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Spirit as a Riddle to Itself: Symbolic Art and the Deep History of Freedom

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Abstract

In this article I suggest that we should understand symbolic art not as some kind of wondrous prequel to classical art, but as a theory of the advent of spiritual self-reflection on a collective scale. Symbolic art is the first form of what Hegel calls ‘absolute spirit’. I understand absolute spirit as the realm of reflective social practices through which humans discuss and reflect on what it is to be human. Symbolic art is thus the first form in which spirit generates genuine self-knowledge. I argue that symbolic art should be understood as the unprecedented beginning of asking what it is to be human, without having a picture of what it is to be human preceding it. The advantage of understanding Hegel’s symbolic art in this way is that we are able to go beyond the narrow conception of symbolic art as existing only in the oriental world and arrive at an understanding of symbolic art which includes social practices from the deep history of our species.

Hegel’s theory of symbolic art is, for several reasons, a fascinating part of his philosophy. Almost all commentators on Hegel’s *Aesthetics* highlight that, for Hegel, symbolic art is only *Vorkunst*; it remains abstract and is ultimately unable to capture the essence of what it is to be a spiritual being or, for that matter, what it is to be human. Houlgate points out that Hegel’s objection against symbolic art is *religious*, ‘because the underlying conception of the divine is still too indeterminate or abstract’ (Houlgate 2007: xviii); Moland characterizes the absolute of symbolic art as the ‘distant divine’ (Moland 2019: 55); and furthermore Pinkard speaks of ultimately ‘unsatisfying’ and unsustainable ‘pictures of being human’ (Pinkard 2007: 12). Even though all of this is certainly correct, I think that concentrating on these shortcomings misses what is perhaps the most important point of Hegel’s theory of symbolic art. I suggest that we should understand symbolic art not as some kind of wondrous prequel to classical art, but as a theory of the advent of spiritual self-reflection on a collective scale. Symbolic art is the first



form of what Hegel calls absolute spirit. I understand absolute spirit as the realm of reflective social practices through which humans discuss and reflect on what it is to be human.¹ Symbolic art is thus the first form in which spirit generates genuine self-knowledge. I argue that symbolic art should be understood as the unprecedented beginning of asking what it is to be human, without having a picture of what it is to be human preceding it. The advantage of understanding Hegel's theory of symbolic art in this way is that we are able to go beyond the narrow conception of symbolic art as existing only in the oriental² and Egyptian worlds and arrive at an understanding of symbolic art which includes social practices from the deep history of our species.

The paper is structured into four sections. In the [first section](#) I discuss an important distinction in Hegel's philosophy of history: the distinction between what does and does not belong in the history of freedom. Hegel, having declared freedom to be the essence of spirit (*Enc.* §382), finds himself in the situation of having to determine when the history of freedom begins, and therefore which parts of the history of spirit are not yet spiritual, i.e. which parts of the history of humanity are not yet human.³ The well-known starting point of Hegel's narrative is what he calls the 'oriental' world, excluding—rather explicitly—Africa and the Americas. This exclusion is, of course, arbitrary, deeply problematic and rightfully subject to fierce critique (Pinkard 2017: 50–67). What I want to focus on is what Hegel's justification for this exclusion looks like. My claim is that Hegel denies that 'prehistoric' forms of life possess a conception of the absolute. In the [second section](#) I discuss this view further. Hegel's suggestion that prehistoric societies do not possess a conception of the absolute seems counterintuitive, but it is of the utmost importance. His reasoning for this view, as he suggests at the beginning of the *Encyclopaedia*, is that the true *anthropological difference* between human beings and animals is not that humans have the capacity to think, but that they have 'religion, law, and the ethical' (*Enc.* §2). I argue that we should understand 'religion' as a certain way of living in a symbolic order, namely one that is grounded in an ultimate notion, i.e. the absolute. If this is right, the denial of such an ultimate notion ultimately denies membership to the human form of life. In the [third section](#) I turn to Hegel's discussion of the *symbolic art form*. In symbolic art, Hegel suggests, we find the starting point of a symbolically mediated representation within the human life form. Consequently, he identifies this art form mainly with what he calls the 'oriental' world. I will argue that Hegel's notion of *unconscious symbolism* can and should be understood as *religion* in the sense of section two and—most importantly—that this notion does not need to imply the conclusion that certain shapes of spirit do not count as living in a proper symbolically mediated world. In [section four](#) I will give an overview of what this view might entail. If I am right in identifying *unconscious symbolism* with the anthropological difference, it seems to follow that we can argue—with Hegel—that living in a symbolic order is what makes humans

human, and we can argue—against Hegel—that his mechanisms of exclusion need a clear distinction between a correct way of living in a symbolic order and a wrong one—a *proper symbol proper*, if you will. To me it seems evident that we need to drop such a distinction and should continue to expand the history of freedom into the deep history of our species—in other words: there is no conceivable reason why cave paintings and prehistoric figurines should not count as belonging to the history of freedom.

