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Strandberg, Hugo; Arndt, Andreas; Gerhard, Myriam; Zovko, Jure

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Hugo Strandberg, Turku

Is it Possible to Sublate Religion?

The possibility of sublating religion is central as to the possibility and meaning of the systematic position. But not only is what is involved in this transition diverse, its possibility is also rather complicated, in the sense that it is neither straightforwardly possible nor straightforwardly impossible. This is in any case what I will try to show.

1

The sublation of religion is, as we will see, complex. One of its elements is the allegedly alienating character of religion, its inability to offer reconciliation. This view of religion first comes to the fore in the section on unhappy consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, but it also motivates the later need for sublating religion. Hegel writes:

[consciousness's] satisfaction thus itself remains marred by the antithesis of a beyond. Its own reconciliation therefore enters its consciousness as something *distant*, as something of the distant *future* [...] What enters its consciousness as the *in-itself* or the side of *pure mediation*, is the reconciliation lying in the beyond; but what as *present*, as the side of *immediacy* and of *existence*, is the world, which still has to await its transfiguration.¹

But according to the introduction to the *Phenomenology*, the philosopher does not introduce any external criteria, but merely observes and describes the movements which actually take and have taken place, thereby making explicit how the various assumptions are in fact destabilized, modified, and abandoned, and where the movement finally ends up.² So is Hegel here doing what he said he would be doing? There are of course people who have abandoned religion, explaining their motivation in the above terms or other similar ones. But there are also people who are at least apparently reconciled in their religion and who claim a satisfaction that is not only limited. People react differently to the situations they are in; the result of an inner conflict is not always the same, but people resolve them in different ways and go in different directions, and what someone sees as a problem may not be perceived as such by someone else.³ The one party could certainly describe the other as involved in self-deception, and Hegel uses such phrases on some occasions in the *Phenomenology*, e. g. when he refers to „the life which is afraid of death and keeps itself clear of devastation“⁴ or when he says that „[a]t the feeling of this violence, anxiety, in front of truth, may withdraw and strive to preserve for itself that the loss of which is imminent.“⁵ But if

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Werke vol. 3, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 574. All translations in this paper from works not originally written in English are mine.

2 See *ibid.*, 74–78.

3 Someone might see this possibility of diverse reactions as a problem, something that shows that reconciliation has not been attained, regardless of the exact nature of the different reactions. But as I read the *Phenomenology*, Hegel turns against precisely this way of understanding our lives together. All the problems in chapter 6 are a result of the idea that community means unity, and the problem is consequently solved, not by means of unity, but by means of forgiveness, that is, when the craving for unity is given up.

4 Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 36.

5 *Ibid.*, 74–75. See also G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion I*, Werke vol. 16, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 56.

one bases one's criticism on such phrases, one is doing precisely what Hegel said should not be done: introducing external criteria. The point is not only that the fact of someone's self-deception needs to be shown; the point is that it is that person herself who must realize this and that our task as philosophers is only to describe her own realization. In other words, the sublation of religion cannot be an external *criticism* of religion, but must be the result of a development that actually takes place in the believer. At most we could say that these are the terms in which religion will be sublated, not that it is so sublated; but such a prediction is not a phenomenological description. Absolute knowledge is only absolute if it is uncontroversial.⁶

(That there are people who say they are reconciled in their religion does not only mean that the kind of „two worlds theory“ – this world and the beyond – to which Hegel points above does not need to characterize religion; more interestingly, it means that that kind of thinking could be claimed to be of a positive, reconciliatory, character. The point is not, to be sure, that these „two worlds“ do not have anything to do with each other. Rather, the point concerns the richness of transcendence in comparison with strict immanence. If transcendence can on the one hand mean the closing of the world, the finitization of it when related to the infinite, transcendence can on the other hand mean the opening of the world, just as the other person, or the future, can on the one hand be seen as something I cannot control and hence as threatening, on the other hand as what exceeds my power of imagination and hence as surprising. Waiting for what is to come is not meaningless in itself, so that its point would only become present once it finally arrives. Rather, waiting can have its own kind of joy; waiting and that which one is waiting for are then really not that different.)

