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Hegel as a Theorist of Secularization

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Abstract

Hegel's philosophy of religion is characterized by what seems to be a deep tension. On the one hand, Hegel claims to be a Christian thinker, viewing religion, and in particular Christianity, as a manifestation of the absolute. On the other hand, however, he seems to view modernity as largely secular, devoid of authoritative claims to transcendence. Modernity is secular in the political sense of requiring the state to be neutral when it comes to matters of religion. However, it is also secular in the sense of there being no recourse to authoritative representations of a transcendent God. Drawing on Charles Taylor's view of secularization, the article focuses on the second strand of his religious thinking, exploring how Hegel can be thought of as a theorist of secularization. It is claimed that his dialectic of religious development describes a process of secularization. Ultimately, Hegel's system offers a view of the absolute as immanent, suggesting that an adequate account of religion will necessarily have to accept secularization as the end-point of spirit's development. This is how the tension between religion and secularization can be resolved.

Can Hegel be described as a theorist of secularization? On standard interpretations of his thinking this characterization is bound to seem either blatantly untrue or downright implausible. Surely, as his theological education, biography and writings—from the early texts on Christianity to the development of a philosophy of spirit organized around the key triune figure of abstract universality, self-differentiation, and reconciliatory *Aufhebung*—demonstrate, Hegel was a Christian philosopher, aiming to offer something like a philosophical account of Christianity capable of transforming the essentially mythological meaning of 'revealed truth' into a conceptually articulated understanding of spirit. As he keeps repeating throughout his mature writings, spirit is the 'absolute' and the 'truth,' and religion is one expression and manifestation of this truth.[1]

In the following I will not be interested in disputing this picture. Rather, the aim is to suggest that it is through Hegel's unfolding of his Christian thinking—his account of spirit, and more specifically, his lectures on the philosophy of

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religion—that we find the sources of what I would like to suggest is his theory of secularization.[2] Hegel, I thus argue, in what must be considered an interpretive puzzle, is a theorist of secularization *malgré lui*. Indeed, the puzzle is not just interpretive but goes, I submit, to the heart of Hegel's thinking, which seeks to articulate a point of view from which the opposition between infinite substance, or the absolute, and finite being can be characterized as successfully overcome. It is through this overcoming, presupposing an exhaustion or externalization (*Entäusserung*) of spirit, that God not only dies in the Enlightenment sense (with religion failing to provide authoritative reasons for belief) but becomes a purely abstract structure of immanent yet a priori categories, disclosed as *Vernunft* and *Idee*, and actualizing itself in the various *Realphilosophien* of nature, history, politics and culture.

According to Hegel, contemporary Western modernity finds itself devoid of resources for entertaining faith in a transcendent reality.[3] The commitments that once made faith of this kind possible (and, Hegel claims, reasonable) have yielded to commitments of a completely different type—centered on intellectualization, rationalization, self-reflection, and a complex sense of oneself as a free agent within constraints and conditions enabling such freedom. Indeed, modernity's only concrete manifestation of the divine is the rational state itself, insofar as it actualizes the kind of freedom Hegel has in mind. The context, which so many commentators of his work have noticed, of 'absolutized immanence,' seeming to make up what Hegel views as the modern world, is thus the result of a complex history and dialectic which, I suggest, is best described as a process of secularization. The task in this essay will be to trace some of the most important lines of argument whereby Hegel accounts for this process.

I. Secularization: The Concept

As the result of Charles Taylor's magisterial 2007 study *A Secular Age*, debates around the concept of secularization have recently gained momentum.[4] However, philosophers of history and social theorists having contributed to an understanding of the process of secularization include such figures as Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Löwith, Blumenberg, and, most recently, Marcel Gauchet, whose *The Disenchantment of the World* paved the way for many of Taylor's key ideas and characterizations.[5] Accounts of secularization are of course numerous, differing a) methodologically, b) in terms of the central causes or conditions to be highlighted as the explanans, and c) when it comes to identifying the explanandum itself: What exactly is the phenomenon one tries to explain and, once a definition is agreed upon, is the phenomenon *really* occurring? Is Western modernity correctly characterized as marked by secularism, or is it

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that only certain practices or social spheres, such as politics and science, have been secularized?

I will not venture into the many concerns arising from this theorizing. However, in order to assess whether Hegel can rightly be described as a theorist of secularization, some handles are needed whereby to demarcate and determine the phenomenon itself. One such handle is the distinction between, on the one hand, secularization understood as a loss of belief in the broadest possible sense of the word, including participation in practices that are expressive of religious commitments and, on the other, secularization as an institutional or more broadly political process, affecting in particular the state. Judging from the literature, it is perfectly possible to view a certain process of transformation as an instance of secularization by focusing only on one of these kinds of frameworks. It is logically possible to have a society in which belief has withered while the state remains religious, and vice versa. Of course, in some societies, especially pre-modern ones, it may be hard to distinguish the two. Thus, many theorists of secularization have focused on both features, and as I will argue, Hegel can be read as viewing modern society as secular in *both* senses of the word: individual belief, at least if it is rational (and for Hegel, in order to acquire authority, belief today must be presented as rational, that is, open to scrutiny, adjudication and possible agreement with other rational agents), can no longer be religious in the traditional sense; and while an objective expression of spirit, the state is essentially secular in the sense of seeking to be neutral between various faiths and confessions.

Secularization theorists also distinguish between descriptive and normative accounts. In descriptive accounts, secularization is a historical process to be retrieved in essentially objective and value-neutral terms. In normative accounts, by contrast, while historical development is unavoidable, the emphasis lies on the possible rightness/wrongness or adequacy/inadequacy (relative to other goals or purposes that may relevantly be ascribed to the community in question) of this process. Thus, on normative accounts, secularization can be characterized in terms of such normatively loaded concepts as loss and nihilism, or emancipation and liberation. While Hegel can be characterized as a historian of secularization, and in that sense proceeding descriptively, I will claim that he is also engaged in accounting for secularization in normative terms. Secularization, understood both in judgmental and in socio-political terms, is for Hegel a *necessary* outcome of spirit's own self-actualization. For spirit to be what it is in truth, it needs to exhaust itself in the world; hence secularization is something that *must* take place and is in that sense purposive.

