

Hegel and Religious Faith

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I'm a philosophic theologian, with no formal training in psychology. So what am I doing here? Well, I'm also an old friend of Iain McGilchrist: we were contemporaries at school together, and have remained in touch ever since. For a long time I lived in the north of England, Iain in the south or in Scotland, and I didn't really know what he was up to, intellectually. But when I did at length discover about his project, some eight or nine years ago now, it was with a real sense of shock, because it related so very directly to my own work, focusing on the religious thought of Hegel. And that's what I want to talk about now: that connection.

Towards the end of next month I've got a book coming out, entitled *Hegel and Religious Faith: Divided Brain, Atoning Spirit*. There are other things in it. However, this is a major part of the argument of that book.

I'm presupposing, here, some familiarity with *The Master and his Emissary*. But, you may be glad to hear, no familiarity with Hegel. Or rather, I'm inclined to suspect that the name 'Hegel' will be associated in your minds with all sorts of obstructive prejudices, misleading preconceptions. So I begin with a plea: that you shouldn't let what you may think you already know about Hegel get in the way of finding out new things!

There is what's sometimes known as the 'Hegel myth'; a whole network of hostile misinterpretations. It's partly Hegel's own fault; he should have expressed himself better. Partly, it's due to the crazy, sheer ambition of his thought, as to which one may indeed well have serious misgivings. But much of it, also, is a matter of quite wilful distortion. Indeed, the intellectual malice that has bedevilled the history of Hegel interpretation is itself a phenomenon that calls for some psychological diagnosis. Maybe Iain's work can help illuminate the motivation for it. I'm inclined to think so.

Hegel lived from 1770 – 1831 so he knew nothing about the scientific study of brain lateralization as such. Nevertheless, it seems to me that his thinking in a certain sense anticipates it. Moreover, it does so with particular reference to Christian theology. Iain, in his book, has largely bracketed questions of theology and set them aside; the book's got plenty in it, already, without discussing theology as well. What happens, though, if one removes the brackets? My suggestion is that, as regards connection with theological tradition, Hegel is actually going to be the key reference point for any such thinking.

Indeed, Iain's thought belongs to a whole tradition which substantially predates the beginnings of scientific neuropsychology. Already in the early 19th century there are several critics of Enlightenment ideology who are arguing along comparable lines. It

isn't only Hegel. Another notable example is the somewhat older German philosopher F. H. Jacobi. In a text first published in 1815 Jacobi actually already anticipates the allegory which gives Iain's book its title: he tells the tale of a Master who represents true, intuitive 'reason', but who is overthrown by an emissary, representing, in the terminology of the day, the calculative 'understanding'.¹ Jacobi's tale differs in its setting from Iain's: whereas Iain describes the emissary as a Middle Eastern 'vizier', Jacobi refers to the 7th-8th century Frankish Empire, and the gradual process culminating in the year 751, when Pope Zachary confirmed the deposition of the last Merovingian king, Childeric III, by the man who had, up until then, nominally been his 'head steward', Pepin the Short. Iain develops his version of the story quite independently of Jacobi, yet the parallels are striking. Thus, when Jacobi speaks of true 'reason', in effect he surely means a thinking in which due precedence is given to the workings of the right cerebral hemisphere; whereas what he calls the 'understanding' is nothing other than pure left-hemisphere thought, which in aggressive 'Enlightenment' ideology quite falsely, alas, usurps the fair title of 'reason'.

It was Jacobi, also, who coined the hitherto unknown term '*nihilism*' to designate the consequences of that usurpation.

Hegel is the truly great theological analyst of those consequences; above all in his quite extraordinary work of 1807, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. By 'Spirit' Hegel means precisely that whole impetus-to-truth which we now know belongs to the right hemisphere of the brain. And he systematically traces the workings of that impetus-to-truth at every level of mental life.

Let me briefly sketch out for you what Hegel is trying to do in the *Phenomenology*.

To begin with, he considers the necessary abstraction of *language, in itself*. That's to say: the basic inability of words ever quite to convey the rich actuality of the here and now; the rich actuality of who 'I' really am; the rich actuality of each individual thing in the world around us. Spirit, at this first level, is just the yearning to convey that rich actuality – forever frustrated by the abstraction intrinsic to language in what we now know to be its left-cerebral-hemisphere dynamics.

Then however the argument moves on from the abstraction intrinsic to language as such to the abstraction of abstract *theories*. Always, Spirit is shown bumping up against the oversimplifications of abstract thought in all its forms. In the light of modern neuropsychology, one might well say that this is the restless impulse of right-hemisphere insight, over and over again bumping up against the functionally necessary limitations of left-hemisphere codification. Hegel illustrates that process with regard both to scientific observations of Nature, and to understandings of morality. He considers, first, general types of thinking, and then a wide range of more specific historical phenomena impressionistically evoked.