In fact, Hegel seems to realize that absolute knowledge cannot be the result of criticism, for later on this element in the sublation of religion vanishes.⁷ On the contrary, Hegel writes:

But this position of separation is not what is truthful, but what knows itself as empty and therefore must be sublated [...]. This *unity, reconciliation*, restoration of the subject and its self-consciousness, the positive feeling of sharing, of participation in the absolute [...] this sublation of bifurcation, constitute the sphere of worship.⁸

2

Another element in the sublation of religion is that there is a truth to religion which it is not able to articulate on its own, a truth that only becomes evident when elevated into the absolute form. This truth is that the content of religion is not really about an external object, God; in fact, religion is self-knowledge:

In it [absolute religion] the being is known as spirit, or it is the being's consciousness about itself that it is spirit. For spirit is knowledge of itself in its externalization [...] Spirit is known as self-consciousness and is immediately evident to it, for it is self-consciousness itself; the divine nature is the same as the human, and it is this unity that is intuited.⁹

⁶ Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, Werke vol. 8, Frankfurt/Main 1986, § 22 Z.

⁷ See esp. G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III*, Werke 10, Frankfurt/Main 1986, § 566.

⁸ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion I*, 71–72. See also G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Werke 12, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 495.

⁹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 552–553. This is connected to Hegel's understanding of and emphasis on infinity, an issue I will not take up for discussion in this paper; see e. g. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*, Werke 17, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 187–190.

In fact, these are two rather different points: first, that religion in general is self-knowledge, in that it is about me and us, second, that in one form of religion, manifest religion, the former fact has not only become evident, but has become evident in the sense that this religion is about self-knowledge. Since the second point depends on the first, it is the first that I will deal with here, even if these forms of religion are a few steps away from the sublation of religion.

That religion is self-knowledge might appear just as problematic as the claim that religion is intrinsically alienating. Of course, one could read it as in line with the general realization that knowledge is or at least always contains an important element of self-knowledge: „The truth of consciousness is *self-consciousness* and the latter the basis of the former, so that in existence all consciousness of another object is self-consciousness; I know of the object as mine (it is my representation), I thus therein know of me“.¹⁰ This would mean that there is nothing special to the sublation of *religion*, it is just an application of this general point to this particular case. But of course this is not all there is to it. A crude expression of the idea that religion is about me and us is this one:

The dwellings and halls of the god are for the use of man, the treasures which are kept in them are his in case of need; the honor, which the god enjoys in his adornments, is the honor of the people, rich in art and generous. At the festival, the people adorns its own dwellings and garments, as well as its services, with elegant things. In this way it receives a return from the thankful god for its gifts and proofs of his benevolence¹¹

What Hegel is saying here is however less criticizable than might at first appear. Of course, if you are a member of such a people, you will not explain what you are doing in Hegel's terms, and if you try to understand what they are doing as an outsider, you cannot bypass their explanations as irrelevant, for what they think they are doing is part of what they are doing.¹² But if what you are trying to express is what you imagine you might say as an outsider were you to take part in the rite, this would, I guess, be what you would be saying. Furthermore, as an outsider you could describe what this people is doing as something with a definite form, thereby drawing a boundary between it and other forms (as *different ways* of expressing your sense of life, or as *different senses* of life). But as a member of the people, this is not possible to say definitely, for it is you who are part of the shaping of that very form. For example, pointing to rules that are more or less agreed upon is only partially successful, for in the end it is you who are part of the shaping of the meaning, relevance, and binding power of these rules. This is so also in an authoritarian setting, for the shaping of the forms of acceptance of this authority is something you inevitably take part in.¹³ In this sense Hegel is completely right when he says that „the owl of Minerva does not begin its flight until dusk“, i. e. that philosophy „does not appear until that day when reality has completed its process of formation and gone to its end“, when „a form of life has grown old“.¹⁴ The reason for this is not that it is difficult to describe a form of life while living it, but because there is then nothing to describe. Folk music is a good example. As long as this was a living form of music, it was not a genre, but the kind of music people made; as a genre, with rules that determine what does or does not belong to it, indeed even as a term, it emerges only once the need is felt to preserve a dying kind of music. But this means that the terms in which a particular form of life, say a form of religion, is described, are the terms in which it can be described once it has been sublated, but not the terms in which

¹⁰ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, § 424.

