

Adams, Hegel, and Transcendental Reflection upon the Word

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It's a pleasure to have this opportunity to discuss Nicholas Adams' new book *Eclipse of Grace: Divine and Human Action in Hegel*. Adams' main message is that theology and Hegelian logic can thrive together. They are not identical, but they are not incommensurate either, and Hegelian logic—or as he calls, it a logic of pairs—can be quite valuable to theology under certain circumstances. Central to Adams' assessment is the notion that theology and logic refer to different operations in language. Theology, he tells us, is a function of language that classifies phenomena, whereas logic inquires into *the rules* by means of which we classify phenomena. The latter does not critique the process or activity of classification. Indeed, we classify all the time. We stop at traffic lights, use menus to order food, pet puppies, etc. In the case of theology, Christians speak of God as love. They talk about justification of human beings through God's grace on the cross. They tell us about baptism and Eucharist. These are tantamount to classifications of phenomena and are quite ordinary in this regard, very much like any 'common sense' discourse, if you will, about *these* particular matters.

Logic, by contrast, tells us about the norms or the categories that we use when we make these kinds of statements. Logic concerns *how* we think rather than *what* we say. This conception of logic as transcendental derives from Kant and is further developed by Hegel. Ultimately, therefore, for Adams, to say that theology and logic are commensurate is to say that Christian talk about God is commensurate with Hegel's account of absolute or 'pure knowing' (taken as Adams suggests, adverbially).

To understand why requires a little background. As mentioned, it was Kant who first clued us into the notion that our judgments aren't 'objectively valid' by virtue of their correspondence to an external or 'real' world, but by virtue of their comportment with certain rules of relations between a) subjects and predicates and then b) judgments and judgments.

Hegel rode this wave but objected that Kant left the so-called noumenal realm outside of reflection. Consequently, Hegel investigated Kant's a) antinomous discussions regarding the apparent 'conflict' between 'appearances and reality' and b) Kant's simultaneous recognition that indeed, 'reason knows something' about the 'noumenal' or the 'real.' Kant's apparent nod at the work of practical reason and its postulates did not suffice, in Hegel's estimation, to offer a thorough account of reason's capacity to identify a logic of relation between appearance and 'reality'—i.e. between 'subject' and 'object' or the 'finite' and the 'infinite.' Transcendental logic applies to these matters as well, Hegel insisted. A division between subjects and objects is merely apparent and a product of a certain preconceived account of the given. A closer look exposes the logical relation between the two. This is the discovery of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel details the point:

The basis of that universally held conception is, namely, to be sought in the insight into the necessary conflict of the determinations of the understanding with themselves. The reflection already referred to is this, to transcend the concrete immediate object and to determine it and separate it. But equally it must transcend these, its separating determinations and straightway connect them. It is at the stage of this connecting of the determinations that their conflict emerges. This connecting activity of reflection belongs in itself to reason and the rising above

those determinations which attains to an insight into their conflict is the great negative step towards the true Notion of reason. But the insight, when not thorough-going, commits the mistake of thinking that it is reason which is in contradiction with itself; it does not recognise that the contradiction is precisely the rising of reason above the limitations of the understanding and the resolving of them. Cognition, instead of taking from this stage the final step into the heights, has fled from the unsatisfactoriness of the categories of the understanding to sensuous existence, imagining that in this it possesses what is solid and self-consistent.¹

In the *Phenomenology* Hegel charges past Kant documenting how, as Adams puts it, subject and object are topics which, when treated according to logics of opposition or identity, generate a host of problems, among which are epistemological failure and ideological polemics.

The purpose of this overly simplistic review of transcendental logic is to explain Adams' account of the difference but potentially happy marriage between theology as classification and the logic of pairs. We can now more deeply appreciate that theology is only commensurate with speculative logic because (and when) it is not representational (i.e., does not associate truth with the determination of a claim as a fixed picture of external reality). This does not, as Adams reminds us, mean that a) theology does not concern phenomena and b) that theological claims may not (sometimes) function according to a logic of opposition. It does mean, however, that a logic of opposition cannot operate as appropriate when questions concerning philosophical justification or knowledge arise (i.e., matters of the relation between subject and object.) Theology may maintain a logic of opposition, but such a logic should not be mistaken for a representationalism which mistakenly associates *a pragmatically-useful understanding of how we refer to phenomena in language with philosophical certainty*. Undoubtedly, common sense discourse may (when reflected upon) be determined rational or true, but not by virtue of its representational correspondence. If, as Hegel suggests, persons have a tendency to misidentify common sense discourse with 'truth' and philosophical or logical reflection with abstraction, the reverse is in fact the case. He states in the Introduction to the *Science of Logic*:

[W]hen the difference of matter and form, of object and thought is not left in that nebulous indeterminateness but is taken more definitely, then each is regarded as a sphere divorced from the other. Thinking therefore in its reception and formation of material does not go outside itself; its reception of the material and the conforming of itself to it remains a modification of its own self, it does not result in thought becoming the other of itself; and self-conscious determining moreover belongs only to thinking. In its relation to the object, therefore, thinking does not go out of itself to the object; this, as a thing-in-itself, remains a sheer beyond of thought.

