

Robert Williams

Hegel on the Proofs and the Personhood of God: Studies in Hegel's Logic and Philosophy of Religion

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The book is divided into two parts. The first is an exposition of Hegel's rehabilitation of the traditional proofs of God's existence that Kant had declared sophistic; the second, a treatise on Hegel's concept of "persons and personhood" leading up to Hegel's attribution of "personhood" (*Persönlichkeit*) to God. These are the parts as advertised in the book title and the table of contents. But the whole is much more than their sum total. In fact Williams offers a tightly knit synthetic overview of Hegel's system, drawn from all its parts but especially from the *Logic* and the lectures on the philosophy of religion. The overarching theme is that the system attains its most concrete realization in the concept of God's life as developed by the philosophy of spirit. Since this concept is best found pre-figured in the Christian narrative of the triune God, the incarnation and reconciliation, inasmuch as Hegel's philosophy of religion is a reflection on precisely this narrative, it turns out to be a treatise in Christian theology.

This is a grand synthesis (occasionally unduly repetitious, it must be said), obviously the culmination of Williams' life-long reflection on Hegel and religion, a masterpiece of its kind for which we all ought to be grateful. Unfortunately its breadth of scope is also the source of the reviewer's difficulties—at least *this* reviewer. It is clear, nonetheless, how Williams conceives the Christian theology which is the upshot of his reading of Hegel's philosophy of religion. In this Williams follows Walter Jaeschke closely. Such a theology must be grounded in the concept, measured by strict standards of rationality as defined by Hegel's idealism. It cannot be, in other words, simply a restatement of "traditional Christian orthodoxy"; nor, for that matter, can it be "Christian" in any unqualified sense. The norm is that whenever "Christianity is not in conformity with the concept of religion, it is not the concept that has to be corrected by

Christianity, but Christianity has to be elevated to conceptual form” (61). Thus, although a conceptual apologia of Christianity, Hegel’s philosophy of religion is at the same time a critique of it. Historically speaking, this means that neither the right-wing Hegelians who after Hegel’s death pressed his theology back into orthodoxy, nor those of the left who on the contrary reduced it to anthropology, were right. Williams, again following Jaeschke, rather wants to reoccupy the middle ground held by Michelet in the nineteenth century, although purged of the pantheistic implications which Williams believes are implied in Michelet’s particular notion of divine “personhood” (15; 158ff.).

Equally clear is what Williams takes as the defining moment of the Hegelian idealism. It lies in the finite/infinite dialectical relation, such as makes the identity of each term depend on the mediation of the other (14-15). Taking the terms in mutual abstraction, thereby reducing their relation to an external connection for which only third party view is possible, is the source of the Kantian formalism which, like a “bogey” (Williams’ word), haunts every reading of Hegel.

In all this Williams is of course right: right regarding what would have to be the project of a Hegelian Christian-inspired theology; right again regarding the importance for its realization of Hegel’s finite/infinite dialectical relation; right, finally, regarding the formalism that makes Kant’s system necessarily subjective. But it does not follow, as Williams repeatedly seems to intimate, that to disagree with him on other substantial aspects of his position necessarily means failing to understand the finite/infinite relation, or, for that matter, falling victim to the Kantian “bogey” (235). That relation does not in fact pose unsurmountable conceptual problems at all. On the contrary, it is easily understood, and Williams should presume his audience both to understand it and to have it in mind when disagreeing. The relation is the direct consequence of Hegel’s metaphysical privileging of becoming over being. For Hegel, being is whatever it is by becoming it. It is an achievement, in other words; in this sense, therefore, inherently other than itself, yet in this otherness attaining self-identity. The task of the *Logic* (and of the *Phenomenology* at a more overtly experiential level of reflection) is precisely to conceptualize how, and to what extent in different contexts, this identity is achieved.