Before I turn to Hegel's writings, I will highlight two strategies from Taylor's *A Secular Age*—one at the level of the explanandum and another methodological—that can be viewed as of Hegelian inspiration, and which will

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therefore be used in order to frame the discussion of Hegel's doctrine. The first is that secularization is best characterized not primarily in terms of the actual prevalence of certain types of affirmative belief (say, beliefs about the existence of a transcendent deity and, conjoined with that, about the possible immortality of the human soul) but, rather, in terms of the *conditions of belief*. According to Taylor, it is necessary to distinguish between the mere holding of a belief (which includes first-person, reflective knowledge of the fact that one holds the belief, an understanding of the meaning of the belief, some knowledge of the social and existential implications of holding it, as well as the propensity to minimize epistemic arbitrariness by offering reasons for its acceptance) and the *conditions* of belief—*what* it is to believe, the lived experience involved in understanding one's life and experience in the light of religious belief, or what Taylor (2007: 3) also refers to as 'the horizon.' Five hundred years ago, he maintains, virtually everybody in Europe took the existence of God for granted. It was part of their background, their horizon, what they could not see themselves reasoning either for or against.[6] Today, when that socially shared and endorsed background is supposed to have withered, while people may have beliefs about the existence of God, they cannot ground their beliefs in the shared trust that existed previously. While their beliefs may appear reasonable, or reflective of strongly held convictions or deep-seated emotion, they do not reflect people's general and unquestionable attitude to life and existence in the way they once did. Taylor (2007: 27) associates the loss of this background with a gradual change from what he calls the 'porous self,' open to powers and authority residing in a fundamentally 'enchanted' environment, to the 'buffered self,' which essentially, and along quasi-Cartesian lines, views itself as being set in opposition to a 'disenchanted' world of objects and events. Unlike the porous self, the buffered self tends not to recognize any authority beyond that of reason itself.

The distinction between belief and condition of belief (together with the idea that secularization should be analyzed primarily at the level of the condition of belief) is one point that I propose can be carried over from Taylor's analysis to my approach to Hegel as a theorist of secularization. The main evidence for this reading will be that Hegel seeks to analyze secularization at the level of Spirit, *Geist*, which is always a shared possession or determination, expressive of shared commitments to norms of theoretical or practical significance. As for Taylor, a major component of Hegel's picture of secularization is precisely the internalization of spirit, taking place in modernity, as the cognitive activities of a purportedly rational subject—existing within an intersubjectively secured life-form but no longer in an unreflective, immediate way—become the generally recognized source of validation and truth.

The other point I would like to make is drawn from Taylor's dismissal of what he calls the 'subtraction thesis.' The thesis, typical of Enlightenment

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thinking and familiar from a number of classical theorists of secularization, including Marx and Freud, holds that secularization is best described as a form of demystification. On such an approach, secularization is the process whereby a community, submitted to various pressures of a rational or non-rational kind, gradually turns from illusion to reality—subtracting, as it were, or peeling away, the world of illusion from the world of reality so that only the latter is left. Taylor's chief objection against the subtraction thesis is that it is circular, presupposing that religion is illusory and the contemporary, scientific world-view true, thereby suggesting at the outset that the process called secularization had to take a singular route when in fact it needs to be traced on its own terms.[7] By predominantly looking for transitions from belief to unbelief, rather than being open to the real complexity of the process of secularization, the theorist will tend to misrepresent it. In Taylor's view, when analyzed properly, the transitions leading to greater secularization are often those that go from one kind of belief to another, and not always, or even rarely, those that go directly from belief to agnosticism or atheism. In this sense, secularization can be brought about by religious fervour, if that fervour, as in the great reform movements culminating in Luther and Calvin, is such that it changes the conditions of belief. As I want to suggest, Hegel's rejection of the subtraction-thesis is manifest in his desire to view spirit's development dialectically, as a process of abstraction and self-alienation, culminating in the enlightenment project of subjectivizing belief.

II. Hegel's God

Hegel's remarks about the fate and status of religion are spread out across his whole work, ranging from the early Bern and Frankfurt explorations of the moral and social implications of Christianity to the latest statements of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, in which religion, understood to be a representation (*Vorstellung*) of spirit, dependent on symbolically charged expressions in the form of sensible imagery, is placed at the second tier of the tripartite manifestation of absolute spirit, comprising art, religion, and philosophy. In the *Encyclopedia*, religion is described as having the same content as art and philosophy, namely the absolute, while being inferior to philosophy because of formally relying on representation (*Vorstellung*).

For Hegel, this distinction carries a number of implications, some of which are immediately relevant to the purpose of reconstructing his account of secularization. Representation means that the subject, in order to arrive at self-understanding (which, after all, is the goal of spirit), must do so via some mediating medium by means of which it directs itself to the object (in this case itself, considered as the object of reflection). As Hegel (1977b: 47) famously

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notes in the 'Introduction' to *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the notion of such a medium, standing between the subject and the object, mediating their relation and purportedly ensuring a cognitive grip, is bound to generate scepticism of the type familiar from Descartes and the whole tradition of the 'way of the ideas' (Locke, Hume, and so on). What the picture suggests is that since direct epistemic access is restricted to the medium (the idea, the *Vorstellung*), there can be no easy or straightforward way of ascertaining that the medium in fact effectively secures objective knowledge.[8] Regardless of whatever medium one deploys, from a cognitive point of view it will appear arbitrary. By contrast to such a picture, a conceptually mediated self-understanding, while not dependent on any sensuous or finite medium that just passively and without rational involvement functions to bring objects within our epistemic grasp, is able to know the object universally and in a mode of full freedom and transparency. This is the key reason why philosophy is a higher mode or form of knowledge than both art (being directly restricted to sensuous presentation) and religion (being dependent on *Vorstellung*, whether sensuous or not) can ever be.