These views on the relation of subject and object to each other express the determinations which constitute the nature of our ordinary, phenomenal consciousness; but when these prejudices are carried out into the sphere of reason as if the same relation obtained there, as if this relation were something true in its own self, then they are errors the—refutation

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, (NY: Humanity Books, 1969), 46.

of which throughout every part of the spiritual and natural universe is philosophy, or rather, as they bar the entrance to philosophy, must be discarded at its portals.²

In Adams' own language, it is incorrect to apply classificatory discourse or a logic of opposition to a philosophical theatre of application without deployment of transcendental reflection.

Having laid out the bare bones of Adams' position, in the remainder of my time I want to highlight what I take to be the dramatic consequences of his account for contemporary Christian theology. Before doing so, it is important to appreciate that Adams' engagement between Christian theology and Hegel's logic offers an important retort to Hegel's own tendency to dismiss religious thinking as picture-thinking. Any religious thinker seeking to offer an account of 'rational' religious thought after Hegel has to come to terms with Hegel's analysis of religious representation in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. She must account for how the move from Christianity to 'absolute knowing' does not result in the supersession of religion by reason.

Here is a quick synopsis of this discussion. Christianity, Hegel says, constitutes a penultimate achievement in philosophical knowing. It does this by way of its recognition that 'truth' is a matter of 'logical relations' and not correspondence. Where, according to Hegel, do we see evidence of this recognition in Christianity? We see it in Christianity's understanding of the relation between the Word and God (or Jesus and God)—i.e., in its transcendental understanding of precisely that which Kant could not apprehend, namely that the finite and the infinite are related in, as Adams says, a logic of pairs (his short-hand for "transcendental logic can be applied here"). Christianity understands or apprehends that "God 'is'" is tantamount to "how God is known by the subject" (*The Word is God, the Word is 'with' God*). Of course this means that Christianity also apprehends that "how the subject knows" is determined by the Object (*the Word is God*)—i.e., the subject and object together constitute the rule or the how the judgment is constituted. In their picture of the Absolute, Christians apprehend that Logos *is* a logical (normative) relation. As Adams suggests, the implications of this move are significant since with this, Christianity apprehends philosophically what other representations of truth had not—namely that truth is an awareness of a method of knowing (even, and in particular, with regard to the relation between the finite and the infinite).

Nonetheless, and here is the issue, the *Phenomenology* suggests that despite its authentic apprehension of how the absolute consists of a logical relation between the finite and the infinite, Christianity's so-called apprehension is partial only, linked as it is to a picture or a claim regarding Jesus. By associating the notion that truth is logical relation *with a fixed claim concerning Jesus'*idivinity, Christianity withholds this claim from absolute reflection such that it retains privileged, representational status. Christianity therefore remains afflicted by an internal self-contradiction. If religious thinkers are going to ride the Hegelian wave, we have to have a good response to this challenge.

Fortunately, Adams has one. Not only does he say that Christianity both apprehends and has fully appropriated the right truth, he maintains that Hegel's own account of absolute knowing derives from Christian logic in the first place. Here, Adams will quote John's "In the beginning was the Word and the Word is God and the Word is with God" to make the point that long before the *Phenomenology*, Christianity understood how the 'is' of the Word in relation to God is not strictly 'analytic' but 'synthetic' in Kantian terms. 'Is' means 'with' and 'with' means constitutive and therefore expressive of a rule which links the two terms. Moreover, Christians do not, Adams

² Hegel, *Logic*, 44-45.

maintains, relegate this truth to a picture arrived at intuitively and then presupposed but appropriate it reflectively. Adams challenges Hegel's characterization of the way that Christians hold the claim about the Word as God and asserts that this characterization is itself oppositional. Hegel, he says,

has a one-sided understanding of divine gift, where the agency of God and the agency of the creature are opposed to each other. It is easy enough to repair this shortcoming: one simply insists that the theological concept 'grace' expresses an overcoming of false oppositions between divine gift and human receipt, between God's donation and human incorporation into the body of Christ.³

In other words, Hegel, you haven't understood the Eucharist. Christians do not posit the Word as fixed and distant. Rather, they participate directly in it. The finite and the infinite take place within the logical relation between the two—i.e., Eucharistic participation means participation in the logical relation of the Logos. Not only is Jesus qua finite logically related to the divine, but so is the Christian community. The Church is the body of Christ, and therefore Christian life is thinking in and acting with the Word. Christianity and a logic of relations are compatible, and such compatibility offers a good description of what it means to think and live in and with the Word.