But one thing is to conceptualize the transitions in this process, or even to conceptualize the process itself as a whole, *in abstracto*, in effect reflectively defining the rationality that

informs all experiences, thus making them intelligent from the start. Quite another is to determine the conditions that make the transitions, and the unity of the process, existentially possible in different experiential/historical contexts, such contexts as therefore require a new concrete start in each case, each start valid only on its own merit. This is an all-important distinction. To draw it is not to fall victim to Kantian formalism, but, on the contrary, to take seriously the lesson one should have learned from the *Logic in principle*, and *historically* in the *Phenomenology*; namely that rationality is visceral, so to speak, or, if one prefers, that it immanently shapes experience even at its most physiologically describable levels. In other words, reason is a form of life, as such conditioned by singularizing historical vicissitudes. The danger is not that one reintroduces Kant's formalism. It is rather that one presumes dialectical connections where none are needed, since the presence of reason is already recognized and comprehended by recognizing and comprehending on its own merit what makes for whichever particular experiential/historical situation is at issue—unless, of course, one wishes to abstract this reason and conceptualize it *per se*, as in the *Logic*. But this last is a scientific enterprise *sui generis*. Running the two together, as if one were dialectically dependent on the other, is a case of misplaced dialectic.

Implied in this is a broad-side criticism of Williams that he would understandably find unfair. For this I apologize. But it reflects one major problem confronting the reviewer. (I shall turn to a second below.) It is difficult to criticize a grand synthesis when so many of its elements are perfectly right, but only if taken outside the synthesis. Let me illustrate the point by concentrating on a number of transitions that are indeed crucial to Williams yet in my view deeply problematic.

Take Hegel's supposed rehabilitation of the cosmological proofs of God's existence. Religion is indeed a product of reason. We are religious *because* we are rational. One can therefore understand the natural instinct to believe in, *and revere*, a cause that would make the universe intelligible, as Kant himself acknowledged. And it behoves the philosopher to explain how this need arises and how it is satisfied; as also to expose the error of conceptualizing experience in a such a way that would preclude any such explanation. Here is where the finite/infinite dialectical relation comes into play. It does so only *in abstracto*, however, for "finite" and

“infinite” are still highly indeterminate categories. Nonetheless, to bring natural reason to understand this relation is already a first stage in bringing it to itself *explicitly*; in other words, to raise it to the standpoint of reason *as such*, freeing it from the misconceptions of common sense that falsify above all the nature of sensibility itself (as it notably did for Kant).

It makes sense to say, therefore, that when purged of the common sense accretions that affect the traditional proofs of God’s existence, or, for that matter, when purged of the Kantian formalism which is in fact dependent on common sense, the proofs can be seen as attempts at elevating the mind to explicit reason. This is indeed right, but still a long way from rehabilitating the proofs as in any way proofs *of God’s existence*. The fact is that *homo religiosus* has historically called upon God with historically charged names (“the God of Abraham and Isaac” is only one case in point). And these names, at least as invoked in the context of typically religious experience, cannot be reduced to God defined as “reason in principle” (64); nor again, to God as “the infinite in thought” (67). It does not suffice simply to add that God is “the correlate of religion”; or that the rationality which is his essence is “alive and, as spirit, in and for itself” (60). These are proclamations which, quite apart from being vague in context, remain unjustified from a specifically religious standpoint. What the “proofs” beg is how reason is typically realized precisely *in* the medium of the historical phenomenon that we unambiguously call “religion”—in effect, why and how for the latter, granted that it is indeed a product of reason, the positivity that attaches to the name of God is nonetheless sacrosanct. Incidentally, it was the recognition of this fact that eventually led the pre-1800 Hegel to part intellectual company with Lessing. (Cf. di Giovanni, 2010.)

Similarly regarding the so-called ontological proof. Indeed, particular situations that present specialized difficulties of their own aside, there should be no problem in principle with transitioning from concept to existence. Even the language of “transition” is doubtful, since, when rightly understood, the concept never leaves existence behind. On the contrary, it is itself a specifically human mode of existence that gives rise to the intentional space within which existence can be intelligently recognized for whatever it is—just as in the case of animals, who are themselves idealists of a sort, their natural needs create the organic space within which things become relevantly present to them qualified as food, mating opportunities, or the like. Problems

only occur when concepts that render an object intelligible at one level of intentional abstraction are expected equally to capture it under different existential conditions. Kant's example of the one hundred dollars in my pocket is a perfect case in point. Of course, the concept of one hundred dollars as determined within the context of monetary theory in general can say nothing regarding whether I have them in actual possession. But take the algorithms of the newly born "granular economics," capable as they are of tracing the individual dollar. They could indeed establish *a priori* whether I have the dollars. The issue, in other words, is not one of transition from concept to existence, dialectical or otherwise. It is one of adequate conceptual determination, such as is attained within the concept without ever transitioning outside it (as if that were possible and yet still retain intelligent experience).