The point is that he's trying to show how the impulse of Spirit pervades *all* our thinking. So he jumps from topic to topic in the most bewildering way. He struggles,

valiantly, to hold the argument together by imposing a uniform technical jargon onto it. If he had known about the cerebral hemispheres, it could all have been made much clearer. But he didn't. Instead, he inherits philosophic language originally designed for completely different purposes. And, as a result, the book is virtually unreadable. To negotiate it, one needs the assistance of numerous commentaries; endless patience; the most resolute intellectual masochism. In that sense, the *Phenomenology* is a complete failure, a glorious failure, however, due essentially to absurd over-ambition! Its notorious obscurity isn't pretentiousness, it is profundity.

Finally, Hegel arrives at what he calls 'absolute knowing'. If I'd been him, I wouldn't myself have used that rather bombastic-seeming term. But he isn't claiming to have arrived at some final result, such as will put an end to the need for further exploration. On the contrary, the whole book has been about what it means to be open-minded. Spirit is the impulse to perfect, endlessly enquiring open-mindedness, at every level of thought. What, then, does 'absolute knowing' know? It knows that the impulse of Spirit, in this sense, is what is most truly sacred. Having arrived at the end of the road, it knows, at last – 'absolutely' – that Spirit is God. And what that means.

The 'unatoned state of mind'

But now I want to look at a particular key moment, right at the heart of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the point where Hegel, in effect, directly addresses the potential conflict between right-hemisphere and left-hemisphere ways of thinking as a hostile confrontation between, so to speak, two sub-selves within the individual self.

His term for this most basic dialectical division of the in-dividual is '*das unglückliche Bewußtseyn*', literally translated as 'the unhappy consciousness'.

Let's consider that literal translation: the 'unhappy consciousness'. There are problems with it; problems indeed already intrinsic to Hegel's German. In the first place, what Hegel has in mind isn't necessarily a form of 'consciousness' in the current sense of that word, the way its meaning has evolved since his day. And neither therefore, secondly, need it be all that 'unhappy', in the ordinary sense.

Nowadays, we've become accustomed to distinguishing between the 'conscious' and the 'subconscious'. When in the early 19th century Hegel speaks of '*Bewußtseyn*', 'consciousness', he doesn't actually have that distinction in mind at all. He's talking about a spiritual condition, partly conscious, yet also very largely subconscious. To some extent, indeed, *das unglückliche Bewußtseyn* really *must* be subconscious. For to suffer this most unfortunate condition is to be committed to fooling oneself, and one can't do this in full awareness of what one's doing. *Das unglückliche Bewußtseyn* is an objectively 'unhappy' condition in the sense that it's pitiable, but the sufferer is unaware – precisely – of how pitiable it is. As regards his or her conscious, subjective state, therefore, the sufferer may not be unhappy at all. In fact,

there's even a certain sort of happiness that's quite typical of the condition in an intense form: the compulsory, neurotic, forever smiling 'happiness' of those who positively revel in emotional pretence.

'*Das unglückliche Bewußtseyn*' is a condition of inner servitude. Famously, earlier in the book Hegel has discussed, in quite abstract terms, the dialectical relationship between 'master and slave' as two individuals. *Das unglückliche Bewußtseyn*, on the other hand, is introduced as an internalisation of the 'master-slave' relationship. That's to say, it's the dialectical interplay between two aspects of one and the same self: a 'master' aspect and a 'slave' aspect. But this is after the usurpation which Iain's allegory describes. What Hegel calls the inner 'master' is in fact the emissary, as usurper. And what he calls the inner 'slave' is, in the terms of Iain's allegory, the true Master now reduced to servitude.

Hegel is, in effect, talking here about the spiritual condition of one in whom the power of left-hemisphere thought-gone-stale, broadly speaking, has become despotic: an inner despotism of rigid prejudice and cliché, sheer wilful closed-mindedness. It's a condition of being inwardly split apart. As regards the individual's relationship-to-self, it's just the most fundamental corruption of Spirit. But to some extent we all suffer from it.

The better to engage with Hegel's real meaning – when it comes to translating – I would propose that, for the reasons I've given, we actually try dropping his own terms, 'unhappy' and 'consciousness'. In general, we need so far as possible to get a fresh take on Hegel's thought; to make it strange again, unlearning some of the lazier preconceptions of the interpretative tradition. And here, at a key point, is a chance to do so. Therefore, by way of thought-experiment, let's render '*das unglückliche Bewußtseyn*' not as the 'unhappy consciousness', but, instead, as the '*unatoned state of mind*'.