The question, however, is whether the systematic need for a category of religion really corresponds to a commitment on the part of Hegel to a corresponding object. What kind of conception does he have of God? Moreover, is this conception homologous with the conception propounded by the religious believer in her dependency on the form or medium of representation?

No student of Hegel can ignore the fact that, rather than viewing religion negatively, as a possession unworthy of humanity in its mature state, familiar from certain strands of the Enlightenment and from thinkers such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, Hegel wants to imbue religion with a tremendous aura of authority, seriousness, and inner truth:

> [Religion] is the loftiest object that can occupy human beings; it is the absolute object. It is the region of eternal truth and eternal virtue, the region where all the riddles of thought, all contradictions, and all the sorrows of the heart should show themselves to be resolved, and the region of the eternal peace through which the human being is truly human. (Hegel 1988a: 75)

There is thus a clear sense in which Hegel does not think that the *content* of religion, which he always identifies with spirit and/or God, somehow is illusory.[9] On the contrary, spirit and/or God are the most real. 'God is the beginning and end of all things. God is the sacred center, which animates and inspires all things' (Hegel 1988a: 76).

Perhaps the most direct expression of his devotion to a conception of God as the absolute and the absolute truth comes at the end of the 1830 *Encyclopedia*

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(1959: 463), where he quotes Aristotle from *Metaphysics*, book Lambda 7, in which the Greek thinker gives his statement of the nature of the prime mover. In passages that inspired the medieval vision of philosophy as a "handmaiden" of theology, Aristotle reasons that, since the concept of an infinite chain of causal relations leads to an infinite regress, all process and change in the universe will ultimately have to presuppose an 'unmoved mover,' capable of causing process and change without itself being subject to it. The unmoved mover, Aristotle argues, is an immutable substance, acting eternally and, by being necessarily in accord with the demands of reason (*logos*), in ways that cannot but be good. In doing so it apprehends itself and becomes an object for itself: 'And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same' (Aristotle 1984: 1695).

In these passages it is not difficult to recognize Hegel's commitment to the divine as a wholly self-sufficient substance—the, as it were, logical structure of the world, necessarily actualizing itself by externalizing itself and then re-appropriating itself by identifying with its particular other.

In a much earlier writing, however, the 1801 *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel speaks of modernity as the period of disunity and alienation when people finally come to realize *that God is dead*.[10] Hegel's story of Western secularization is complex and lends itself to various interpretations. However, the key idea that must be associated with, and indeed identified with, secularity, is the, for Hegel, complete loss in modernity of any authoritative vision of divine *transcendence* (entailing, importantly, the vision of some sort of object of representation). The essential teaching of Christianity—and, obviously, the Scriptures—is that God, rather than being presentable in ontotheological terms as some sort of object of representation, is *fully revealed* (*geoffenbart*): whatever otherness or externality pertained to God has been overcome. In that God, understood as a transcendent being, is conceived of not only as *capable* of dying but, in the figure of Christ, as *actually* dying, Christianity is crucially different from all other religions. In Christ's resurrection and ascension, which the religious community receives in the form of the Holy Spirit, Hegel sees the possibility of a reconciliation of transcendence and immanence, universality and particularity, in the mediated unity of spirit.

Hegel's account of God's necessary death follows from his vision of spirit as essential self-revelation. The making of the world, he writes in the 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1988a: 129), 'is God's self-manifesting, self-revealing.' Drawing its inspiration from, among others, Jacob Böhme, the idea seems to be that spirit can only actualize itself insofar as it makes itself manifest to itself.[11] Inert unity—exemplified in accounts such as that of Spinoza, in which the substance is unitary, containing no moment of self-differentiation—involves no self-manifestation and hence no moment of creation, of coming into being or

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actuality. There must be some form of objectification followed by an appropriation of the objectification such that the subject can reflexively know itself as identical with its objectified other. Actualization is therefore self-differentiation followed by reunification or reconciliation with the differentiated other. As spirit actualizes itself, it comes to know itself in the successive determinations arising from the process of self-differentiation and reunification. The death of God is simply the highest expression, in any religion, of precisely this essential process of spirit's own self-manifestation. In the suffering of Christ, God—as an abstract, transcendent and universally real entity—is conceived of as dying away from Himself, being transformed into the self-reflective practices of the community of believers who in acts of worship commemorate this death. For Hegel, since it has discovered and articulated the dialectic of self-differentiation and reunification, Christianity is the only true or, as he puts it, *consummate* religion. It is the religion of the fully revealed God, in which the divine, when understood adequately, is no longer presented in an alienated, projected or transcendent form.

III. Hegel on Political Secularization

We have seen that Hegel most certainly is a believer, if this means that he holds the view that a divine substance exists. However, we have also seen that God's divinity (conceived in Hegel's *Science of Logic* as *die Idee*, comprising the full overcoming of all dualisms, the organic unity of all dialectical movements conceived as a whole) actualizes itself via externalization (*Entäusserung*) or *kenosis*, arriving ultimately at full self-revelation in the existing universe. Thus, while my view grants that Hegel did believe in a divine being, it also forms the basis for thinking not only about *how* the externalization takes place, which, I take it, is the object of Hegel's philosophy of spirit as a whole, but also about whether externalization—and with that the full overcoming of all appeals to transcendence—can justifiably be characterized in terms of secularization.

The apparent ambiguity of Hegel's position – the endorsement of Christianity coupled with the belief that the modern world is indeed secular – comes out clearly in his assessment of the role of religion in the modern, rational state.