Let me expand. It is possible to reverse the order of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and to read the analogies of experience as introductory to the analytic, in the same manner that Hegel's *Phenomenology* is introductory to the *Logic*. For just as in the *Phenomenology* rationality is displayed already at work in historical contexts, so in Kant's analogies, if one abstracts from the Humean common sense prejudices regarding the nature of sensibility that affects them with formalism (admittedly not an easy task), the presence of rationality is demonstrated in the very way the human body orients itself in space or discriminates between different temporal series. Inasmuch as an agent involved in these operations invokes the categories of causality or substantiality for the sake of self-articulation, these derive their relevant meaning in the first instance only in context, directly from the operations. Even *ex post facto*, when considered on their own conceptual merit and duly developed as such, they would still carry no meaning were it not that the body is intelligent, already rational as body, *ab origine*. This is not to say that one cannot, or should not for the sake of self-knowledge and intellectual clarity, abstract the rationality thus already inherent in actual experience as a specific life-form and conceive it *per se*, just as one abstracts the syntax that holds a language together, thereby rendering it in an idiom typically its own, itself a kind of language. This is exactly what Kant does in the Analytic. The categories are the determinations of the concept of an object in general ("Sie sind Begriff von einem Gegenstand überhaupt." Kant, B128.19). To think, therefore, as Kant did, that one should further demonstrate their existential validity is an illusion, the product

of common sense which divorces concept and existence, as if the latter were anywhere to be found except within the intelligible space created by the concept, originally as form of life, reflectively as category. Any transition from category to analogy of experience can only be a matter of system building, as required by the universe of science.

But to get to the point I have been driving at, the idealists never objected to Kant's categories. They only objected to their having been chosen rhapsodically, and because their list was incomplete. Hegel especially complained about this—understandably so, since his logic, which turned out to be a reformation of Kant's analytic, is where his idealism differs from Fichte and Schelling's. As he said to Niethammer in 1812 (October 23), "Metaphysics falls entirely within logic. Here I can cite Kant as my precedent and authority. His critique reduces metaphysics as it has existed until now to a consideration of the understanding and reason." Hegel's logic is the methodic dialectical determination of the concept of the concept of an object in general, where the object is demonstrated to be truly recognizable as such when itself determined as subject, that is, in the idealized existence of art, religion and science. Hegel's logic is a *Kategorienlehre*, as such also an ontological argument—one, incidentally, that has little to do, if anything at all, with the classical forms of the argument. It is an ontological argument only in the sense that it demonstrates that the concept of being, when fully articulated, needs no external norm of truth: it is its own norm, as such the principle of absolute science. Williams would certainly grant this last statement, though not likely agree with my reading of the *Logic*. But the point is that to demonstrate that existence is a determination of the concept (or essence) is not the same as demonstrating that God exists, or, for that matter, in any way elucidating what one means by religion. God is yet to be named. Adorning what should be essentially a logical argument with religious language does not do the job; on the contrary, it runs the danger of mystification.

But I might be looking in this first part of Williams' book for what is in fact only proleptically anticipated from the second, where God's personhood is the issue. Here the reading of the *Logic* becomes all the more important. But let me first sort out a number of issues. As Williams well knows, there is a difference between "singularity" (*Einzelheit*), such as is due to the accidentalities of nature and the circumstances of history, and "individuality" (*Individualität*).

This last is an achievement, most notably attained in “personhood” (Williams’ preferred term). And it is well known, as Williams himself has documented in previous works and repeats in the present, that the achievement requires recognition. This means that the individual is truly such only in community; that he or she cannot be identified for whatever he or she is (indeed, in the first place even according to gender) without being counterposed to an other individual with whom he or she shares a common bond that transcends them both as otherwise singular individuals.

Hegel gives abundant phenomenological and historical accounts of this sociability. It reflects the nature of rationality as a form of life, such as is first and foremost realized in discourse. Language is normative. This means that, although discourse is always the activity of a singular speaker, hence subjectively motivated and on a subject which is historically determined, it is necessarily carried out in a medium which has an authority of its own and is itself the carrier of a discourse that has been going on from time immemorial. It is just as true to say that language speaks through the singular speaker, or that a speaker unwittingly realizes in his or her particular discourse intentions that run across it anonymously, as that the speaker is saying something new. Creativity is precisely a matter of actively subjugating oneself to, but thereby re-making one’s own, these otherwise anonymous intentions—all this, while respecting the conditions of normativity in general. It is a matter of negotiating these necessarily conflicting requirements. And this is a process in which one is never alone. For, on the one hand there is always room in the space provided by the anonymous intentions for someone else individually re-appropriating them; on the other, doing this in front of somebody else, with this *other’s* effective recognition, is the test as to whether in the process one is respecting the conditions of normativity.