I. Exclusion from the history of freedom

The purpose of this section is to describe how Hegel justifies the exclusion of spiritual forms of life from the seemingly universal freedom of spirit in his philosophy of history. By exclusion I mean the above-mentioned problem, that defining what makes human beings human requires making a distinction between human and non-human, or in a historical perspective, not-yet human.⁴ His answer to what spirit essentially is, is that ‘formally the essence of [spirit] is freedom’ (*Enc.* §382). From the beginning this renders the standard critique of an uncritical essentialism useless. Defining the essence of spirit as freedom does not directly translate to a certain set of properties that needs to be met in order to count as a spiritual being. But it also would be too simple to take it as a mere normative statement. From the standpoint of the normative reading, Hegel’s argument would be: If spirit is essentially free, every spiritual being should be free, hence there is no conceivable justification for domination or exclusion. This kind of reading evidently has a hard time explaining why Hegel, in fact, does exclude so much of human history from the history of freedom.

I want to turn now to what Hegel identifies as the beginning of history, namely the oriental world. To refresh the reader’s memory: what Hegel describes as the oriental world in his lectures ranges from China and India to Persia and interestingly also to Egypt. Speaking purely chronologically, this means that Hegel takes what is today called *Achsenzeit* as the beginning of the history of freedom.⁵ This epoch ranges from 800 until 200 B.C. and marks the advent of the major religions which are associated with the societies above. Egypt is an interesting exception.⁶ What is interesting about Hegel’s inclusion of Egypt is that he—especially in his conception of *symbolic art*—presents it as the point of transition towards the Greek world, marked by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. He thus presents Egypt as having the most advanced notion of the absolute⁷ which leads to the strange picture of presenting something that chronologically was prior to the world of the *Achsenzeit* as its solution.⁸ I just want to mention that, but put the historiographic questions aside now.

What is remarkable about the beginning of the philosophy of history is that in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel more or less considers the identity between the

beginning of world history and the oriental world to be self-evident. He introduces it in §355 and refers for further justification to Peter Stuhr's book *Vom Untergang der Naturstaaten* (1812).⁹ A detailed justification by Hegel himself can only be found in his lectures. In every lecture on the philosophy of history there are passages on Africa and the Americas in which Hegel marks them as 'prehistoric' forms of spirit. These remarks are always given in the introduction before the 'actual' beginning of history (*GW* 27, 1: 80–85; *GW* 27, 2: 515–26; *GW* 27, 3: 833–45). One striking passage is the following:

We have determined the character of the Oriental world. It is said that history begins here with the consciousness of an independent substantial power, which is independent of caprice, in contrast to the African principle. Therefore, in Asia, we first have a state, a coexistence under a general principle that prevails. (*GW* 27,2: 538, my translation)

The oriental world marks the beginning of the history of freedom because *consciousness* develops knowledge of an *independent and substantial power*. In the above quotation this knowledge is presented in direct opposition to Africa, where there is no such power but only power linked to allegedly arbitrary forms of freedom or *Willkür*, sometimes translated as 'caprice'. The general idea seems to be that in the oriental world a self-conception of spirit emerged which allowed it to enter the history of freedom. If '[s]pirit is actual only as that which it knows itself to be' (*PR*: §273) Hegel's claim is that this self-knowledge is the first to enable freedom. Why is that? At first glance this is rather counterintuitive since Hegel seems to claim that the first form of freedom arises from spirit knowing itself to be determined by an independent and substantial power. But to Hegel this is precisely how freedom begins. His reasoning is that only by introducing such a power can there be something like a universal normative obligation which allows spirit to emerge from nature and establish something akin to ethical life.¹⁰ The dimension of Hegel's philosophy in which the different ways spirit knows itself are discussed in his philosophy of *absolute spirit*. I want to turn to his conception of religion now to shed some light on what this might mean.

