine being.” (VPR 1, 316/424)

Not surprisingly, Hegel was charged with Spinozistic pantheism. Yet Hegel is not arguing that all finite and contingent things are purely and simply “God” for, as he puts it famously in the Philosophy of Right, “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.”

The rational truth, the divine, is alone fully actual, alone is “genuine being.” All the same, it is important to note that Hegel’s argument for actuality shows that contingencies are themselves necessary and no finite thing, no matter how contingent, has a mutually exclusive relation to the rest of Spirit. Nothing is outside of or beyond God. Hegel is certainly a kind of pantheist, even if not of the reductive and simple-minded form that he ridicules in his lectures.

The identification of God with the good infinite, the infinitely self-related totality of all being, has enormous implications for religion. In truth, the understanding has not just reduced God to a “beyond,” but indeed to an empty abstraction:

Father, the One, the οὐ, is the abstract element that is expressed as the abyss, the depth (i.e., precisely because it is empty), the inexpressible, the inconceivable, that which is beyond all concepts. For in any case what is empty and indeterminate is inconceivable;

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it is the negative of the concept, and its conceptual character is to be this negative, since it is only a one-sided abstraction which makes up only one moment of the concept. (VPR 3, 213/288)  

The God of the understanding may be called the “simple, eternal essence,” as Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but we see with reason that “simple essence is absolute difference from itself, or its pure other of itself.” (PG, 500§769) Without this differentiation, essence is only the “abstract void,” the “empty word.” (PG, 501§771) Moreover, the attributes of this abstract God are themselves abstractions. God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, traditional theology says, which then must tie itself in knots of specious theodicy to explain why, for example, a perfectly good and powerful Gog could permit evil. The speculative philosopher, Hegel, says, does away with all of this, “When we speak of God in order to say what he is, it is customary to make use of attributes: God is thus and so; he is defined by predicates. This is the method of representation and understanding.” (VPR 3, 202/277) But these predicates, like “omnipresence and omniscience,” “fall into opposition and contradiction with each other.” Accordingly, Hegel continues, “the predicates do not compromise the true relation of God to himself.” (VPR 3, 202/277) “Spirit,” Hegel says, “abandons its own simple unitary nature and rigid unchangeableness.” (PG, 513§786) Of course, “love” is precisely one of these attributes when considered in terms of the understanding. But “love” when grasped with speculative reason, will come to be the solution to the antinomies of the understanding.

The God of the understanding, left on its own, not only contradicts itself but, when considered carefully, as Hegel does, evaporates into thin air. The British romantic poet William Blake, making a similar point much more forcefully, calls this God “Nobodaddy”⁵, and Nietzsche famously says, “Instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yea! In him war is declared on life, on nature, on the will to live! God becomes the formula for every slander upon the “here and now,” and for every lie about the “beyond”! In him nothingness is defied, and the will to nothingness is made holy!”⁶ Hegel in effect agrees that the traditional Christian God is vulnerable to these criticisms and, indeed, mounts a not so subtle one himself. While we do  

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not know precisely Hegel’s views on this matter, it is possible to interpret Hegel has claiming that it is not only Jesus who dies at the crucifixion, but also the abstract God of the understanding. Hegel is fond of citing the Lutheran hymn of Johannes Rist, “O Trauring, O Herzeleid” that “God himself is dead.” (VPR 3, 249/326) In each of the four lecture series, in Faith and Knowledge and in the Phenomenology Hegel cites Rist’s hymn and speaks of the terrible feeling that God himself is dead. Moreover, he states in the Phenomenology, “The death of this picture thought contains, therefore, at the same time the death of the abstraction of the divine Being which is not posited as Self. That death is the painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that God Himself is dead.” (PG, 512/§785) Or again, in and through the death of the mediator, “Substance becomes subject, by which its abstraction and lifelessness have died, and Substance thereby has become actual and simple and universal self-consciousness.” (PG, 512–13/§785) However, it is especially in the 1831 lectures that Hegel seems to suggest that God of the understanding himself dies and that, indeed, the resurrection is that of the Holy Spirit in the human community, “The abstraction of the Father is given up in the Son—this then is death. But the negation of this negation is the unity of Father and Son—love, or the Spirit.” (VPR 3, 286–87/370) As Hegel puts it in the Phenomenology, the “externalization” (Entäusserung) of Spirit is the only way for Spirit to be. These externalizations are how God appears at all, and “without which he would be lifeless and alone” (PG, 531/§808), or, more accurately, this abstract God is “dead and cannot be known.” (PG, 502/§771)