In the *Addition* to § 270 of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1991: 302), he claims that 'The state is indeed essentially secular and finite, and has particular ends and particular powers.' Hegel's reasoning at this point is fairly complex. However, the basic thrust of his argument is that any attempt to externally ground the state on religion—as in Islamic sharia or forms of Judaism—by making it dependent on the arbitrariness of emotionally charged piety or the internal dimension of representational thought, is bound to destabilize the state. In the interest of protecting individual freedom, the state should be tolerant of

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various religious practices as long as they do not interfere with the businesses of the state and do not prevent its members from performing their most basic duties towards it (such as taking part in military service); and religion can functionally unite communities around goals that coincide with the interests of the state and even serve to 'integrate the state at the deepest level of the disposition of its citizens' (Hegel 1991: 295). Designers of a rational state should, however, not let religion enter into politics and political deliberation more generally, and fundamental laws and principles of the state should not be founded on religious creeds and commitments. If it is, then the danger arises that its claim to be a rationally structured entity is undermined and the door to fanaticism is opened.

> Thus, if religiosity sought to assert itself in the state in the manner which it usually adopts on its ground, it would subvert the organization of the state; for the differences within the state are far apart, whereas everything in religion invariably has reference to the totality. And if this totality sought to take over all the relations [*Beziehungen*] of the state, it would become fanaticism; it would wish to find the whole in every particular, and could accomplish this only by destroying the particular, for fanaticism is simply the refusal to admit particular differences. (Hegel 1991: 303-4)

Hegel's commitment to the essential secularity of the state is, however, tempered by his equally significant commitment to the rational nature of the state, and thus to its essential actuality of spirit, requiring self-knowing in the form of principled cognition. The state, he famously claims, is divine, though only in the sense that its rational structure is based on an articulation of spirit as it unfolds as the actual shape and organization of a political entity.[12] Unlike Kant, Mill or, closer to our own time, Rawls, Hegel is in other words not a straightforward theorist of the modern, secular state. He does not think that the rational state as such is secular in the sense that its foundation merely reflects the general will or principles that rational agents will be able to agree to behind the veil of ignorance. Rather, the secularity of the state follows from his theory of spirit, which in the state objectifies itself such as to achieve full expression and manifestation.

The account of the state in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* should not be confused with a historical account of the nature of actually existing modern state (say in the form of Hegel's own post-Napoleonic state of Prussia, ruled by King Friedrich Wilhelm III in accordance with the written constitution of the reform administration of Chancellor Hardenberg).[13] In terms of the issue of secularization, all that can be gathered from this writing is that to the extent that it is rational, the state will have to be secular, founded not on religion but on spirit as expressed in

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Hegel's philosophy of objective spirit. There is in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* no claim to the effect that the modern state actually (or 'empirically') is secular.

The passages in which his assessment of contemporary secularity are to be found are elsewhere. Most striking in this regard are his comparisons of contemporary Europe with the Roman Empire. Thus, in the 1821 version of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel indirectly describes a modern society—familiar from Weber's account of *Entzauberung*, the desacralization and demystification of the world—in which instrumental reason is rampant, rationality mainly a privately exercised capacity to secure rights and goods, and in which a common life based on religion—Taylor's 'horizon' or 'background'—has gone, irretrievably lost.[14] Instead of true faith and knowledge of God, there is an abundance of historical and technical information (mere 'facts' carrying neither intrinsic meaning nor significant connection with rationally organized systems of facts), as well as moralistic views and purely subjective feelings and sentiments. What is left is only 'finitude [turned] in upon itself, arrogant barrenness and lack of content, the extremity of self-satisfied disenlightenment (*Ausklärung*, a derogatory play on *Aufklärung*).'[15]

IV. Hegel's Secularization Narrative

In order to obtain an adequate sense of why Hegel can count as a theorist of secularization, we have to look beyond the philosophy of right to Hegel's views of history, and more particularly the history of spirit.

Hegel's account in both the 1824 and the 1827 lectures on the philosophy of religion of the development of religion from 'nature religion' and magic via Oriental, Greek, Jewish, and Roman religion to, finally, 'the consummate religion' of Christianity is enormously complex and impossible to summarize in this paper. For present purposes, it undeniably seems to suggest that no culture ever existed without religion, and that religion therefore is universal. However, the lectures do describe various transitions in the history of religious development that arguably can be interpreted as instances of secularization. Keeping in mind Taylor's claim that they tend to be best understood as taking us from one type of belief to another, rather than, as in the subtraction view, from belief to atheism, these transitions, as we shall see, take on a particular significance.

One such—relevant for the history of Western religiosity—is the transition from Greek to Jewish and Roman religion. As is familiar from many of Hegel's writings, including the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the various *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and the *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, in Greek religion, or what Hegel often calls the 'Religion of Beauty,' the divine is viewed as present in the world and expressible in the form of myths that themselves give shape and meaning to

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the ethical and political life of the community. Religion essentially serves to integrate the community. Given the lack of self-reflection and interiority, as well as the purportedly spontaneous participation in socially endorsed roles and structures, that Hegel ascribes to the ancient Greeks, there is no room for a sense of alienation from the divine. As in Taylor's account of the European Middle Ages, the divine is universally present in the rituals and symbols of social life. However, in contrast, obviously, to the European Middle Ages, its presence is essentially commensurate with human existence: the gods, while different from humans in their power, dispositions, and abilities, take a human shape or appearance.[16]

In the 1827 lectures and elsewhere, the Greek religion, while presenting a beautiful and deeply satisfying unity of the human and the divine, is ultimately viewed as inadequate. First, it fails to liberate the divine from the finite, making representations of the divine dependent on human embodiment, which is transient and mortal. Second, Greek religion lacks the moment of active endorsement—the apperceptive element of taking oneself to believe on the basis of considerations and reasons that mark the subject as a rational being. Mere existence in an enchanted universe, while in Marcel Gauchet's account the prototype of all religion, is for Hegel a form of immediacy, calling for an overcoming in the form of some sort of rupture or transcendence. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that rupture or transcendence is famously brought about by the irresolvable conflict between the human and the divine law as epitomized by the tragic stand-off between Creon and Antigone in Sophocles's *Antigone*.[17]