Indeed, it is only imaginatively, as we cannot help doing, that we speak of anonymous intentions, or even of normativity, as if these were things one is in conflict with. Existentially speaking, the conflict is between individuals engaged in determining what it means to be human, and in the process at the same time subjectively coming to terms with one’s own natural/historical past. The conflict is essential because existence is radically singular. That it should acquire universal significance—that is, that it should be made the norm of what counts as “human”—depends on a judgement which is therefore necessarily creative, for it entails crossing

the distance separating universality of norm and singularity of existence. And since, on the one hand, a norm is not effectively such unless recognized *as such*; and, on the other hand, there is nothing about its natural/historical content that necessarily pre-determines it as norm, the judgement crossing that distance requires that the recognition be *extracted* from the *other*. Creativity is in principle violent: the sociability based on it necessarily the product of an ongoing process of reconciliation.

The question is how this translates into logical reflection. I take it that when Hegel speaks of the “universal singularity,” (217) and associates this with personhood, he means by it the conceptual model—the conceptual *typic*, I am tempted to say, borrowing the word, but *only* the word, from Kant—of what it is to be a “person.” A person is one whose singularity of existence has authoritative standing in a community bound by mutually recognized norms of communal life—where, in other words, he or she is the bearer of a recognized name. And this is an achieved existential standing that can be indefinitely reiterated in history under a variety of circumstances—such as those the *Logic* abstracts from.

This makes sense, however, on the assumption that the *Logic* is the systematic account of the many ways “being” can reflectively *be said* to be “whatever it is”—as defining, in other words, the structure of a universe of meaning by virtue of which beings can be intelligently recognized (*erkennen*) for what they are, although in each case (as we said earlier) on their particular existential merit. The *Logic* is the science of reason *as reason*. But clearly this is not how Williams understands it. He rather follows Houlgate, for whom “being has the form of *thought* and so knowable from *within* thought” (Houlgate, 12). Quite apart from the *non sequitur* implicit in the claim (it is like saying that a story can be narrated because its message has syntactical content), the claim lends itself to a common-sense kind of realism which is the counterpart of Hume’s common sense subjectivism. Williams can thus simply move from the logical idea of “personhood” to the claim that God is a person as if the transition from the one to the other did not need justification. *Who* is this God whose personhood is being claimed? What is his name? Or perhaps, if he is only to be known by what he does, *whose* God is he? (Please, forgive the gendering of the pronoun.) Or is God to be identified, as Williams occasionally seems to do, with reason in general, or, under the title of “spirit,” with the love that binds a community

together? But how is this any different from reducing theology to anthropology, the only difference being that “humanity” and “human society” are given a much richer and dialectically more complex content than Feuerbach or the left-wing Hegelians did? Williams is of course reflecting on the Christian religion and the culture it created (241ff). Hegel considered this religion as consummate, because already aware of itself *as religion*, hence in principle already philosophical in nature. Perhaps, in measuring Christian beliefs by the standards of the concept, as he proposes to do at the beginning, Williams’ intent is simply to distill the speculative content of such beliefs. But what about the rest that makes religion *religion* rather than just philosophy? What is religion? Is it just the category vested in imaginative garb?

These questions were begged in the first part of the book and are still begged in the second. This does not mean that Williams does not do due diligence. On the contrary, his positions are invariably seriously annotated. And this gives rise to the second major difficulty facing the reviewer earlier alluded to. In criticizing Williams, is the reviewer by that token also criticizing Hegel? Is Williams’ reading of Hegel’s lectures on religion the historically correct one? I am ready to concede that it is, even though I actually believe that if one assumes as hermeneutical principle that individual works should be read on their own merits and with reference to their intended audience, the lectures are not as clear as Williams portrays them. Nonetheless, in an effort at being fair in my judgement, I am diplomatically ready to concede the point. But this only means that Hegel’s philosophy of religion belongs to the nineteenth century, significant only in the socio/historical context that made possible the right/middle/left divisions among the Hegelians. What relevance can these divisions, or, for that matter, occupying the middle one, possibly have in the current religious landscape? This is unfortunate, for I believe that there are elements in Hegel’s thought that are very relevant indeed.