II. Religion and the anthropological difference

It was Walter Jaeschke who defended the view that precisely in Hegel's philosophy of religion the *non-metaphysical character* of his philosophy becomes clear (Jaeschke 2020: 135). I think he was right about this. The purpose of this section is to develop the idea that in Hegel's philosophy of religion the notion of *God* or *the absolute* does not describe a metaphysical entity—rather, the absolute is to be understood as the

ultimate normative and conceptual centre of a certain shape of spirit, i.e. the ultimate notion of spirit's self-knowledge. In the grander scheme of my argument this suggests that Hegel's exclusion at the beginning of the philosophy of history is arbitrary and revisable on grounds of his own philosophy. In an early transcript by Hotho from 1822/23 we find the following passage:

Art renders religion sensual and tangible for the representation, and science also has the same content, namely science that is solely science, namely philosophy. Philosophy presents this content in the form of thought. The finite sciences correspond to a lower level. Religion is that the substance of the state comes to consciousness. (*GW* 27,1: 70, my translation)

The forms of absolute spirit are cultural forms in which spirit represents itself in the way that it takes itself to be. Accordingly, these forms share the same content.¹¹ Understanding the notion of absolute spirit in this way implies that it is not possible to make a clean distinction between objective spirit (institutionalized freedom) and absolute spirit as the representation of the notion of this institutionalized freedom. On my reading, this is how we should understand the fact that *in religion the substance of the state comes to consciousness*. The most radical passage supporting this reading might be this one:

There is one concept of freedom in religion and state. This one concept is the highest that humanity possesses, and it is realized by human beings. The people who have a poor concept of God also have a poor state, poor governance, and poor laws. (*V* 3: 340, my translation)

Since spirit is only 'as that which it knows itself to be' it seems evident that the way spirit knows itself has huge implications for human sociality (*PR*: §273).¹² There are several important contributions throughout the literature supporting the suggestion that Hegel's notion of religion as a social practice is in tension with the metaphysical reading (Lewis 2011; Mooren 2017). But whereas Lewis gives a rather Habermasean outlook on the role of religious reasoning in the public sphere, I think the best way of understanding religion as a social practice is by taking Hegel's claim seriously that the practised notion of God and that of freedom are one and the same. That is, we should understand the practised definition of the absolute as the normative centre of the society it is practised in.¹³ This normative centre gives rise to the possibility of an ethical justification but cannot itself be justified by further reasoning. This is why the notion of *authority* takes centre stage in Hegel's philosophy of religion.¹⁴ It is helpful to draw from sociology to clarify what this might mean. The view that the notion of God should be understood as a self-

representation of what is regarded as normatively binding in a given society was put forth most clearly in Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*:

But religion is above all a system of notions by which individuals imagine the society to which they belong and their obscure yet intimate relations with that society. This is its primordial role; and although this representation is metaphorical and symbolic, it is not inaccurate. Quite the contrary, it fully expresses the most essential aspect of the relations between the individual and society. For it is an eternal truth that something exists outside us that is greater than we are, and with which we commune. That is why we can be sure that acts of worship, whatever they might be, are not futile or meaningless gestures. By seeming to strengthen the ties between the worshipper and his god, they really strengthen the ties that bind the individual to his society, since god is merely the symbolic expression of society. (Durkheim 2008: 170f.)

The reason why this is interesting is that religion for Durkheim is the most fundamental form in which society as a 'reality *sui generis*' is expressed (2008: 17). For Durkheim, this means that human life is intrinsically social and that this sociality must be mediated through a shared symbolic representation of the world or, as he calls it, 'collective representations' (2008: 18).¹⁵ Circling back to Hegel, it seems fair to say that spirit also can be viewed as such a reality *sui generis* which exists through shared symbols and meanings or—more familiar to his language—through a certain collectively shared self-knowledge of spirit. Understanding Hegel this way opens up the possibility of reading his account of absolute spirit as a historical reconstruction of what counted as absolute within different societies and thereby an account of the way different societies perceived and consequently institutionalized human freedom. Hegel's notion of the *definition of the absolute* thus could be roughly equated to what Durkheim calls collective representations. And in fact I believe that the way Hegel goes about telling the story of absolute spirit is to concentrate on the question what kind of social consequences a certain set of collectively shared representations have.