Jewish religion, or what Hegel calls 'The Religion of Sublimity,' interprets the absolute in terms of pure transcendence, devoid of mediation with the world of finite existence. While God acts out of necessity, from the vantage-point of human existence his actions seem inscrutable and incomprehensible, and the world of finite existence appears arid and without meaning or purpose. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* this is the world of the unhappy consciousness being alienated from the absolute.[18] Roman religion, on the other hand, or the 'Religion of Expediency,' involves the withdrawal of the divine from communal life and the essential privatization of belief, which now (as in stoicism) takes on a compensatory quality. In Roman religion, what matters is political dominion, and the gods' primary function is to realize this 'universal purpose.' Jewish religion is alienating as the result of the sublimity and purely abstract quality of the absolute. However, Roman religion is alienating due to its cold, utilitarian vision of the divine and the transformation of the public realm from an arena of spontaneity (as Hegel saw in the Greek polis) into a system of rights and entitlements, leading to a general sense of social atomization and loss of social unity.

Hegel is hardly claiming that Jewish or Roman communities in some sense are 'more secular' than the Greek ones. In fact, as a configuration of religious life,

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the Jewish liberation of the absolute from finite modes of representation and mediation may seem more 'pure' than Greek religion, in which the gods inhabited an ontologically less well defined sphere above the human abode but nevertheless in the existing world. From the point of view of an account of secularization, however, what matters is the loss in both Jewish and Roman religion of the immediate identity of the subject with the social substance and the consequent alienation of the subject from the absolute. As Taylor argues, secularization does not necessarily follow a path of subtraction, a critique and demystification of the divine, leading along more or less rational routes toward a weakening of religious fervour. Rather, secularization can and often does come about as the result of collective steps that serve to *alienate* the subject from the absolute and thus weaken the horizon in which faith attains genuine significance and motivational power. As we have seen, Taylor also suggests that secularization is necessarily accompanied by an increasing sense of division between subject and object combined with a turn from the 'porous' to the 'buffered' self. Both the Jewish and the Roman religion involve such transformations of subjectivity. The Jewish religion views the absolute as transcendent, thereby cutting off the connection between the subject and the living manifestation of spirit that the Greeks were able to enjoy in their art and religious practices. As a result, when God is viewed as subsisting entirely without sensible shape, the subject starts seeking the law, or the absolute, in thought and thought only.[19] When thought finds no support in the existing world, it risks becoming empty or dependent on ceremonial service, which itself is abstract and external. The Roman religion, on the other hand, equally brings about a buffered self by setting up a formal and ultimately strictly utilitarian institution of public worship with which the individual subject finds itself incapable of identifying. According to Hegel, the subject position publicly available to the Romans was reducible only to that of being an abstract bearer of rights (property rights in particular). The result is withdrawal, the setting up of a strict division between the inner and the outer.

> Thus on one hand the individual perishes in the universal, in the sovereign authority, in the Fortuna Publica; but on the other hand human purposes hold sway and the human subject has an independent, essential value. These extremes and their contradiction are the whirlpool in which Roman life tosses and turns. (Hegel 1988a: 385)

In the Chapter on Spirit in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the complete development of spirit from the ancient Greeks via the Romans to medieval Europe, absolutist Europe, and the Europe of the Enlightenment is for Hegel understood in terms of alienation. If, roughly, spirit in the ancient Greek world was too natural, failing to display a capacity for self-reflection, then the subsequent dialectic of spirit

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takes the form of purifying the subject of everything natural, every non-reflective attachment and commitment, such that spirit (or, in the language of the *Phenomenology*, 'the Substance') can finally become subjective (or 'Subject'). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the beginning of alienation is precisely to be located in the transition from Greek to Roman antiquity. However, the process of alienation and purification continues beyond that and goes all the way to the European Enlightenment, where faith has retreated into the inner and is expressed 'in the heart.'

After the downfall of the Roman empire, medieval Europe powerfully and lastingly reasserts the existence of a transcendent and almighty God. However, in Hegel's account, medieval Europe is itself showing up tendencies that point toward the sixteenth century reform movements and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of enlightenment. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for example, Hegel describes the development of the nobility and its honor code. Gradually, as the European state becomes more centralized and the court system is established, the nobility adopts an increasingly more intense ethics of self-purification, pointing toward the empty 'flattery' of the French absolutist court. Indeed, as Taylor (2007: 70-1) argues, medieval Europe abounds with projects of self-purification—some, as in the example of the nobleman, partly secular, others, as in Christocentric forms of spirituality, turning inward, focusing on individualizable actions like fasting, going on pilgrimage, praying privately, and so on, as well as abandoning the standard forms of devotion, in particular the mass.

Equally important, however, for a dialectical account of the process of secularization, is Hegel's observation, particularly in the early Jena period, that the start of Christianity shares with the Roman world an intense desacralization of nature.[20] Responding to this process, Hegel sees Catholicism as attempting to revoke the desacralization. However, this strategy had to fail because the diremption between the ideal and the real, between the divine and man's earthly existence, had already been experienced as historically real, provoking a return of spirit not to nature but to itself in its progressively more pure and 'denatured' state. Protestantism is for Hegel the concerted effort to destroy the sanctification of the world imparted by Catholicism. Where Catholicism, or what Hegel in the *System of Ethical Life* calls the first form of Christianity or even a 'beautiful religion,' seeks to return to mythology, Protestantism accepts the broken unity of subject and object, introducing infinite longing and anguish. As Weber more famously argues, the moment of reconciliation with empirical reality consists in its being the material on which the inwardly infinite subject acts. The return to empirical existence takes the form of reconciling oneself not to an enchanted universe but to a world of commonplace, everyday work and necessity.[21]

Although Hegel is by no means correctly described as an anti-Enlightenment thinker of the sort found in Burke or de Maistre, his analysis of the Enlightenment is