Not 'consciousness', but '*state of mind*': *das unglückliche Bewußtseyn* is simply an ever-present resistance to difficult reality, more or less subconscious, that then underlies, and mixes with, all sorts of secondary formations of spiritual inertia. Objectively, but by no means always subjectively 'unhappy', it's more precisely the condition of being '*unatoned*'. Divided as it is between a 'master' aspect and a 'slave' aspect, it's a basic incapacity to live 'at one', at-oned, with the reality that the 'slave' aspect all too timidly apprehends. This reality is too difficult for the 'master' aspect, and so the apprehension is censored, distorted or interpreted away.

Traditional Christian theology, of course, speaks of 'atonement' as what Christ accomplishes on behalf of the faithful, and then within their souls: rendering them 'at one' with God, and so able to live in harmony with the supremely difficult reality of divine justice. Here then is one particular religious mode of 'atonement', in the broader sense that I'm proposing. Since 'atonement', in this context, comes to mean a symbolic bearing of punishment in restitution for sin, as Christ is said to have 'borne our sins' on the cross, we tend to use the noun 'atonement' with the preposition 'for': 'atonement for sin'. Or there is the verbal form, 'to atone', likewise:

'to atone *for* sin'. But I want to revive the now largely forgotten, original usage in which 'atoned' can also be an *adjective*, applicable to souls. So that one may speak of souls being either 'atoned' or 'unatoned'.

In the old ritual of the Jerusalem Temple for the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus* 16) two animals were sacrificed, a bull and a goat, and their blood symbolically intermingled – that is, at-oned – before being sprinkled on the altar. The blood of the bull, it seems, represented the spirit of God reaching out towards Israel through the medium of the Temple liturgy. As the failings of the clergy tended to impede this, the bull was sacrificed especially for the sins of the High Priest 'and his house'. But the blood of the goat represented the spirit of the people reaching out towards God and therefore repenting their corporate sins – the goat was sacrificed on behalf of all. The spirit of God reaches out; the spirit of the people reaches out: two flows of blood, at-oned. As a regular event, this symbolizes the overcoming not of any particular sin, but of humanity's primordial insensitivity to sin in general. It represents the overcoming of religious 'thought-gone-stale', in the sense of whatever helps render us insensitive to our need for atonement. The Temple ritual for the Day of Atonement was thus a programmatic representation of what all the ritual of Israelite religion was, most fundamentally, meant to achieve.

If however one considers the matter more generally, then one would surely have to say that not only Christianity and Judaism, but *all* true religion – all religion to the extent that it truly wages war on thought-gone-stale – is essentially a project of at-one-ment, so defined. Our existence is always more or less split: we both belong to reality and are cut off from it, insofar as we find it too difficult. In other words: we are never fully at-oned. And we need strategies to awaken us, imaginatively and emotionally, with ever-greater intensity, to the problem of our being unatoned. As I would understand it, just this is the core impulse of authentic religion in all its forms; whether God is explicitly recognised, or is only implicitly at work in it. In order properly to understand religious truth as such, one has to begin by analysing our *primordial* need for atonement, looking beyond the way it's represented in different particular religious cultures in order to sense its real universality. And that's just what Hegel's doing here.

Or, to approach the same point from another angle, I'm talking about religion in its true character as the very purest *antithesis to propaganda*. Never has any previous generation been as bombarded as we are now by propaganda: so many campaigns, at work in all the various mass media, to influence what we buy, how we vote, our whole lifestyle. Propaganda may no doubt serve many good purposes as well as bad ones. But the one thing it can never do is confront us with the true difficulty of difficult reality. How could it? Propaganda looks for immediate effects by prodding at our simplest behavioural reflexes. Difficult reality is what most of all takes time to approach, time that the propagandist doesn't have. True prayer is the opposite of propaganda in that it's a deliberate slowing down of the mind, so as to attend, so far as possible without distraction, to difficult reality. Indeed, the proliferation of propaganda in the world of mass communication actually creates, I think, a whole new purpose for prayer. For propaganda might very well perhaps be defined as *the*

systematic exploitation of unatonement. And, moreover, it incidentally reinforces what it exploits as it seeks, in effect, to invest the unatoned life with the maximum possible glamour and excitement. Increasingly, the true discipline of prayer has to be understood as a form of therapy for those exposed to propaganda. Now more than ever, it's all about building up our inner capacity for resistance to the propagandists' seductive artistry. The 'unatoned state of mind' is, not least, a general term for our (never willingly acknowledged) vulnerability to propaganda.