This is where Hegel's elaborations on the *anthropological difference* in §2 of the *Encyclopaedia* become important. Broadly speaking, Hegel argues that we should not take *thinking* to be the distinguishing characteristic of the human lifeform—not because animals also think, but because thinking is a misleading notion in this context. 'This distinction is tied up with the fact that the human content of consciousness which is grounded in thought does not at first *appear in the form of thought*, but rather as feeling, intuition, representation, i.e. *forms* that must be distinguished from thought *as form*.' Thought as form is reserved to the most elaborate

form of spiritual self-knowledge in philosophy. It seems evident that this sense of thinking is a rather small portion of what lies in question here. When we say the anthropological difference consists in thinking we must keep in mind a very broad notion—one which includes ‘religion, law, and the ethical’. Hegel calls the idea that thinking should be the central difference ‘an old prejudice, indeed a triviality’, which of course means that he accepts that it is true, but that it is not very informative and may even be misleading (*Enc.* §2). It becomes misleading if thinking is separated from other forms of spiritual self-knowledge which may at least include, according to this paragraph, feeling, intuition and representation. The provocative consequence then is to say that, if only religion is practised by humans, why not take this to be the anthropological difference? ‘In this kind of separating it is forgotten that only human beings are capable of religion and that animals no more have religion than they have law and morality’ (*Enc.* §2).

If we were to say that religion is the only difference this statement would lend itself to the same objection, namely that it is only one form of spiritual self-knowledge. While at the beginning of the *Encyclopaedia* the forms of self-knowledge that belong to individual spiritual beings are also discussed, on the collective scale of the shared symbolic structure of the world it is possible to narrow the options down to *Anschauung*, *Vorstellung*, *Denken*, which are expressed in the cultural practices of art, religion and philosophy. Hegel’s philosophy of absolute spirit consists to a large degree in an historical reconstruction of the *definitions of the absolute* which were expressed in these forms—that is, which notion of freedom or collective self-knowledge of spirit was prevalent in a society entertaining these definitions (*Enc.* §384). This is, of course, a very complex matter which I cannot discuss in detail. What I will concentrate on now is how Hegel tells the beginning of that story, which for him starts with the *symbolic art form*.

III. Symbolic art and the history of freedom

Hegel is keen on clarifying from the start that symbolic art is merely ‘the beginning of art, alike in its essential nature and its historical appearance, and is therefore to be considered only, as it were, as the threshold of art’ (*Aesthetics* I: 303). Terry Pinkard fittingly wrote that for Hegel the problem with symbolic art is that it ‘must be unsatisfying not because it makes us unhappy in any sense but because the pictures of being human which it offers cannot sustain themselves’ (Pinkard 2007: 12). But why is that? Pinkard argues that the problem lies in its abstract character: ‘symbolic art is necessarily abstract, sometimes possessing great technical beauty, but always hinting at more than it can actually express’ (2007: 12). I think we need to say more. The remarkable thing about symbolic art is not that the definition of the absolute it represents is abstract, but that it generates a definition of the absolute at all. The

reason for this is that there is no definition of the absolute prior to it, or to put it in Pinkard's terms, in Hegel's story there was no picture of being human that preceded symbolic art. As symbolic art marks the beginning, it is evident (within Hegel's framework) that symbolic art must be abstract. But the interesting point is that it is a beginning. The task of this section is thus twofold. Firstly, I want to clarify the notion of the *definition of the absolute*. Secondly, I want to discuss the connection between the rather technical idea of a *definition of the absolute* and Hegel's theory of symbolism. Hegel's idea, I argue, is that the first symbolic representation of the absolute must be a riddle to itself; that spiritual self-knowledge must begin in a form which is opaque to itself.