I have in mind the battle of prestige in the *Phenomenology* that Kojève has made famous. Williams refers at one point to a passage in the lectures on religion where Hegel says that conflicts of that type are due to sense-appetites that prevent individuals from rising above their singularity (182; cf. also 218-219). This is apparently part of the mind’s elevation to God. In fact, Hegel is here lapsing into a common-sense type of moralism which, if applied to the *Phenomenology*’s battle, guts it of its existential significance. At issue in the battle is again the

singularity of existence that depends on the *hic et nunc* of nature and history and, as so dependent, short of escaping into inauthentic abstractions, can never be reduced. As the universalizing function of reason sets in, nature is rather invested with new value: what otherwise would be a fight for a particular object of natural desire is transformed into a battle for extracting the recognition of one's right to that desire. This is necessarily a violent act, for it entails investing the singular with universal value; it demands creativity, in other words, and to repeat, there is nothing *a priori* determined about this. Sociability requires the reconciliation of a constant underlying conflict.

In Hegel's battle for prestige the reconciliation is already achieved inasmuch as it entails on the part of each contestant respect for the other; this is, however brutal, already a form of effective communication. In the *Phenomenology's* narrative that follows, the conflict and the reconciliation are institutionalized in a series of social arrangements that culminate in a renewed battle of prestige—this time, however, between consciences who invest their inner voice, necessarily particularized as it is, with divine authority. It is like wanting to be, though finite, like God. Here the violence is absolute, and the reconciliation only possible in the medium of the language of reciprocal confession and mutual forgiveness. Hegel's idea of the religious community is based on precisely this language. It is a profound idea that I take as normative for any reading of Hegel on religion. The implication is that religion has to do with the quest for personal identity. This is true, of course, of rationality in general. But it is to the subjective, intimately individual side of this quest that religion is devoted, objectifying it with its myths and ritual practices. The further implication is that religion is necessarily idolatrous, for it has to do precisely with the naming of *one's* God, and names are nothing if not singular. As Freudenthal argues, Moses Mendelssohn, in his way, had recognized this much: being idolatrous is what prevents religion from being just philosophy. It follows, finally, that religion is violent, its reconciliation always only a provisional achievement—as history, past and current, amply attests. H. S. Harris (whose name, significantly, appears only three times in the book, once incidentally and twice in footnotes), commenting on the present religious situation, once noted that while *it is incumbent on the Christian to forgive the non-Christian for not being Christian, he must at the*

same time ask forgiveness for being Christian. This, I submit, is as Hegelian and today apposite a statement as I can think.

Be this as it may, it is clear that although conceptually my disagreement with Williams goes back to a difference of view regarding Hegel's logic, the even more significant difference is of attitude regarding religion as a historical phenomenon. Nonetheless, my opening judgement stands. The book is masterful work, and it certainly demonstrates—as I wholeheartedly agree—that the philosophy of religion is the best point of access to Hegel's thought. I am grateful for the book. The hope is that it will promote discussion on the subject. But, precisely for this reason, since I expect a wide readership, it is important that I rectify some incidental inaccuracies. For one thing, it is not true that Jacobi was the translator of David Hume (71). He did however publish a dialogue by the title of *David Hume* (1787) in which he argued that there is a bodily *a priori* that makes Kant's formal categories irrelevant. He obfuscated the claim in a second edition, the one best known. Hegel's total view of Jacobi was much more nuanced, at times even flattering, than the exclusively polemical citations in Williams' book would indicate. It is also not true that Thomas Aquinas subscribed to a double truth position (259, note). This is a misleading claim. Aquinas' position on the relation of faith to reason was not unlike Hegel's on the relation of immediate to reflective knowledge, except that he packed a lot more into the immediate side of the relations than Hegel did. At any rate, Aquinas argued against the theory of double truth that he rather attributed (perhaps unfairly) to Ibn Rochd (Averroès). Finally, it is not true that the concept of "spirit" remained vague in classical theology (261). I suggest that one read Augustine's *de Trinitate*, or Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* (II, qu. 36-39). These, of course, are only incidental imperfections in a sea of otherwise serious scholarship, exceptions that prove the rule.

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