'A condition of sheer inner contradiction'

Hegel begins his discussion of this absolutely primordial, universal phenomenon by drawing a basic distinction between two forms of 'splitting-into-two' (*Verdopplung*), a healthy and an unhealthy one:

There is [already] a certain splitting-into-two intrinsic to the concept of 'Spirit'. But here [in this internalisation of 'master and slave'] we have the splitting-into-two without the [restorative] unity of Spirit. And the unatoned state of mind is a condition of sheer inner contradiction.²

The necessary splitting-into-two that immediately belongs to Spirit is the development of a capacity for two sorts of thinking: not only the direct, fresh registering of concrete reality but also abstract reflection on experience. As we might now say: it's the partnership between the two cerebral hemispheres. In the unatoned state of mind, however, the problem is that the proper partnership between these two sorts of thinking has broken down. It has become a rivalry and the capacity for abstract reflection has started to tyrannise over the capacity for direct, fresh registering of concrete reality. Theoretical hypotheses and imaginative pictures have gone stale and the staleness has, moreover, been invested with repressive authority.

In the ensuing, introductory passage Hegel sets out to define '*das unglückliche Bewußtseyn*' purely and simply as such, decisively abstracted from any particular cultural manifestation. As a matter of fact, I think it helps render Hegel's meaning clearer if, in translating this passage, one renounces *any* use of the word 'consciousness', not only in rendering the phrase '*das unglückliche Bewußtseyn*', but right the way through. The German text repeats '*Bewußtseyn*' over and over again – a stylistic tic infesting the *Phenomenology* in general. And the context shifts disconcertingly; not only is the unatoned state of mind, as a whole, a *Bewußtseyn*; so are both of the two warring elements within it. Sometimes the word refers to a viewpoint, at other times to a process. The repetition of the word has a fog-like effect. But translation gives us an opportunity to dispel that fog. Besides 'state of mind', in my English version I've rendered it with a whole range of variants: 'force field', 'identity', 'aspect', 'self', 'aspect-of-self', 'soul', 'working-through', 'persona', 'condition', 'thinking', 'thought'. Thus:

This unatoned, and to that extent pitiable, state of mind constitutes a single force field of contradictory impulses, the interplay of two mutually dependent

identities. There is no possibility of peaceful unity being achieved through the triumph of one aspect over the other. But, rather, the self bounces back and forth between the two. [It is ausgetrieben, literally 'driven out', from each in turn.] Indeed, what does it mean for Spirit truly to come alive, and enter into actual existence? First and foremost, it is the reintegration of what has here disintegrated; the reconciliation of what is here in conflict. Or it is what happens when we recognise the properly complementary nature of the two aspects-of-self that have been split apart. This state of mind is itself the gazing of each 'self' upon the other. It is both at once; its essence is the unity of the two. Only, it is not yet conscious of its own essence as that unity.

For, again: being unatoned means fooling oneself.

To be atoned with, and opened up to, reality is to lay oneself fully open to being changed by fresh experience. Yet the inner despot-self of the unatoned state of mind, addicted to cliché and reassuring prejudice, is a spirit of sheer, censorious resistance to all such change. Therefore, Hegel calls it '*das Unwandelbare*', literally 'the Unchangeable'. Or, perhaps better put in this psychological context: 'the Rigidity Principle'. Its workings include every sort of resistance to thoughtful change-of-mind; stubborn, arrogant or sanctimonious. The Rigidity Principle *projects itself and* so it purports to speak on behalf of 'God', or whatever other idolatrous concept its immediate cultural environment supplies.³ Set over against it, on the other hand, is another sub-self, potentially the agent of thoughtful change, but too insecure to push such change through against the Rigidity Principle's resistance. This second, adaptable (*wandelbare*) sub-self keeps rising up, only straightaway to be put down again:

Since, to begin with, the unatoned state of mind is only the immediate unity of the two aspects – not appreciating how they are in fact complementary, but supposing them to be rivals – it considers just one of them, the Rigidity Principle, to be what really counts [das Wesen, literally 'the essential']. The other, the adaptable aspect, it regards as being of much lower status [das Unwesentliche, literally 'the inessential']. For this soul, these two are quite alien to one another and, as the working-through of their contradiction, it identifies itself with the adaptable aspect. As such, it depreciates itself. And in response to the demands of the Rigidity Principle, it feels obliged to set about freeing itself from all that belongs to its own adaptable nature. Thus, whilst, for itself, it is identified with the adaptable, and it thinks of the [projected] Rigidity Principle as an alien being, yet, in itself, it still remains no less identifiable with the Rigidity Principle, [the projection really is only a projection], even though [out of false humility] it declines to recognise this. So the relationship between the two can never be one of mutual indifference. That is to say, the unatoned self can never be indifferent to the demands of the Rigidity Principle. But it is, itself, immediately both aspects at once; even as it understands the proper relationship between them to be that of boss and subordinate, in which the latter is required to be entirely self-effacing [aufzuheben ist, literally 'has to be cancelled out, sublated']. Because both contradictory aspects are equally