Hegel is treading a thin line here. He wants to defend rational philosophy and Christianity from, on the one hand, the romantic attack on reason by authors like Frederich Schleiermacher as well as from, on the other hand, conservative theologians like Tholuck. This means that Hegel simultaneously attacks orthodox Christianity on a whole series of fronts while rigorously defending a new Christianity in the light of the categories of speculative philosophy. So how does the “concrete” God of reason and of the “good infinite” save God not only from the German romantics and pious theologians, but also from more trenchant future critics like Marx and Nietzsche? Hegel does this by resurrecting God, but as a God that contains negation, finitude, and death within itself.

For Hegel, then, suffering and death are not just the fate of Jesus, but characteristics of Spirit itself. This is also why God is not merely substance, as in Spinoza, but subject,

The vitality of God or of spirit is nothing other than a self-determining...(which involves) distinction and contradiction, but
is] at the same time an eternal sublating of this contradiction. This is the life, the deed, the activity of God; he is absolute activity, creative energy [Aktuosität], and this activity is to posit himself in contradiction, but eternally to resolve and reconcile this contradiction: God himself is the resolving of these contradictions. (VPR 3, 196/270–71)

God is self-transcending, self-sublating activity, a self-elaboration. This means that God is continual self-differentiation and self-creation. The revealing of God thus

refers to the primal division of infinite subjectivity or infinite form; it means determining oneself to be for an other.... It is said that God has created the world and has revealed himself. This is spoken of as something he did once.... But it is the essence of God as spirit to be for an other, i.e., to reveal himself. He does not create the world once and for all, but is the eternal creator, the eternal act of self-revelation. This actus is what he is; this is his concept, his definition. (VPR 3, 105/170)

Yet if this is so, the statement “God is love” is not merely an edifying notion likely to promote certainty in the believer, not merely an elaboration of God’s goodness, but is a sound philosophical claim about the nature of spirit itself. Since God sublates finitude and death, this means, as we have seen, that they are internal to God. Moreover, through the interrelation of all finites, God thus relates to himself. Each finite is both itself and its other. A fortiori, God is the self-dirempting being that only is in and through the self-relating of the finites within the totality that God animates. Yet this is the logical structure of love. “When we say ‘God is love,’” Hegel explains, “we are saying something very great and true.... For love is a distinguishing of two, who nevertheless are absolutely not distinguished for each other.... This is love, and without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of distinction, one speaks emptily of it. This is the simple eternal idea.” (VPR 3, 201–202/276) Of course, it is impossible here to fully justify this claim, which amounts in its completion to nothing less than the explication of Hegel’s complete system of philosophy. And yet the core idea that God is love is essentially plausible. If being is self-differentiating, then each individual being shares an identity with any other. To “know this” is to understand the Absolute Idea. And yet, Hegel shows in the Science of Logic that the Idea is the unity of the “idea of the true” and the “idea of the good.” To love, then, is to fulfill the highest good of finding one’s identity only in and through others.
If it is the case that the God as totality is best understood as reason or as love, then this means that each finite being, and especially each human being, has as his or her own proper identity, the identity of others and, indeed, of all others. It should then be the case that the human journey is itself a pilgrimage toward the God that is love—a pilgrimage the essence of which is to realize one’s own full powers to love. Let us now turn to that pilgrimage.

The Pilgrimage to God through Love

We have seen that “God is love,” and that this is not merely an edifying representation that would provoke certainty in the believer, but a philosophically plausible claim to the truth. This is because Spirit is its own self-differentiation—it is self-othering. If it were to be the case that this process of differentiation arose only as forms of unself-conscious nature then the self-differentiating character of Spirit would remain forever implicit. However, its self-differentiation includes the emergence not only of finitude but also self-consciousness finitude. This means there is an opportunity for the implicitly self-differentiating unity of Spirit to become explicit or self-conscious. This self-consciousness is love or, equally, reason, for it is explicitly aware that its own being and that of all reality is self-differentiating, self-determination. Moreover, it knows that the fulfillment of one is equally the fulfillment of the other. Hegel thus says, “The freedom of self-consciousness is the content of religion, and this content is itself the object of the Christian religion, i.e., Spirit is its own object.” (VPR 3, 100/165) But since, (a) there is no a priori, fully-formed and separate God—God is itself a self-becoming, and (b) it is only human self-consciousness that can make explicit that God is reason/love, then (c) God only becomes love, only becomes fully God-self in and through the realization of human reason and human love. This is why the Holy Spirit sublates God the Son and God the Father. The journey of the pilgrim self-consciousness to God thus is not to come to recognize that which was always already there, but to fully actualize God by fully actualizing itself. Hegel cites Goethe approvingly in speaking of God as love, such that the “consciousness of the One is to be had only in the consciousness of the other. God is conscious of himself, Goethe says, only in the other, in absolute externalization.” (VPR 3, 126/193) This gives new speculative meaning to the statement of John, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:12) Its most appropriate literary form is thus not “odyssey,” for it is not returning to a lost home, but pilgrimage, such as in Dante’s Divine Comedy. Let us follow
some of the steps of this pilgrimage, but first identify Hegel's general conception of the self.

