

Lessing's Ditch: A Preface

In 1777 G. E. Lessing published a pamphlet with the title "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power."¹ It is a commentary on a quotation from Origen, who argued for the truth of Christianity because of its "prodigious" miracles. Since reports of miracles are not themselves miracles, wrote Lessing, the reports are only as reliable as any historical account can ever be. In addition, historical truths cannot be demonstrated. Nevertheless Christian apologetics claim that "we must believe them as firmly as truths that have been demonstrated."²

This posed a problem for Lessing, since "accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason." He fleshed this general statement out with examples:

If on historical grounds I have no objection to the statement that this Christ himself rose from the dead, must I therefore accept it as true that this risen Christ was the Son of God?

That the Christ, against whose resurrection I can raise no important objection, therefore declared himself to be the Son of God; that his disciples therefore believed him to be such; this I gladly believe from my heart. For these truths, as truths of one and the same class, follow quite naturally on one another.

But to jump with that historical truth to a quite different class of truths, and to demand of me that I should form all my metaphysical and moral ideas accordingly; to expect me to alter all my fundamental ideas of the nature of the Godhead because I cannot set any credible testimony against the resurrection of Christ: if that is not a *metabasis eis allo genos* [shift into another genus], then I do not know what Aristotle meant by this term.³

Lessing drove the point home with a vivid metaphor. "That, then, is the ugly, broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap. If anyone can help me over it, let him do it, I beg him, I adjure him. He will deserve a divine reward from me."

In 1968, when I returned to university for graduate studies, Emil Fackenheim drew my attention to Lessing's ditch, and suggested I investigate the way in which Lessing's successors responded to that final plea. Kierkegaard had self-consciously adopted the image of an impossible leap, making it the central motif of his philosophical writings.⁴ Schelling, in his lectures on modern philosophy, accused Hegel of an illegitimate move when he shifted from the logic to the philosophy of nature: "The point at which the Hegelian philosophy arrives in this move is a bad one, one which has not been foreseen at the beginning of the logic: an ugly broad ditch."⁵

Fackenheim suggested that Kierkegaard and Schelling were not alone in picking up Lessing's gauntlet, but that it motivated the religious philosophies of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel as well. If I were looking for an interesting topic for a dissertation, this was it.

In the course of completing degree requirements, the range originally suggested was gradually narrowed, until the final submission focused simply on Hegel and the late lectures of Schelling.⁶

The papers collected in this volume reflect several aspects of that early preoccupation, now modified and elaborated. They reflect my conviction that Hegel's response to Lessing's challenge is of greater interest than that of Schelling (and, indeed, than those of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Kierkegaard).

Lessing distinguished between two classes of truths: truths believed on the basis of historical testimony, and the truths of reason by which we form all our metaphysical and moral ideas. The former are accidental and contingent; the latter are necessary and fundamental. The difference between them is so radical that it cannot be bridged.

Yet Hegel set out to provide such a bridge. And he did so by investigating both sides of the ditch—the eternal truths of reason as well as the contingent truths of nature and history.

By approaching Hegel from this perspective I noticed features of his logical discussion that are all too often overlooked. The truths of reason are not static: each one is involved in a transition into something else; concepts dialectically shift to their contrary. Yet they are not entirely fluid. Reason fixes opposites as alternatives; it recognizes that finitude is an inevitable counterpart to infinity, that contingency is the inverse of necessity, that universality becomes abstract and

opposed to radical singularity. These concepts are understood both as distinct and determinate, and as complementary and interrelated.

*On Hegel's Logic*⁷ offered some fragmentary results of that investigation into the nature of reason. An *exposition de texte* of the logic of actuality ("The Necessity of Contingency") was an early attempt to test the water, and became central to the demonstration that Hegel's logic was necessary. Subsequently I modified my original interpretation. The objective status of thought's dialectical becoming ("The First Chapter of Hegel's Larger *Logic*"), the tripartite scheme of transition, reflection, and disjunction ("Transition or Reflection"), and the central role understanding plays in the logical process ("Where is the Place of Understanding?") all received a more focused attention, both defending my interpretation against criticism and documenting some of its radical implications.