As I've indicated, I take Adams' intervention as extremely valuable when thinking about religious thought after Hegel. Noteworthy, Adams' intervention has a precedent in the conception of the community as lived script described in Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. There, Mendelssohn argues that knowledge of God and knowledge of world are semiotic affairs. We live in language. Of course, language functions as written script and oral communication. We need the former for transmission purposes, but it's only the latter that generates knowledge as the on-going discernment of life in the world and in the Word. Most importantly, the delicate balance between written texts and oral speech bypasses representational forms of knowledge. According to Mendelssohn, representation stymies the living connection between language and world. Written language is the condition of the possibility of reflection through oral communication, not its fulfillment.

When applied to religious knowledge and language, representational regard for written discourse is tantamount to idolatry. If, for Mendelssohn, fixed identification between sign and reality in general renders an immeasurable world measurable, fixed identification between a written claim and divine reality limits God. *Theological propositionalism is a contradiction in terms for Mendelssohn.*

This demise of theological propositionalism does not, however, signal the end of religious thought for Mendelssohn, since the semiotic character of revelation gives rise to and takes shape as the on-going study and, indeed, practice or living engagement with the Word (in this case, Torah). For Mendelssohn, study or reflection means an analysis of the process by which language, world, and word come into play in community conversation. (Obviously one would need a good bit of time to compare his account of study or reflection to Hegel's account of speculative thought.) But study, Mendelssohn maintains is only complete as practice or the living enactment of the text, since reflection means reflection upon the (logical?) relations between word, world, and community. Certainly, such reflection impacts upon considerations of rightful action. (With this, Mendelssohn anticipates the required relationship between 'reflection' qua theoretical assessment of semiotic

³ Nicholas Adams, "How Theological is Hegel's Theology: A Response to Cyril O'Regan," unpublished, academia.edu., 8.

relations and practice, which becomes a cornerstone of both Hegel and Cohen's critiques of Kant and in particular of Kant's type of practical reason—but more on that another day). Ultimately, then, for Mendelssohn, the Jewish community who studies the text theoretically and translates the effects of this study into action serves as the greatest example of what it means to engage in religious (indeed, theological) reasoning. Certainly, it is worth noting how the Torah, or what Mendelssohn refers to as “revealed legislation,” is particularly suitable to this form of communal reflection, since reflection upon law naturally generates transcendental accounts of the rules governing legal logic. Written law naturally generates oral reflection instead of propositional determinations. And finally, of course, laws reflected upon are or should be enacted.⁴

The similarities between Mendelssohn's account of the Jewish community's theoretical and practical engagement with the divine Word as legislation and Adams' account of the nexus between Christian theology and Hegelian logic—i.e. the Eucharistic community—should be clear. In both instances, religious thought registers as on-going reflection regarding the rules or categories operative with regard to the elements of religious life as taken up in the Word—i.e. persons, world, and especially God. Religious reasoning (including reasoning about God, both theoretically and practically performed) takes place within and in relation to the logic of the text (and the world) and not outside of it. Reflection upon God, for example, means the methodological analysis of the norms constitutive of the judgments we make in texts and in the world when the judgments (statements of classification) have to do with God.

While readers may find the similarities between Adams' Hegelian-informed account of religious reason and Mendelssohn's description of the Jewish community as the lived script rather surprising, a number of leading Jewish philosophers have devoted scholarly labor to spelling out multiple points of connection between Hegel and Jewish textual reasoning. For example, in his *Philosophy and the Jewish Question*, Bruce Rosenstock identifies Mendelssohn's notion of the Jewish community as the “lived script” as the paradigm of Hegel's account of the Last Supper first described in his earlier “The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate.” As Rosenstock says,

Mendelssohn's impact upon Hegel's early theological writings is both extensive and deep ... Mendelssohn had argued that Judaism, lacking a creed or set of revealed doctrines, is not properly called a religion. Rather, the Jewish people, living in accordance with the orally transmitted interpretation of the written ceremonial laws, are the corporate embodiment of the revealed legislation, its “living script.” This emphasis upon embodied ceremonies is central in Hegel's *Spirit-Fate*. Hegel's use of Mendelssohn's claim that the Jewish people are a “living script” is most apparent in his interpretation of the Last Supper, the Jewish Passover ceremony that Jesus “fulfills” before his death. ... Like Mendelssohn with his interpretation of Jewish ceremonial practices as a “living script” of revelation, Hegel sees the significance of the Last Supper as lying in its fusion of action and interpretation. Also, [Hegel indicates that]...Jesus's fusion of action and sign in the Last Supper cannot be sustained by the disciples. Although Jesus's love is the fully present meaning that the act of sharing bread and wine as his flesh and blood signifies, this loving action leaves behind itself a bodily remainder, the bread and wine in the mouths of the disciples. This bodily remainder makes the ritual of communion inherently different from the Jewish ceremonies that consist in purely “transitory” acts in which “there is nothing lasting.” This transitoriness is the essential