I have already used the notion of a definition of the absolute above to describe the ultimate notion of spirit's self-knowledge, which itself can be understood as the normative foundation of a given society. Hegel introduces this notion in §384 of the *Encyclopaedia*, where he states that the 'highest definition of the absolute' is spirit and then adds:

To find this definition and to comprehend its meaning and content was, we may say, the absolute tendency of all culture and philosophy; it was the point towards which all religion and science pressed on; only this impetus enables us to comprehend the history of the world. (*Enc.* §384)

If we can understand the history of the human form of life as the search for spirit as the definition of the absolute it seems to follow that the history of spirit's self-knowledge must begin with another definition and consists to a large degree in misunderstandings of what it is. I understand absolute spirit altogether to be the history of these 'misunderstandings'. Departing from the *Aesthetics* the first definition of the absolute is that of the religion of Zoroaster.¹⁶ It 'takes light as it exists in nature—the sun, the stars, fire in its luminosity and flames—to be the Absolute, without explicitly separating this divinity from light, as if light were a mere expression and image or symbol' (*Aesthetics* I: 325). It then proceeds to what Hegel takes to be *Brahma*: 'the consciousness of the Absolute as what in itself is purely universal, undifferentiated, and therefore completely indeterminate' (*Aesthetics* I: 335). This story culminates in what Hegel calls *symbolism proper*, which Hegel identifies with Egypt, leading Whitney Davis to comment: 'For every art is always somewhat "Egyptian"—indeed, I will suggest, must be "Egyptian"' (Davis 2018: 71). The reason for Hegel's emphasis on *symbolism proper* (and his identification of it with Egypt) is twofold. Firstly, because the definition of the absolute here introduces negativity for the first time in its natural form of death.¹⁷

But the first determinateness and negation of the Absolute in itself cannot be the free self-determination of the *spirit* as spirit,

but is itself only the immediate negation. The immediate and therefore natural negation in its most comprehensive mode is *death*. Thus the Absolute now is interpreted as having to enter this negation as a determination accruing to its own essence and to tread the path of extinction and death. (*Aesthetics* I: 348)

And secondly, because the definition of the absolute articulates its self-knowledge in riddles and thereby makes its failure to generate a non-paradoxical form of self-knowledge a constitutive part of its self-knowledge: ‘Egypt is the country of symbols, the country which sets itself the spiritual task of the self-deciphering of the spirit, without actually attaining to the decipherment. The problems remain unsolved’ (*Aesthetics* I: 354).

There certainly is a lot to unpack here. I will concentrate on the formal aspect and will not discuss the historical reality of these religions. In my view the remarkable thing about these passages is that Hegel identifies ultimate notions within the self-knowledge of the above-mentioned shapes of spirit. Against the backdrop of the way the absolute is thought with each shape of spirit—or, to put it a bit more sociologically for clarificatory reasons, against the backdrop of collective representations—we are able to understand the inner workings of a certain shape of spirit. Understood in a weak way this seems to be rather uncontroversial. If we want to understand the cultural practices of a past or a different society we must engage with the meaning they attribute to these practices, otherwise we will end up with a distorted picture of what they are.¹⁸ But I think Hegel wants to say more.¹⁹ A stronger interpretation argues that Hegel tries to identify ultimate meanings throughout the history of the human form of life (i) in the light of which all meaning within a form of life is generated; (ii) these ultimate meanings cannot be justified or explained by other notions in that form of life; and (iii) as such, the absolute can be understood as the way spirit represents its own freedom and, precisely by representing it, in fact produces the possibility to actualize freedom. Looking at it this way has the advantage that absolute spirit does not need to be understood in either metaphysical terms, nor as a hermeneutical endeavour. It is much more, since it is the realm in which spirit—which is ‘actual only as that which it knows itself to be’ (*PR*: §273)—actually knows itself.

A less opaque way of expressing this might be to say that absolute spirit should be understood as constitutive forms of spiritual self-reflection. Committing to a metaphysical reading would mean to argue that there is a fixed content prior to the reflective practices which then only gradually understand what spirit has always already been. Committing to a hermeneutical reading would mean to say that there is no fixed content whatsoever and to equate Hegel’s position to some sort of historicism.²⁰ I want to suggest that it is helpful to think of absolute spirit as reflective practices within human sociality which