The conclusions reached are significant for Lessing's problem. According to Hegel, the necessary and universal truths of reason do not exclude the accidental, the singular, the finite, or the transitory as totally alien to its nature. Within the realm of pure reason, contingency and particularity—with all their diversity—are inevitable counterparts to, and conditions for, universal necessity. In addition, comprehensive thought posits and requires a contingency opposed to conditioned necessity, a finitude opposed to infinite regress, and a singularity opposed to abstract universality. Without that reference to radical difference, reason collapses into a simple identity that merely repeats its own inane formulae.

When compared with Schelling's alternative, the subtlety of Hegel's analysis becomes evident. For Schelling, reason moves from pure potentiality through pure actuality to a conjunction of potentiality and actuality: that pattern continually recurs, modified by its specific context. When nature and history confirm whether reason's projections are fulfilled, contingencies are to be ignored and only essential patterns brought to light ("Challenge to Hegel").

Reason may be open to contingent singularity. But that will not by itself resolve Lessing's problem. For, like Procrustes, we may use it to force external finitude into its own mold. Thus Schelling constructs an interpretation of Greek mythology and Christian revelation that makes them conform to the structure of potencies and potentialities. Hegel could well be guilty of the same sin. For he too incorporates the discoveries of natural science and the narratives of history into his systematic perspective.

After all, Hegel's reason does not leave contingency and singularity to persist as unresolved diversity. The logical discussions of these categories lead on dialectically to their counterparts until all are

resolved into a more comprehensive unity. So contingency becomes but a component of absolute necessity, while singularity and abstract universality are coupled in judgement and finally integrated in disjunctive inference.

In a sophisticated move at the very end of his *Logic*, Hegel anticipates this challenge. In his chapter "The Absolute Idea," pure thought has come to terms with itself and has transparently identified its method. That self-transparency, however, reveals to thought its own limitations. All of the differences explored—the finite categories, the contingent transitions, the particularized alternatives—are nonetheless internally related as aspects of thought itself. Its infinite, necessary universality incorporates diversity into its own dynamic. That means, however, that it has had nothing to say about genuine diversity, about external relations, about actual contingencies in a world far removed from thought, about singular events that are not at all conceptual. Using its own categories, pure thought thus recognizes its own partiality. As a network of internal relations, it is outside of, and excluded from, all external relations.

Thought, however, does more. It can expect that whatever is other than thought can nevertheless be accurately described by some of the terms that have emerged within its own development. That "other" will constitute a realm that is contingent, transitory, finite, external, and singular (all of which are categories of the logic). So thought has, within its own vocabulary, concepts that will be appropriate to nature as its alien counterpart.

Thought anticipates something else as well. For reason can overreach its opposite and discover there a necessity inherent in the contingency, an infinite network of relations that sets the context for the finite, explanatory disjunctions that situate singulars. In fact, this is precisely what natural science and history have done, and continue to do, albeit in a disconnected way. They take contingencies in space and time and trace the connections that tie them together. The philosophies of nature and history reflect on this process, and set those segregated results within a more comprehensive perspective.

The achievement of pure thought, then, is appropriately twosided. Thought has become self-consciously partial; on its own it can know nothing about external contingencies and historical accidents. To do justice to them it must take account of how they are different and unique. Nevertheless, it has tools for thinking about the ways they are different and for discovering how those differences are themselves related as components of identities, how singulars are integrated into generals, and how some contingencies relatively condition others.

So the second half of Hegel's response to Lessing concerns the ways we can legitimately talk about accidental truths. In other words, how accidents are appropriately transformed into truths in such a way that their inherent necessity becomes manifest and that reason is not merely instantiated but does justice to external differences and their significance.

The discussion of this aspect of the question is divided into two parts. The first considers some relations between thought and empirical reality in general: time as transition ("Concept and Time in Hegel") and political equality as logical diversity ("The Inequity of Equality"). The general principles involved are spelled out in "Is Hegel a Rationalist or an Empiricist?"