essential to this state of mind, what ensues is just the ceaseless movement of their contradiction – the inter-relatedness of the two opposite impulses means that neither may come to rest, but that both are forever regenerating themselves out of their opposition.

Here, in short, we have a struggle against an enemy, victory over whom is really defeat; and where what one wins in one persona one loses in the other. The whole experience of life, its being and doing, comes to be pervaded by a distressing sense that, really, one is meant to be and do the opposite, that it is all mere nothingness. One raises oneself up, to adopt the point of view of the Rigidity Principle. Yet this elevation is merely another twist of the same condition. And so one is immediately recalled to what opposes it: the point of view of one's own particularity. As the Rigidity Principle enters into our thinking it is straightaway affected by the particularity of the particular thinker, from which it can never be disentangled. Instead of this particularity being expunged in the thought of the Rigidity Principle, again and again it springs back.

One must certainly be grateful that the adaptable aspect of the self *does* keep springing back – for otherwise we would become mere robots. But this constant return of the repressed is just what makes the unatoned state of mind 'unhappy'.

Hegel's gospel

The unatoned state of mind: one might say that this is Hegel's analysis of *original sin*. For it's a phenomenon more or less characteristic of every culture, indeed every actual human individual, without exception.

But in the passage that follows, he illustrates it primarily by allusion to aspects of Christian history. This isn't because he thinks that Christian history is particularly badly affected by it. On the contrary: it's because he himself is a Christian, and because he's especially interested in what he sees as the special potential of Christian theology symbolically to articulate the overcoming of unatonedment.

On the other hand, the unatoned state of mind is endlessly resilient. In principle, Hegel thinks, the Christian gospel symbolically overcomes it; but then, in practice, what was symbolically overcome re-insinuates itself back into Christian thinking. This can't be prevented. The truth of 'absolute knowing' requires maximum dissemination; therefore it requires religion. But religious truth, as such, can never be rescued from ambiguity. And that's why religion needs philosophy: at least, to alert us to its ambiguities.

How does the Christian gospel, in its original truth, symbolically overcome unatonedment? Again, the unatoned state of mind pervades all cultures: monotheistic, polytheistic and atheistic alike. But sternly monotheistic cultures provide it with especially dramatic expression; they bring it, most clearly, to the surface. For here,

as I've remarked, the Rigidity Principle projects itself onto the figure of the Lord God. It invokes the thunderous will of the Lord God to back up its censorship; its authoritarian prohibitions; the ferocity of its dogmatism. However, the primordial truth of the Christian gospel, as Hegel understands it, dramatically subverts this. For it shows us the Lord God, as it were, coming down from the false, illusory heaven imagined by unatonement, to become incarnate 'in the form of a slave', as St. Paul puts it. He is made manifest in the figure of a crucified dissident. Crucifixion, as a Roman institution, is just the most vivid possible symbolic self-expression of the unatoned state of mind at its cruellest and therefore most overt. The one whom Pontius Pilate condemns to death, God raises to manifest eternal life. Here, potentially, we have the most vivid, possible, symbolic counter-affirmation of perfect truth-as-openness: undaunted, all-questioning. Other forms of monotheistic culture have other ways of affirming atonement. Christianity, however, in this way sets the imperatives of atonement right at the very heart of its worship.

And then, alas, it's forever betraying them. Such is the malign cunning of unatonement.

Hegel's greatness, as a philosophical theologian, is that he's the first Christian thinker ever to have defined the basic criterion for religious truth in these exact terms. The present-day development of neuropsychology clearly reinforces his argument, very considerably.

Notes:

1. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, translated from the German by George di Giovanni, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, pp. 541—2. This is part of the new preface that Jacobi, following his retirement, added to his earlier work, *David Hume on Faith*; also intended as a general preface to his collected works.
2. My translation. For the paragraphs I am working on here, compare the standard versions by A. V. Miller, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, pp.126-7; J. B. Baillie, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910, pp. 251-3.
3. This is why, as translator, I opt to write 'the Rigidity Principle' with a capital 'R' and 'P'.