actually do constitute something which counts as absolute within a certain form of life or shape of spirit. The inner dynamics of this process are not arbitrary in Hegel's view because liberation within the realm of spiritual self-knowledge is the decreasing dependence on absolute presuppositions²¹ which exist outside the realm of spirit and thus the increasing capacity for spiritual self-determination.²² This striving for presuppositionlessness also constitutes the hierarchy of art, religion and philosophy as media of absolute spirit. In Hegel's view art and religion are intrinsically bound with a spiritual self-knowledge which is reliant on presuppositions.²³ Since this is not my main topic here, I just want to reflect on the difference of the mediums of art and religion in light of this very briefly. The technical difference is between *intuition* and *representation*; historically, Hegel argues, art was the dominant mode of spiritual self-reflection until the collapse of the Greek world; religion was the dominant mode until the reformation. Since they share the same content, namely the definition of the absolute prevalent in a certain form of life, this means that art and religion are able to communicate certain definitions of the absolute in different ways. Art, bound to sensual immediacy, is best suited to express definitions which are in need of an expression in sensual content—symbolic and classical art. Conversely, religion is able to express definitions of the absolute which are detached from sensual immediacy and primarily communicate through representations. The infamous theory of the *end of art* thus means nothing else than a functional change in the primary mode in which spirit communicates its self-knowledge and thus can be read as liberation.²⁴

The starting point of this process is symbolic art which is mainly associated with the oriental world. I think Hegel gives two primary determinations of symbolic art, the importance of which can hardly be overstated for Hegel's philosophy altogether (Speight 2018: 80f.; Moland 2019: 58ff.). The first definition concerns the introduction of the difference between '(i) the meaning, and (ii) the expression thereof' (*Aesthetics* I: 304). The second definition concerns the fact that this difference itself cannot be seen from within the symbol, which leads to its polyvalence:

the look of a symbol as such raises at once the doubt whether a shape is to be taken as a symbol or not, even if we set aside the further ambiguity in respect of the specific meaning which a shape is supposed to signify amongst the several meanings for which it can often be used as a symbol through associations of a more remote kind. (*Aesthetics*: 306)

The reason why this is so important is because it is only by establishing the difference between *meaning* and *expression* that it becomes possible for spirit to step outside the world of sensual immediacy and enter a world in which a thing can be taken for something, i.e. to attribute meaning to things beyond their immediacy and as

such establish relations between things. Without the difference between meaning and expression there can be no meaning.²⁵

There seem to be two ways to understand this difference. The first one would be to say that if meaning and expression differ there is a problem. On this account, to draw from Hegel's own examples, the problem would be that the 'lion' as the 'symbol of magnanimity' would not be a precise expression of magnanimity because the lion signifies more and differs from what it symbolizes (*Aesthetics*: 304). If we take magnanimity as the universal content or meaning of the lion, this is an unsatisfying way of signifying the lion's content since it also could signify, for example, 'danger'. Ultimately this way of looking at symbolic art and its function within the history of freedom is deeply flawed. The flaw is that according to this account societies in which symbols of this kind were means of communications would need to have an implicit understanding of the distinction between what is actually meant and the insufficiency of their symbols to grasp this meaning. This seems to be an absurd way to think about such societies.

The peoples, poets, priests did not in fact have before their minds in this form of universality the universal thoughts lying at the root of their mythological ideas; and only if they had had them in this way could they have then intentionally veiled them in a symbolic form. (*Aesthetics*: 311)

This second-order step of veiling an already transparent meaning into symbolic form is what Hegel calls 'conscious symbolism': 'By conscious symbolism, I mean, we are to understand that the meaning is not only explicitly known but is expressly posited as different from the external way in which it is represented' (*Aesthetics*: 379). This intentional use of symbolism is something humans are able to do and obviously still do up to this day but it is not what symbolic art is about. The shapes of spirit in which symbolic art was the primary mode of representing what they are to themselves fall entirely under the category of *unconscious symbolism*. This is exactly the realm in which meaning and expression are intertwined in a way which makes it impossible to sort them out, or to say that there is a universality of meaning apart from its untransparent expression. Symbolic art is thus the realm where spirit is a riddle to itself, and precisely through this riddle the history of freedom begins. To Hegel this riddle is solved by Oedipus who stands—symbolically if you will—for the 'self-deciphering' of spirit (cf. *Aesthetics*: 354).²⁶ By solving the riddle of the Sphinx with the answer 'human' he put an end to the world where spirit was submerged in the process of self-deciphering and as such marks the point of transition towards the Greek world (cf. Falkenstern 2018). What I want to focus on here is not the way forward and the way Hegel tells the history of freedom from here on out, but rather take a look at symbolic practices in our deep history.