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fairly negative. Both in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in the 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* the Enlightenment is characterized as an essentially negative moment, geared towards critique, or what Hegel calls 'the destruction of externality,' though basically in an abstract and sterile fashion. It is easy to see that the Enlightenment represents an extreme version of the drive towards self-purification, of ridding the subject of any pre-given and non-reflective attachments, of overcoming immediacy. The requirement, after all, of successful enlightenment reflection is precisely that no content should be accepted at face value, that everything should be subject to doubt and rational scrutiny. The Enlightenment thus enforces the establishment of a radical ideal of rational agency. Whatever is to be accepted as valid or true must undergo a critical investigation. For religious existence, however, as in most other areas of life, the Enlightenment is destructive. By treating faith on a par with scientific belief (and here Hegel probably has Hume in mind), it asks for justification where none can be given; thus, since God's existence 'cannot be proven,' religion must be rejected.[22]

In Jacobi, by contrast, who builds on Kant and accepts his restriction of knowledge to the order of appearance, the theoretical impossibility of justifying the existence of God is endorsed as an epistemological fact but not as a reason to reject faith. Faith, Jacobi argues, is wholly non-cognitive, residing in the heart. On Hegel's reading, while Jacobi's strategy is understandable and capable of retaining some sense of the object, it fails to achieve any determinacy and regresses to mere formless emotion, locked inside the self.

> This is what is called the pious life of feeling, to which *Pietism* also restricts itself. Pietism acknowledges no objective truth and opposes itself to dogmas and the content of religion, while still preserving an element of mediation, a connection with Christ, but this is a connection that is supposed to remain one of mere feeling and inner sensibility. Such piety, together with the vanity of subjectivity and feeling, is then turned polemically against the philosophy that wants cognition. The result of this subjectivity is that everything fades away in the subject, without objectivity, without firm determinacy, without any development on the part of God, who in the end no longer has any content at all. (Hegel 1988a: 486)

Hegel's 1824 and 1827 lectures on religion were both responding not only to Jacobi but equally or more importantly to his concern over Schleiermacher's forthcoming *Glaubenslehre*, of which Hegel had some knowledge, in which the way to save religion from the onslaughts of science and general enlightenment criticism was also to locate the origin and meaning of faith in the realm of the non-cognitive—feeling, intuition, piety.[23]

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Pietism of Jacobi's and Schleiermacher's form is for Hegel expressive of modernity, and in particular of the withdrawal of spirit to the interior. An important task of the lectures on religion is to demonstrate the partiality of such views. Rather than the most sophisticated response to the condition of modernity, they represent the penultimate step of disenchantment, the loss of God as concrete truth shared by members of the religious community. As Hegel polemically writes, if Schleiermacher's version of pietism, emphasizing a feeling of dependency, were right, then 'a dog would […] be the best Christian.'[24] Feeling is indeterminate and sense-based, devoid of content (that is, of claims that are able to express objective truth).

In his study of secularization, Taylor likewise argues that the very turn to the inner, originating in the many reform movements of Western Christendom that culminate in Luther and the Reformation, does not so much safeguard belief from sceptical attack as making religious commitments arbitrary. Pietism is reactive, presupposing the Enlightenment's view of reason and its standing in the world. Like enlightenment thinking in general, it condemns the individual subject to isolation and withdrawal from the world of socially mediated endorsement and recognition. However, is pietism, as I have been intimating, well characterized as a species of secularism? Is not pietism, after all, a response to, rather than a symptom of, the secularism invoked by science and enlightenment critique?

From a Hegelian point of view, pietism involves a dismissal of any form of public religion. In that regard it sides with secularism. However, at the level of individual attachment it also represents a decisive step in the direction of secularism. The reason is that the fully subjectivized faith—faith made manifest simply through emotion—is arbitrary and ultimately self-cancelling. To simply sense in oneself a feeling of fulfillment or, as in Schleiermacher, 'dependence,' is an event existing independently of any object of faith and its truth. By depriving it of any intentional relation to an object, it makes of faith a mere mockery. In Taylor's account the structurally similar phenomenon is the quest for authenticity, which he views as one of the deepest strands of modern secularism. In the search for authenticity, no object or activity is a priori ruled out: what counts as successful is only the sense the individual has of being in touch with some crucial aspect of itself. Since no final criterion can be offered whereby the search for authenticity can be brought to a conclusive end, the believer (echoing Schlegel's *Ironie*) is condemned to endlessly search for the new and become a consumer of life-style options. It is the authenticity that counts, yet as long as authenticity is a matter exclusively of individual self-reflection and the care of the self, it follows that the horizon in which belief can attain significance and intersubjective acceptance is being ignored or—what is more likely—has withered completely.

At the end of the 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel distinguishes between the culture of the Enlightenment and what he calls a "third moment"

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beyond both criticism and emotion. The third moment is characterized by the fact that subjectivity, rather than being abstract, arbitrary and devoid of (necessary) content, develops a content that is in accord with necessity. Even when it seeks to preserve religion, enlightenment 'reflection,' the freedom of abstract universality, assumes a hostile attitude toward faith. On the other hand, all forms of appeal to the heart—pietist versions of emotionally charged *Innerlichkeit*—fail as well, being devoid of content. In response, and as the sublation of this opposition, Hegel (1984: 247) proposes that theology needs to 'take refuge' in the concept (*der Begriff*) and philosophy: for only philosophy can freely and rationally preserve the content of religion.