Hegel's notion of the human person is one of active self-transcendence—we seek to objectify ourselves in the outside world and at the same time change our nature. "[N]o human being is satisfied with a bare selfhood; the I is active, and this activity is a self-objectifying, the giving of actuality and determinate being to oneself." (VPR 1, 327/438) Love and union are foreshadowed here precisely because self-objectification requires that the human being only find her true self outside of herself.

Self-objectification generates a kind of "active concept." While the understanding contents itself with the simple oppositions, reason knows the "concept" (Begriff). The activity of the concept, Hegel says,

is what we call drive. Every satisfaction of a drive is for the I this process of sublating subjectivity, and thus positing its subjective or inner being as something likewise external, objective and real; it is the process of bringing forth the unity of what is only subjective with the objective, of stripping away this one-sidedness from both of them. When I have a drive, that is a condition of deficiency, something subjective. The satisfaction of the drive procures for me my feeling of self.... The striving must come into existence. (VPR 1, 327-28/438-39)

In a very real way, therefore, our striving has its fullest form in the striving for God, and the ultimate satisfaction of this striving is fulfilled only in love.

Of course we human beings must learn this, and learn it through a process of self-transformation that is often anguishing. The self-affirmation we gain by transforming nature into expressions of our own will will ultimately only be satisfying by a kind of inversion—a self-affirmation achieved only in and through anguishing self-negation. In earlier forms of striving and desire, of course, there is as yet no sign of this inversion. "The first will is the natural will; the will...of desire." (VPR 3, 39–40/103) The form of desire may well be "the infinite form of cognition. But [its] immediate content [is to have] singularity and self-seeking as its goal." (Ibid.) Hegel is blunt, "Willing what is natural is, more precisely defined, evil. [It is] the willing of separation, the setting of one's singularity against others." (VPR 3, 38/102) The natural, immediate human being is evil not because he or she is self-consciously and purposefully struggling against the good, but merely because it is our characteristic that we "ought" to transcend our natural being. "This has been expressed by saying that human beings are evil by nature, i.e., they ought not be
the way they immediately are; hence they are as they ought not to be.” (VPR 3, 134/202) To put this another way, qua merely finite spirit, we do “not have genuine existence.” (VPR 3, 147/214)

In the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion Hegel jumps straight from the “natural will” to “The second moment...the elevation of spirit out of natural will, out of evil, out of the willing of singular selfishness, out of every type of restriction whatsoever.” (VPR 3, 45/109) Obviously, there are many important stages between the natural to this “universal” will, an issue that the Phenomenology of Spirit addresses, but it is worthwhile to focus on one that is particularly important. In the Phenomenology Hegel claims that the encounter with the other human being is precisely what affords the opportunity of transcending natural will. While this encounter can produce either a struggle to the death or the unequal recognition of mastery and slavery, it can also give rise to fully mutual recognition. However, this is so if and only if each self “effects the negation within itself.” (PG, §175) That is, each self must transform its natural desire in favour of cooperation, “On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it is.... Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.” (PG, §175) Herein we see the essential, though not the final, structure of love, “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another.” (PG, §178) The demands of encountering others offer us the opportunity to transcend our natural desire, to “effect the negation” ourselves and to commit ourselves to cooperative activity. Note here, however, that this is not an act of self-sacrifice. Desire is not repressed, but is transformed because it learns that its only satisfaction comes in cooperative engagement with others. The self does not abolish itself to become one with another—that is the logic of slavery—rather, it fulfills itself when it learns that its highest form of selfhood is the “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and the ‘We’ that is ‘I.’” (PG, §177) This dynamic will turn out to be decisive in our understanding of love in its highest form.