If the way I presented symbolic art is correct, it is possible to understand it in the following way. Symbolic art is defined by (i) marking a difference between meaning and expression and as such making it possible for spirit to step out of nature in a world where things actually mean something. (ii) This difference is obscured, untransparent and a riddle, and the answer to this riddle is ‘human’ but it is expressed in different ways. (iii) These different expressions of spirit being a riddle to itself come together in establishing an ultimate notion of spiritual self-knowledge—be it light in ancient Persia, Brahma or the Egyptian realm of the living and the dead. The important thing seems to be that Hegel thinks of these definitions of the absolute as opaque and untransparent answers to the question of what it is to be human. (iv) The history of freedom begins with precisely this question of what it is to be human—obviously not in this form, since that would presuppose a concept of humankind—but in the form of longing for a symbolically mediated answer to who and what we are. (v) Since the history of freedom begins as a riddle, there is no immediate right answer. That means that membership to the human form of life is defined by asking a question and not by giving a certain answer.

Hegel’s theory of symbolic art thus solves the problem of membership within the human form of life (i.e. the starting point of the history of freedom), not by positing certain essential features which have to be met in order to count as human, but by making the question itself the defining criterion. The reason why I think this is a helpful way of thinking of Hegel’s theory of symbolic art is because now his textually evident exclusions of certain historical societies from the human form of life do not make sense against the backdrop of his own theory. If the distinguishing criterion of spiritual freedom in its beginnings is to be a riddle to itself, it seems incoherent to argue that there are ‘wrong’ ways of spirit being a riddle to itself. This enables us to go—within Hegel’s own framework—beyond Hegel’s own narration of the history of freedom.

IV. Symbols and the deep-history of humankind

Only recently the oldest-known cave painting was discovered in modern day Indonesia. It dates back 45,000 years and is thus older than, for example, the paintings in Lascaux.²⁷ Within the discipline of archaeology there is no strict consensus regarding when exactly art and religion arose. Recently, Agustín Fuentes proposed that the earliest example of human products ‘that might be considered symbolic date to around 300,000 to 500,000 years ago’ (Fuentes 2017: 202). This is a rather controversial claim and also Fuentes settles for the more common opinion that around 40,000 years ago something remarkable happened which marks a qualitative difference. This is what archaeologists ‘refer to in an ungainly phrase as the

“Middle/Upper Palaeolithic transition”, and marks the beginning of a ‘cultural explosion’. (Mithen 1998: 171)

For my purpose it is not necessary to follow the intricacies of the archaeological debates and the different views one can have towards the empirical data.²⁸ What is important for the argument of this paper is that there is overwhelming empirical evidence (not available to Hegel, of course) on the basis of which we nowadays date the evolution of social practices of art and religion much further back before the rise of the first civilizations. The evidence is so overwhelming that I do not see any possible argument for why these ‘prehistoric’ practices of art and religion should not be considered as belonging to the realm of absolute spirit. That is to say, it seems clear that they do represent a certain understanding of what it is to be human: they generate ultimate notions of a symbolic order or, in Hegel’s terms, definitions of the absolute. Evidentially, we do not have any written records and no detailed understanding of the meaning conveyed in their symbolic organization of the world. We do not know and quite possibly will never know how they named their gods and what stories they told about them. But this does not change the fact that it seems impossible to make sense of the archaeological findings without accepting that there was already a use of symbols in the sense Hegel attributes to symbolic art.²⁹

I want to discuss very briefly Steven Mithen’s account of the Middle/Upper Palaeolithic transition.³⁰ Mithen’s basic claim is that this transition is when ‘modern’ human mindedness arose as ‘cognitive fluidity’ (Mithen 1998: 181). The purpose is to show that we should date back the evolution of what Hegel calls symbolic art into the deep history of our species and that there is, if my argument above is correct, no conceivable reason for excluding everything historically prior to the *Achsenzeit* as not belonging to the history of freedom, or for excluding, geographically, Africa and the Americas. The historical side of this exclusion does not seem to pose a real threat since archaeology only later established itself as the science it is today. This does not hold for the geographical exclusion. I think it is undeniable that Hegel at least uncritically accepted premises which we should identify as racist. The worst of which is that he denies Africa and the Americas the capacity of *Bildung* or *Trieb zur Kultur*,³¹ which also in his time had very real effects in producing knowledge about the societies in question. One striking example is the colonial discourse on *Great Zimbabwe*, whose ruins were so baffling to the Europeans that it did not take long until speculation arose about possible ‘white origins’ because it was simply inconceivable within the colonial narrative that there could have been an African culture capable of such astonishing architectural achievements.³² My aim is not to deny that Hegel at least uncritically accepts and reproduces views similar to this or anything close to defending the passages where he does that. What I want to argue for is that if we take Hegel’s proposal of what symbolic art is and what role it played in the history of the freedom of spirit seriously, it becomes

clear how arbitrary these exclusions are. And exactly because they are so arbitrary it becomes possible to drop them within Hegel's own framework.