Hegel shows that even the most conservative description of natural and political phenomena can reveal an inherent rationality. The movement from future to present to past is an upside-down form of the logic of becoming. Political debates about equality falter because they ignore the logical point that similarities are abstracted from dissimilarities. By taking account of what we discover empirically and describing it accurately in the abstract categories of thought, and by noticing what happens when political dogmas are pushed to their limits, we find an implicit rationality that reflects, even though in an inverted form, the structures and patterns of the logic.

Lessing's dilemma, however, focused not on contingency in general but on the accidental truths of Christian history, which is the specific theme of the final section. For Hegel did not scruple in tackling that question directly. He showed how religious yearning itself seeks to overcome transience and change ("'Unhappy Consciousness' in Hegel"). Death, the final mark of human finitude, does not separate us from transcendent divinity, but is central to religious doctrine, feeling and practice ("God, Man, and Death"). The agony of the mystical dark night and the self-condemnation of confession, though religious truths, are the existential counterpart of rational negativity ("Is Hegel a Christian?"). In addition, when one abstracts the content of religious doctrine and practice from its determinate descriptions one finds a transition from individual to universal, a synthesis of particulars within a universal, and a universal that integrates singulars and particulars—three patterns that embody the logical forms of syllogistic inference ("The Syllogisms of Revealed Religion").

Thus the accidental truths of history show themselves to be the incarnation of the necessary truths reason unfolds. On the one hand, negativity constitutes the most profound moments of human experience; on the other hand three mediated movements are integrated into a single network of syllogisms. Indeed, this correspondence

serves to establish the logic as true. Reason and Christian faith mutually justify each other.

Yet Hegel's achievement is not complete. Despite Lessing's explicit challenge, he does not show the necessity of Christ's resurrection. The individual God-man dies, and through death becomes universally present: the rational necessity of that can be recognized. But Hegel affirms no empty tomb, no resurrection of the body. He identifies instead with the traditions for which the resurrection is spiritual and the risen body is the Christian community. The reported miracle of the first Easter remains accidental, outside of the necessary truths of reason.

In addition, the fact that thought must be radically open to the contingencies of history raises a final question: when Hegel bridges the ditch between reason's necessity and history's contingency, is that itself an accidental and transient accomplishment or does it mark the final victory of pure thought? ("Is Hegel a Christian?")

While the various chapters in this volume originated as independent essays in response to particular conditions, they nonetheless reflect an inherent network of relations. Together they represent one effort to work through Hegel's response to Lessing's challenge. And in the course of doing so, they defend a number of crucial interpretative theses:

1. There is a significant difference between Hegel's logic and his philosophy of the real world. The "necessary truths" of the former can be developed within the confines of pure thought, abstracted from actual contingencies. The latter must be radically open to what in fact does occur, and to the contingent attempts by scientists and historians to understand and explain those events. While scientific and historical investigations inevitably use rational categories like "cause" and "purpose," they must do justice to accidental truths that could never have been anticipated.

2. The integration of conceptual thought and actuality, which Hegel calls the Idea, is not itself a simple feature of conceptual thought. It is thought overreaching that which is other than thought, an overreaching that must take account of the difference between concept and actuality—of the nasty, broad ditch—as well as their similarity.

3. Because the difference just mentioned is essential to the Idea, thought must continually be open. In other words, Hegel's philosophy is not closed to novelty but, in order to be consistent, expects its systematic comprehension to be temporary and transitory. New events will build on what has already been achieved. But that novelty will be as much rejection and destruction as elaboration and completion.

4. A final thesis is even more radical. The revision that will continue to be necessary in the philosophies of nature and of spirit reverts back to the realm of pure thought. For thought is an abstraction *from* reality, not an independent realm. As new differences and determinations emerge in reality, the logician will become aware of how thought has previously confused distinct logical operations and concepts, and how apparently disparate concepts are nonetheless dialectically related. While its method might be absolute, details of Hegel's *Logic* turn out not to be so.

Thus there is contingency even in the necessary truths of reason, just as there is necessity within the accidental truths of science, history and religion. The ditch is neither as broad, nor as ugly, as Lessing had made it out to be. The miraculous is not really as miraculous as it had appeared. That, however, leaves a final question for the reader to answer: Does Hegel merit the divine reward that Lessing offered anyone who would help him over the ditch?