This ascent, however, is not the straightforward march toward the divine the likes of which one finds, for example, in Plato’s Symposium. Again, like in the Divine Comedy, one must first move farther from God before moving closer. In one sense it is right to say the human being in his or her naïve, “natural state,” is farthest from God—after all it is an “evil” that we “ought” to transcend. However, in another very important sense it is the very cultivation of the
human will that draws it into a far deeper alienation [Entfremdung] or cleavage from God. This is not something that Hegel had realized when he wrote *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* in 1796, in which the “fate” of love is lost and then again found. The greatest wound in spirit is carried out by the free will itself not because it loses itself somehow, but because its own self-development leads it to challenge God. This is because as human powers develop themselves we sunder an original, naïve unity to the point that when thought develops itself and becomes autonomous “it attacks the content of God too, requiring that it must stand the test of thought.” (VPR 3, 289/374) This is the abstract thought of the Enlightenment, “the vanity of the understanding.” Speculative philosophy intervenes, such that reason sublates understanding and a kind of reconciliation is achieved, the lineaments of which we have already begun to see. (VPR 3, 265/69/343–47) The will must then come to see that this alienation can be overcome when it recognizes the nothingness of itself and of all of its cares and concerns and is reconciled with God in “love,” “forgetfulness” and “bliss.” This recognition of nothingness allows the self to be fully one with otherness and this, of course, is love in the fullest sense of the term. In this transformation into love, the will “wins itself back,” but in a new and transfigured form: “[T]he divine principle of turning, of return to self, is equally present in cognition; it gives the wound and heals it, [because] the principle is spirit and is true.” (VPR 3, 40/103)

The self that has transcended natural desire, and its “vanity of the understanding” still expresses a drive and it is therefore still very much “concept,” albeit in a higher form. In so doing it heals the wound that it has itself caused. The highest object of this drive now must ultimately become, “God as spirit, who is infinite subjectivity, infinite determinacy within himself, is both the absolute truth and the absolute goal of the will.” (VPR 3, 45/109) Of course we have just seen that God is love, because God sustains “infinite determinacy within himself” as one. God is love because God is the identity of all determinate identities and differences. Equally, then, God is reason (*Vernunft*), whereas the understanding (*Verstand*) cannot get beyond differentiated identities. Only reason can sustain identity in and through its own self-differentiation. We have also seen that the self realizes identities with others in and through mutual recognition. Many Christian accounts of the pilgrimage of the soul thus take a path that sounds similar to the one emerging here in Hegel—the transcendence of natural will towards what seems like a moral attitude to “love thy neighbour” in mutual recognition followed
thereupon by the imperative to love God. This is only partly true for Hegel.

If, prior to the consummate religion (or in lower forms of the consummate religion) the holy is a mysterious beyond that is radically separate from the world of ethical life, the central message of Christianity for Hegel is neither some kind of “monkish withdrawal” nor a regime of “servitude” to a church which “ought to prevail over...the worldly realm” (VPR 3, 263–64/340–41), but the recognition of divine truth in all worldly existence, but especially in the highest forms of worldly existence. The highest way in which the “contradiction” of worldly and divine is resolved is the “ethical realm, or that the principle of freedom has penetrated into the worldly realm itself, and the worldly, because it has been thus confirmed to the concept, reason, and eternal truth, is freedom that has become concrete and will that is rational. The institutions of ethical life are divine institutions.” (VPR 3, 264/341–42) Hegel expresses this eloquently apropos of romantic art, which “strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes Humanus its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds and fates.”

Specifically, human ethical action expresses itself in duties to the three “divine intuitions” of a fully free society: family, civil society and state. Moreover, one’s engagement with these realms can never be reduced to the formalisms of individual personhood, abstract rational morality or conscience, but is realized only in the very concrete demands of the really existing family in which one finds familial love, the really existing civil society in which one expresses one’s individuality, makes a living and shares in the corporate, communal life of those in the same trade, and the really existing state in which one is oriented as a responsible citizen to the concrete, universal good of the whole society.