⁴ For Mendelssohn's analysis of Judaism and written and oral Torah, see, Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1983), Section II.

quality of the “living script” that the Jewish ceremonial law becomes in the embodied existence of the people. Hegel contrasts the bodily remainder of Jesus’s love with an ideal form of writing that would disappear upon being read. This ideal writing is like Mendelssohn’s “transitory” signs of the “living script” of the Jewish ceremonial law. Like Mendelssohn’s “living script,” Hegel’s ideal writing is an antidote to idolatry, the fetishization of the sign.⁵

Clearly, Hegel’s language of pure subjectivity or pure spirit ‘leaving no remainder behind’ should not be construed as a spiritual reduction of the material. Rather, by this Hegel means what he argues in the *Phenomenology*, namely that the body of Christ constitutes the logic of subject and object in logical relation, and yet, the community who consumes this ‘truth’ leaves a remainder—i.e. does not fully consume it but permits the retention of an un-consumed, unreflected upon claim that “only Christ is the logos.” In contrast to this, as Rosenstock suggests, Mendelssohn’s account of the Jewish people as the living script who fully reflect upon the Word and do so not only through (oral) study but through legal action (practical reason as the negotiation of the finite and the infinite) offers a corrected model.

Consequently, if Rosenstock is correct that Hegel (partly) based his account of the Last Supper on Mendelssohn’s account of the Jewish people, Adams’ argument for a viable religious rationality in the wake of the *Phenomenology* gains force. In other words, a Hegelian critique of Christian theology as synonymous with theological representationalism (all content, no form) finds authentic correction in an account of Christian thought when it mirrors the life of study and action characteristic of the Jewish people as the lived script.

Indeed, such an approach to religious thought predicated upon a particular account of language, logic, and law, rules out two common, modern approaches to theology: a) a theological propositionalism which insists upon the fixed connection between representations and divine reality or b) the Barthian rejection of this relation together with the insistence nonetheless of an absolute wholly other theological realism (i.e., the fixed claim that we do not know God and God is nonetheless ‘real’ in his unknowability).

To put an end to theological representationalism is not to consign religious thought to silence. We talk about God all the time. Our texts and traditions speak about God, and this speech or language *operates in the world*. Still, to say about theology what Hegel says about natural science, namely that it takes its objects for granted, is not the same as saying that it takes the theological or philosophical justification of these objects for granted as deductive principles from which justified claims can be made. A post-Hegelian, non-representational Christian thinking is, as Adams says, inevitably textual, logical, and judicious.

I see this as very, very good news. Still, I end with a question. In a recent paper delivered at Notre Dame, Adams takes on Cyril O’Regan’s challenge to the role of Hegelian logic in Christian theology. There, as in the larger book, he insists that Hegel’s logic should have a limited use with regard to theology (a limited “theatre of application”). In the book, a limited theatre of application seems to mean that there are proper *occasions* for philosophical inquiry, occasions when common sense discourses about phenomena concern matters of subject-object relations, individual and community, thought and being, and freedom and tradition. Philosophy as transcendental logic makes a kind of truce with ordinary language and does not force itself upon instances of ‘paper doubts.’ In

⁵ Bruce Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig and Beyond*, (NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), 210-211.

the Notre Dame essay, however, Nick suggests a slightly different account of what he means by theater of application. About the “logic of reconciliation,” he says that “Hegel takes a perfectly good insight with limited application and over-extends it.”⁶ Some claims, Nick seems to suggest, should be off-limits from transcendental reflection, like the claim that there is a difference between the creature and the creator. “The latter,” Nick says, “is a perfectly good opposition which the tradition rightly insists on preserving and repeatedly acknowledging.”⁷ By Hegel’s *over-extension* Adams seems to be referring to Hegel’s insistence that, if not practically then certainly theoretically, any claim *can* be subject to speculation.

Such a critique suggests a shift in Adams’ appropriation of Hegel. In the book, Hegel’s only real problem concerns his dismissal of religion as not fully rational. Here, however, the problem seems to be Hegel’s insistence upon the logic of reconciliation as the rightful approach to matters of subject-object (knowledge) relations. The question I raise obviously is not whether there is a good and fair opposition between God and creatures, but whether or not the determination of this opposition is consigned to a fixed status, immune from further reflection. To the extent to which Nick here suggests as much, it causes me to wonder whether his encounter between Hegel and Christian thought is good news after all. I will leave it to him to let me know.

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⁶ Adams, “How Theological is Hegel’s Theology?,”h9.

⁷ Ibid.