> This reconciliation is philosophy. Philosophy is to this extent theology. It presents the reconciliation of God with himself and with nature, showing that nature, otherness, is implicitly divine, and that the raising of itself to reconciliation is on the one hand what finite spirit implicitly is, while on the other hand it arrives at this reconciliation, or brings it forth, in world history. This reconciliation is the peace of God, which does not 'surpass all reason,' but is rather the peace that *through* reason is first known and thought and is recognized as what is true.[25] (Hegel 1988a: 489)

Hegel's solution bears affinities with the scholasticism of figures like Anselm and Aquinas. However, their notion of philosophy as being a 'handmaiden' to revealed truth never went so far as to cancel the moment of faith altogether. For Anselm and Aquinas, the task of philosophy is to offer a rational articulation of the content of faith. However, the content of faith continues to be available in the form of non-rational, immediate commitment, and philosophy and faith, while capable of acting upon each other, remain mutually independent and formally incompatible.[26] Hegel is more radical. For him, the modern world is essentially *prosaic*, capable of articulating its own conceptual commitments as they play out in our relation to nature, society, the human mind and culture but completely devoid of the kind of spiritual fervour with which, say, Hölderlin (and Hegel in his younger days) dreamed of a beautiful Christian community of love or, later, the young Nietzsche would advocate the joyful return to Greek, tragic culture. God considered as a transcendent entity of representation to which consciousness is supposed to relate is no longer a viable conception. If God exists, then it must be as a self-relationship of spirit, the consciousness of absolute spirit, and hence the basic structure of the absolute in the way it gets articulated by philosophy. Religion, then (though not God in Hegel's technical sense), since it has always failed to elevate the objects of representation to the level of the true self-consciousness of spirit, is necessarily a thing of the past, the recounting

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of which must take place via the historically minded dialectic of the lectures on religion.

One might, at this point, confuse this claim with some sort of descriptive account of modernity of the kind we find in many secularization theorists and researchers. Such an account would point to a *de facto* loss or transformation of spirituality to be ascertained, say in contemporary Europe, by the actual waning of religious (and especially Christian) practice. However, Hegel rarely claims that the end of religion means the end of religious practice (or, for that matter, the end of faith). He makes no predictive pronouncement to the effect that churches will close, people will stop praying, and the like. The point is predominantly normative: that such practice (and the commitments that go with and sustain it) can no longer carry any claim to authority. As Jaeschke (1992: 15) suggests, the parallel with Hegel's much more famous yet often misunderstood thesis about the end of art is striking. Hegel's (1975: 11) claim that 'art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past,' is not implying that artworks will no longer be made or enjoyed. The claim, evidently, is that art 'in its highest vocation' is no longer available. By art in its highest vocation Hegel means art, like Greek sculpture and some Christian painting, capable of displaying the basic metaphysical certainties of a given community in sensuous form. In modernity, as conceptual thinking becomes the only acceptable candidate for achieving the requisite of universality and freedom, art of this kind comes irretrievably to an end *in its capacity to present the absolute*. This does not, however, deter Hegel from identifying alternate roles for art to play. Among these are the attentiveness to bourgeois existence displayed in Dutch genre painting and the 'objective humor' of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the late Goethe's *Divan*-poetry.[27] Thus, Hegel's narrative of art's development confirms the general tendency towards secularization that we have already had ample opportunity to detect elsewhere. Art is no longer capable of offering an *authoritative* presentation of the divine. However, it also reveals ways for art to continue existing in the absence of such authority.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor identifies a number of post-religious forms of spirituality. The expressivist paradigm coming out of romanticism, aspiring to wholeness or some form of felt unity between subject and object experienced perhaps through art or nature, is one such 'religious expression after religion.' In its rejection of the transcendent God, it is consistent with the 'immanent frame' of rationalized modernity but in tension nevertheless with the complete disenchantment of nature effected by science. Hegel does not speculate about any such commitments. What is important to realize is that they are not ruled out by his (at least implicit) claim that religion is over. For Hegel, the modern world is thoroughly secular in the two fundamental normative senses I have examined in this paper: a) in the sense of requiring the state to be neutral when it comes to

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matters of religion, and b) in the sense of there being no recourse to authoritative representations of a transcendent God.

It was Hegel's belief that only the incorporation of Christianity and the Christian God into his system could save the Christian religion from itself. Whether that move was successful therefore depends on the acceptability of the system as a whole. In this article I have not touched on that question. My aim has only been to trace the outlines of what I take to be Hegel's vision of how and why Western societies have been on a path of secularization.

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Notes

[1] Recent studies of Hegel's religion relevant for this paper include Kolb (1992); Hodgson (2005); Jaeschke (1990); Desmond (2003); Burbidge (1992).

[2] I am in this regard in line with Löwith (1949: 57), who speaks of Hegel's thinking as a 'secularization of the Christian faith.' Robert Pippin, likewise, in Pippin (2005: 296) refers to 'Hegel's Protestant secularization of the divine.' As I intend to demonstrate, Hegel remained religious in the complex sense he was able to give to this notion *while* describing Western history, and in particular the onset of modernity, as a process of secularization. The classical question has been whether Hegel is ultimately a thinker of divine life, or whether he ends up with some sort of humanism, reducing God to man's self-conception.

[3] It should be noted that I take a commitment to transcendence, to the existence of more or less intelligent forces or sources of authority and end-setting outside the order of empirical reality, to be a required feature of what *modern* agents can seriously associate with religious belief. At least, that is where matters stand for Hegel's account of modernity. Pantheism would count, but only as long as spirit and matter could at least be analytically distinguished, as in so-called panentheism.

[4] Taylor (2007).

[5] Gauchet (1997).

[6] Taylor (2007: 13) argues that 'all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated. This is what philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Polanyi, have called the 'background'.'

[7] It is not, strictly speaking, circular to hold that secularization is the loss of religious belief and then to trace the process whereby such a loss occurs. If that were the case, then neither could the history of science be told, if such a history, as is bound to be the case, is told by someone who

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is convinced of the cognitive superiority of contemporary over, say, medieval science. Taylor's aim is to warn against prejudging the course that the process of secularization has taken.

[8] See Hegel (1977b: 47): 'Or, if by testing cognition, which we conceive of as a *medium*, we get go to know the law of its refraction, it is again useless to subtract this from the end result. For it is not the refraction of the ray, but the ray itself whereby truth reaches us, that is cognition; and if this were removed, all that would be indicated would be a pure direction or a blank space.'

[9] Hegel (1991: 292): 'The content of religion is absolute truth, and it is therefore associated with a disposition of the most exalted kind.'