In the love one has for this world one is oriented to the particular—my family, my personal life in civil society, my state. We see here the importance of the transfiguration embodied in the good infinite. Love as an abstract universal is empty and inefficacious. The

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8 Hegel criticizes these abstract, personal forms of morality in many of his writings, but especially in the Phenomenology of Spirit in the chapters on “Reason” (Ch. V, especially Section C, “Individuality which takes itself to be real in and for itself”) and the “Culture” and “Morality” sections of Chapter Six, “Spirit” (Section B and C respectively) and in the Philosophy of Right, Part II.
most important ethical duty of the Christian is “Love your neighbour.” Hegel doesn’t mince words,

In its abstract, more extensive connotation, as love of humankind in general, [this commandment] prescribes the love of all humanity—and thus it becomes a lame abstraction. The human beings whom one can love are a few particular individuals. The heart that seeks to embrace the whole of humanity within itself indulges in a vain attempt to spread out its love until it becomes a mere pretense (Vorstellung), the very opposite of what love is. (VPR 3, 53/118)

And again, “love is made the principal commandment—not an impotent love of humanity in general but the mutual love of the community.” (VPR 3, 150/218)

Not surprisingly, the family member and citizen of a free society who is free in the fullest sense has renounced his or her natural will. The practice of worship in a community of faith, the cultus, is essential for this. Hegel says that in the cultus (and I will quote at length)

[one] lays aside one’s subjectivity—not only practices renunciation in external things such as possessions, but offers one’s heart or inmost self to God and senses remorse and repentance in this inmost self; then one is conscious of one’s own immediate natural state (which subsists in the passions and intentions of particularity), so that one dismisses these things, purifies one’s heart, and through this purification raises oneself up to the realm of the purely spiritual. This experience of nothingness can be a bare condition or single experience, or it can be thoroughly elaborated in one’s life. If heart and will are earnestly and thoroughly cultivated for the universal and the true, then there is present what appears as ethical life. To that extent ethical life is the most genuine cultus. But consciousness of the true, of the divine, of God, must be directly bound up with it....The negation of one’s specific subjectivity is an essential and necessary moment. (VPR I, 334–35/446–47)

Herein, Hegel is making a distinction between one’s mere particularity, one’s self-interest in the narrow sense, and the particularity embodied in ethical life, for “ethical life is the most genuine cultus.” When I give myself over wholeheartedly to the needs of family, civil society and state themselves, rather than adopting an attitude toward them that is utilitarian and thus self-oriented, then I am engaging in a drive, a self-objectification that fulfills me and them at the same time. Of this utilitarian attitude that is self-interested we must
repent, see it as “nothing,” and give ourselves over to the ever-changing world of ethical life.

Yet the commitment to ethical life is still only the penultimate form of love. Just as the loving self must engage wholeheartedly in the particularity of family, civil society and state, he or she must, paradoxically it might seem, also recognize, through anguish, that they are not enough, for “this religion entails a rocklike stability and a surrendering of this stability.” (VPR 3, 72/136) The very commitment to ethical life is to also anticipate in anguish their death—not just of the individuals within them but perhaps even the institutions themselves. “The community is a process of eternal becoming.” (VPR 3, 163/233) In so doing we find the “infinite love that exists only as infinite anguish, as the death of everything worldly and immediate.” (VPR 3, 73/137) We feel anguish precisely because we love that which we must also transcend. We do not renounce particular loves, but see them through the light of death, anguish and thus a higher love:

[T]he infinite love that comes from infinite anguish [unendlichem Schmerz], comes from the worthlessness of particularity and the mediation of love through it. Of course the love of a man for a woman and friendship can occur, but they are essentially defined as subordinate, not as something evil but as something imperfect, not as something indifferent but essentially as [a state in which we are] not to remain; they themselves are to be sacrificed in order that they may do [no] injury to that absolute direction and unity. (VPR 3, 75/139)

And again, Hegel says, “Spirit is the absolute power to endure this anguish, i.e., to unite the two and to be in this way, in this oneness. Thus the anguish itself verifies the appearance of God.” (VPR 3, 146–7/215)

It is only in this light that we can understand when Hegel says that in God “spirit frees itself from all finitude” such that “finite life seems like a desert,” and “Everything earthly dissolves into light and love.” When we let go of our worldly commitments we fully admit to ourselves that they will die. This does not lead to despair, but to bliss:

If our concern with it is a feeling then it is bliss (Glückseligkeit), and if an activity then it has to manifest God’s glory and majesty.... Everywhere this concern is regarded as the Sabbath of life. Truly in this region of the spirit flow the waters of forgetfulness from which the soul drinks. All the griefs of this bank and shoal of
life vanish away in this aether, whether in the feeling of devotion or of hope. All of it drops into the past. In religion all cares pass away, for in it one finds oneself fortunate. All harshness of fate passes into a dream. Everything earthly dissolves into light and love, not a remote but an actually present liveliness, certainty, and enjoyment. (VPR 1, 61–62/150)

To take up the point of view of the infinite is to see my life and that of my community as both rational and necessary, but also as temporary and mortal. If we fully identify with finitude then we inevitably cling to our lives, the lives of other people and the institutions in which we live and thrive. However, if we adopt an infinite stance we take joy in the “gallery of images,” “the realm of spirits foaming forth,” and know that their death is part of their exuberance.