¹¹ Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 524–525. This is connected to the last quote by the idea that there is something defective to any knowledge in which the element of self-knowledge is not made explicit (ibid., 504): „For the represented ceases to be represented and alien to its knowledge only by the self having produced it and so sees the determination of the object as its own, thus sees itself in it“

¹² This, in fact rather Hegelian, point, is forcefully made by Peter Winch. See Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*, London, 1990, e. g. 87.

¹³ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, New York, 1972, 149.

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Werke 7, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 28.

the sublation itself occurs. If the philosopher understands religion *post festum* as an attempt at, or expression of, self-knowledge, this is precisely just a *post festum* understanding. The understanding of the philosopher is not the understanding of the believer, not because the believer has a different, competing understanding, but because she does not have that kind of understanding at all. What her belief is to her is not settled, but is shaped in her very believing.

In fact, Hegel himself ultimately distances himself from the idea of reducing religion to self-knowledge:

If religion were really only to be understood as a relation from us to God, an independent being of God would not be admitted; *God would only be in religion*, something *posited*, produced by us. However, the expression just used and criticized, that *God is only in religion*, also has the great and true sense that it belongs to the nature of God, in his complete independence, being in and for himself, to be *for the spirit* of man, to communicate himself to him; this sense is a quite different one than the one was just pointed out, in which God is only a postulate, a belief. God is and gives himself in relation to man.¹⁵

3

The former two elements of the sublation of religion – religion as intrinsically alienating and religion as self-knowledge – have now proved not to be the terms in which the sublation occurs; at the most, they are the way sublation comes to be described once it has already occurred. When trying to understand the sublation of religion, we must therefore turn to another of its elements, namely to Hegel's distinction between representation (*Vorstellung*) and concept (*Begriff*).

Hegel writes:

For philosophy can certainly perceive [...] its own content in the religious content and let justice be done to it, but not vice versa, for the religious mode of representation does not apply the criticism of thought to itself and does not comprehend [*sich nicht begreift*] itself, is thus excluding in its immediacy.¹⁶

The point here is that although the religious content is true, it is not able to understand its relations to other contents; by automatically seeing itself as excluding them, religion is not able to tell whether this is really so or not.

This might seem to be a very strange way of picturing religion. Since all determination is negation,¹⁷ the passage just cited suggest that religion is totally in the dark about what it is saying. Could this really be the case? But in fact, what Hegel says here sheds much light on how he understands the concept of religion. Religion basically consists of dogmas and also includes actions and feelings to the extent these have a doctrinal character.¹⁸ To the extent these dogmas (and actions and feelings) are understood, however rudimentary that understanding might be, that understanding comes from outside. This means that one can only speak about religion in that way

¹⁵ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*, 382–383.

¹⁶ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, § 573 A. See also e. g. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*, Werke 13, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 143–144.

¹⁷ See e. g. G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik I*, Werke 5, Frankfurt/Main 1986, 121.

¹⁸ See e. g. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, 24, Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion I*, 35, Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*, 199–200.

in abstraction; in practice, it is always somewhat determinate, which means that there is always an element of thought to it.¹⁹ In other words, religion is always to some extent sublated.

This is not a criticism of Hegel. On the contrary, what I said above goes in the same direction. As a believer, you cannot simply refer to the dogmas, as if they were able to tell, on their own, how they should be understood; on the contrary, it is you as a believer who are part of the shaping of the meaning, relevance, and possible binding power of these dogmas. What your belief is to you is not settled, but is shaped in your very believing. If there is anything in the form of religion which is not true, it would be the belief that the content of a dogma is settled on its own, that what is settled is not only a specific manner of speaking.