[10] Hegel (1977a: 190) refers to 'God is dead' as 'the feeling upon which the *religion* of more recent times rests.' By 'the religion of more recent times' Hegel clearly means religion as it has been has been shaped by the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and various Pietist movements.

[11] Hegel (1988a: 431): 'Jacob Boehme was the first to recognize the Trinity in another manner, as universal. His way of representing and thinking is rather wild and fanciful; he has not yet risen to the pure forms of thinking. But the ruling foundation of the ferment in his mind, and of his struggles to reach the truth, was the recognition of the presence of the Trinity in everything and everywhere.'

[12] Hegel (1988b: 42): 'The State is the divine Idea, as it exists on earth. In this perspective, the State is the precise object of world history in general. It is in the State that freedom attains its objectivity, and lives in the embodiment of this objectivity. For the law of the State is the objectification of Spirit; it is will in its true form.'

[13] The debates at this point have been complex and long-standing, going all the way back to the immediate post-Hegelian response. In the one camp there were people like Erdmann and Rosenkranz, representing the right-Hegelian view that Hegel was referring to the actually existing state, and, in the other, left-Hegelians like Strauss, Bauer and Feuerbach, representing Hegel's theory in ideal terms, as an instrument, however ideological, of social critique.

[14] Hegel (1983: 158-62).

[15] Hegel (1983: 159-60). I borrow the translation from Stewart and Hodgson (1997: 203).

[16] The theorist of secularization Marcel Gauchet (1997: 27) argues that religion in its 'original pure state' requires the complete dispossession of human freedom and self-reflection, a desire to merge with an enchanted nature, a socially endorsed conception of the social order as immutable, collective social organization, and the 'absolute predominance of a founding past.' Although in describing the operations of divine law Hegel focuses on the family rather than society as a whole, the similarities between his characterization of Antigone's world and Gauchet's phenomenology of religion in its original, pure state are striking.

[17] See Hegel (1977b: 279-89).

[18] There is a puzzling discrepancy between the treatment of Jewish religion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. In the former writing, the Jewish religion seems to make a cameo in the early section of the Self-Consciousness Chapter on unhappy consciousness, next to Hegel's discussions of stoicism and scepticism. It is, however, not present in Hegel's long chapter on Spirit, in which he accounts for the transformation from

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Greek to Roman and then to Christian society and religion, culminating with the European Enlightenment. In the *Lectures*, however, he inserts a brief discussion of Jewish religion between the characterizations of the Greek and the Roman worlds. As Hodgson (2005: 228-37) makes clear, Hegel's treatment of Judaism changes significantly from the perspective of the *Early Theological Writings*, in which alienation is the key, to the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* in which the emphasis is on God's transcendence. The theme of transcendence remains central in all the lectures on the history of religion, including those of 1821, 1824, 1827, and 1831.

[19] Hegel (1988a: 359): 'Thus the unity of God contains one power within it, which is accordingly the absolute power. Every externality, every sensible configuration and sensible image, is sublated in it. For this reason God here subsists without shape—he subsists not for sensible representation but only for thought. The inwardly infinite, pure subjectivity is the subjectivity that is essentially thinking. As thinking it subsists only for thinking, and therefore subsists in its [activity of] judgment. Thinking is the essential soil for this object.'

[20] See Hegel (1979: 182). For an account of Hegel's assessment of early Christianity versus the Roman world, see Jaeschke (1990: 162).

[21] Jaeschke (1990: 164) views Hegel's connection between protestantism and disenchantment as being 'close to the theory of secularization.' Jaeschke (1990: 165) adds that 'The radical desacralization of the world is, to be sure, the hallmark of the present epoch; it is, however, characterized in a derogatory fashion, and as a passing phenomenon. It is regarded as a precondition, to be fullfilled before "the spirit can venture to sanctify itself as spirit in its own shape, and reestablish the original reconciliation with itself in a new religion," consecrating the world no longer in alien fashion but its own.'

[22] Of course, attempts at proving God's existence were given in scholasticism and continued in rationalist thinkers like Leibniz and Descartes. However, in the 1827 lectures on religion, Hegel argues that none of them seem to work and, more fundamentally, they misunderstand the nature of religious faith by construing it on a par with scientific understanding. The *Verstand*—and here Hegel is surely also in line with Kant's dialectic of pure reason- is fundamentally incapable of establishing a relation to a transcendent object.

[23] For an account of Schleiermacher's role in particular, see Hodgson's 'Editorial Introduction' to Hegel: (1988a: 15-24).

[24] The passage—from the Berlin years—is quoted from the translation by J. Michael Stewart for Stewart and Hodgson (1997: 166).

[25] The reference to the "surpassing of all reason" is an allusion to the German translation of Phil. 4:7: 'And the peace of God, which surpasses all reason [*Vernunft*], will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.'

[26] Gilson (1948: 52): 'Such appear to us the points of contact and the distinctions between Reason and Faith in the system of St. Thomas of Aquino. Faith and Reason can neither contradict each other, nor ignore each other, nor be confused. Reason may well try to justify Faith: it will never transform Faith into Reason, for as soon as Faith were to abandon authority for proof, it would cease to believe; it would know. And Faith may well move Reason externally or guide it internally; Reason will never cease to be itself, for once it renounced the proof of its assertions, it would deny

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itself and would vanish to make room for Faith. It is, therefore, the inalienability of their proper essences which permits them to act upon each other without contaminating each other.'

[27] For an excellent account of the extent to which Hegel provides conceptual space for 'art after the end of art,' see Rutter (2010). See also Pippin (2005: 295): '*The modern social world itself may be rational, in other words, but it is, to say it all at once, just thereby not very beautiful, and its 'meaning' is not very mysterious.* It has its own kind of domestic and rather small-screen beauty, we can say—hence all that Hegelian praise for Dutch celebrations of the bourgeoisie—but the "sacredness" of orderly city streets, piano playing, milk pouring, needlework, and fine clothing, does not, given that Hegel's aesthetics is so content-driven, satisfy very lofty aesthetic ambitions.'

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