But why is this “nothing,” when it should, perhaps, be “everything”? Is not this making “nothing” of our lives the kind of denial of life of which Nietzsche eloquently complains? Yet we must realize that this “nothing” is the same as that which we find in the dialectic of being and nothing at the beginning of the Science of Logic. Until declaring the nothingness of our lives and loves we have been enjoying their being—the fact that they are. But being is not “first philosophy” for Hegel. As soon as we posit being it slips into nothing and then forthwith into becoming. The affirmation of myself or of ethical life is the affirmation of being—and yet they are finite, and always slipping into nothing. “The difficulty...stems solely from clinging to the ‘is’ and forgetting the thinking of the Notions in which the moments just as much are as they are not—are only the movement which is Spirit.” (PG, 509/§780) The absolute in Hegel is not the coming to a final resting place, it is the point at which one recognizes finally that the only “stable” reality with which one can identify oneself is in fact a becoming. As we have already seen, both God and the community are “eternal becoming.”

So why then does he talk about forgetfulness? This stance of bliss allows us to forget the rocks and shoals, the worries and concerns—for these too are not ultimate things. They come with the territory of finitude and thus as assuredly pass as do our joys. Of course Hegel himself has felt the pain of watching noble civilizations, like ancient Greece, be destroyed. In one of his most important passages he says, in the Philosophy of History,

Without rhetorical exaggeration, a simply truthful combination of the miseries that have overwhelmed the noblest of nations and polities, and the finest exemplars of private virtue—forms a picture of most fearful aspect, and excites emotions of the profound-
est and most hopeless sadness, counterbalanced by no consolatory result...we retreat into the selfishness that stands on the quiet shore, and thence enjoy in safety the distant spectacle of ‘wrecks confusedly hurled.’ But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized—the question involuntarily arises—to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered.9

But this “quiet shore” is it not a kind of stoicism, a place of a pure “I” that watches finitude be born and die from a detached point of view? No, it certainly draws on the resources of stoicism for its sense of detachment, but it is the philosophical standpoint. One only gets to this absolute standpoint by living one’s ethical life fully and thus also by experiencing the anguish of death and loss. It is not detachment from life and death but their sublation. The comprehension of the historical process, which is itself a journey of spirit like that of the pilgrimage we have followed here, allows us to recognize that there has been a purposefulness to history—the realization of human freedom as love. This stance is thankful, blissful and appreciative, for it is united with the God of love. The universal no longer stands over and above the person, who “experiences the joy of finding itself therein, and becomes aware of the reconciliation of its individuality with the universal.” (PG, 146/§210) It is from this quiet shore that one can perceive that “from the chalice of this realm of spirits/foams forth for Him his own infinitude.” (PG, 531/§808)

Conclusion

In his youthful The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate, Hegel defends a utopian notion of love and community, from which humanity has fallen and towards which Jesus bids us to return. From this point of view the dualism of inclination and Kantian duty is not sublated, but precluded. This is love without the “labour of the negative,” without the necessary alienation that Hegel soon would see was a necessary condition for the full development of spirit. The Spirit of Christianity

is too insightful a text to be “mere edification,” let alone “insipid,” but Hegel’s mature philosophy comes face to face with alienation, cleavage and anguish, with the rending asunder of Besondere [particularity]. Hegel’s pilgrimage is fraught with hardship. It is, after all, “the pathway of doubt... the way of despair.” (PG, 61/§78) But Hegel’s position is not exactly the same, for example, as Simone de Beauvoir’s. He acknowledges the intractable “ambiguities” of human life, and yet to acknowledge them is always to be, in a very important sense, beyond them. When Hegel says that, “Spirit is the bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk; which is at once infinite movement and infinite repose” (PG, 47–48/27–28), the last word goes not to Euripides, but to the bliss of agape, to the joy of recognizing that God is love. For all its trials, Hegel’s pilgrimage is not tragedy, but a divine comedy. Despite the talk of the “speculative Good Friday”\(^{10}\) and the “Golgotha of the Spirit” (PG, 531/§808), and despite his criticisms of orthodox Christianity, Hegel’s is emphatically an Easter philosophy.

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