For the believer, there is thus a question about how her belief is related to other things – other things she believes, other questions she asks, other things she does, other people she meets, with thoughts, beliefs and ways of acting of their own – or, differently put, about the meaning of her belief. Does this mean that she feels a need for sublating religion, substituting philosophical, *begriffliches* thinking for it? Yes and no. As I have already said, religion is, in fact, always somewhat sublated. On the one hand, this means that there is always a need of thinking about the meaning of the belief. But on the other hand, it means that this need already characterizes religion, that its sublation does not occur in favor of something *different*. To the believer, thinking about the relation of her belief to other things, about its meaning, is not independent of her belief: she may see it as a religious task and question, she may see the question about her relation to God as part of that relation. The difficulty of determining the relation between philosophy and religious belief thus consists in the fact that religious belief is not only a set of dogmas (and accompanying actions and feelings), but also a way of thinking which otherwise is described as philosophical.

This thinking is hence *about* religion, but at the same time done *within* it. That this thinking is done within religion means that there is after all something to the connection between religion and self-knowledge, for at the same time as the above kind of thinking could be described as concerning the relation of religious belief to my life in general and the meaning of the belief, it could just as well be described as concerning my life and the meaning of it. But that this thinking is done within religion, does this not mean that it is still limited, that there is some dogma that thinking avoids touching?²⁰ Well, as soon as you try to formulate which dogma this is, it becomes clear that this is not the case. Seeing yourself as a religious reformer is one possibility. Then there will not be many of the established forms of the religious tradition to which you belong that you will leave untouched. Furthermore, the relations between concepts such as „orthodoxy“ and „traditional Christianity“ and other ones are not automatically clear, but are shaped by the believer’s way of using them, as we saw above. What „orthodoxy“ and „tradition“ mean is thus not settled on its own. Here it might be tempting to say that there is after all some essence to religion, which the believer avoids touching to the extent that her thinking is done within religion: belief in a god. But what makes this essential and immune to reformation and historical change as long as one remains within religion, is its abstract, indeterminate character. As soon as one tries to explain what „belief in a god“ means, one will either come up with something which is no longer an uncontroversial religious content, or with something which is as indeterminate as what one was trying to explain. „The belief that a supernatural being exists“ could, in fact, be an example of both possibilities. So for the believer, the attempt at getting a clear understanding of what her belief means, even at this level, could be seen as a religious task and question. „Atheism“, as normally understood, is then not even a possibility: what it denies is either merely an abstract phrase, not clear to anyone, which means that it could not even be denied, or something which is also controversial within religion.

¹⁹ In fact, Hegel explicitly says this, in various contexts and with somewhat different imports. See e. g. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, §§ 2 A, 12 A, 20 A; Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion I*, 126; G. W. F. Hegel, *Die Vernunft in die Geschichte*, Hamburg, 1955, 43–44.

²⁰ For such an objection, cf. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion I*, 147, 217.

4

In other words, to identify philosophy with thinking and religion with representation is right only to the extent one sees religion merely as content, not also as thinking. In practice, there are already systematic attempts to religion, to the extent the believer relates her belief to the rest of her life. Understood in this way, the sublation of religion and the attainment of the systematic position is not the result of a criticism of religion, but of the accentuation of something which is already there in the life of the believer. And, as Hegel says, the position is not even a position, but movement: „Spirit is not a resting one, but rather absolute restlessness, pure activity“²¹ This is clearly the case, for if absolute knowledge were to consist in some fixed dogma, questions would only arise again about how that dogma is related to other beliefs, questions, actions, and people one meets. So if the sublation of religion is understood in the way I have ultimately understood it here, the same thing goes for both thinking and religion: what is in the end important is not so much their answers as the life of spirit itself, or, as the believer might put it, less what is said about the relation to God than the life that relation means, the life in which that relation exists only by becoming, and becoming, among other things, by being pondered on.

Dr. Hugo Strandberg
 Dept. of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University
 Tehtaankatu 2
 FI-20500 Turku
 Finland
 hugo.strandberg@abo.fi

²¹ Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, § 378 Z. See also Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 46–47, 559, 568, 585.