Steven Mithen's core argument on the evolution of 'modern' human mindedness suggests that around 40,000 years ago our minds became truly and intrinsically social³³ by integrating different kinds of 'specialized intelligence' into a social whole (Mithen 1998: 172). The reason why this became possible is that humans started to establish an autonomous symbolic dimension which he defines as follows. The symbol is 'arbitrary to its referent', it is 'created with the intention of communication', and there is a 'space/time displacement between the symbol and its referent' (1998: 178). This enabled communication between individuals in ways which were not possible before because by means of communication through this symbolic dimension everything could be seen as interconnected. This is what Mithen calls *cognitive fluidity*. Through the use of these arbitrary and displaced symbols the modern human mind became fluid in two senses: (i) intersubjectively fluid, because groups now had new and potent means of communicating and producing social coherence; (ii) fluid on the level of individual mindedness, because the walls between different kinds of problem-solving intelligences now collapsed:

The four chapels of technical, natural history, social and linguistic intelligence [...] are in place. But the walls of these chapels are solid; the chapels are closed to each other, trapping within them the thoughts and knowledge of each specialized intelligence - except for the flows between the chapels of linguistic and social intelligence. To constitute the modern mind, the thoughts and knowledge located in all these chapels must be allowed to flow freely around the cathedral—or perhaps within one 'superchapel'—harmonizing with each other to create ways of thought that could never have existed within one chapel alone. (Mithen 1998: 172)

This ultimately leads to the 'collapse of the cognitive barrier between the social and the natural worlds' (1998: 190). By establishing an autonomous symbolic dimension, mediated through art and religion, humans integrated their world into a social whole—they thus established society in the sense of Durkheim discussed above: as a *reality sui generis*.³⁴

Circling back to Hegel, I want to briefly consider the advantages of extending the notion of symbolic art this way into the deep history of our species. I think there are two core points: (i) this notion enables us to think differently about the beginning of the history of freedom. Hegel's account of the oriental world is shaky at best and his notion that only around 800 B.C. something like cultural representations of a shared symbolic universe were beginning to be expressed in

symbolic art is simply empirically false. To me it seems that expanding the notion of symbolic art into the deep history of the human life form is helpful, especially if we are interested in the notion of a history of freedom. (ii) The second point is closely connected. If one accepts that giving an account of what makes us human is always accompanied by the threat of exclusion of those who do not match the given criteria, dating the beginning of the history of freedom further back into our deep history is also helpful in this regard. The reason is that Hegel quite evidently runs into major problems by excluding parts of the history of humankind from the history of freedom while simultaneously claiming that freedom is what makes us human. The structural problem he is faced with is that he has to name a historical constellation in which human freedom came into being and thus has to exclude everything before as prehistory—not yet free, not yet fully human. In a sense I think that this is a necessary price if one subscribes to the idea of a history of freedom, and this is certainly a topic lending itself to passionate debate. But if there is something to reconstructing symbolic art as the beginning of the history of freedom in the way that I have proposed in this paper, the history of human freedom begins by collectively asking what it is to be a spiritual being and producing cultural artefacts which can be read as an answer to this question. Adding that this question firstly rises in the form of opaque forms of spiritual self-knowledge, as riddles, seems to rule out the possibility of saying certain societies or cultural groups are doing it ‘wrong’ to begin with.

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Notes

¹ For more details on this understanding of absolute spirit than I will be able to give in this paper, see Kreis (2014, 2018), Bertram (2018), and (Mooren, Rojek and Quante 2018: 656).

² The notion ‘oriental’ is being used throughout this paper in the sense of Hegel’s own technical term.

³ Abbreviations used:

Hegel, G.W.F. 1968ff. *Gesammelte Werke*. In Verbindung mit der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) herausgegeben von der Rheinisch-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Hamburg.

– GW 25, 1: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes. Nachschriften zu den Kollegien der Jahre 1822 und 1825*.

- GW 27, 1: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters 1822/23.*
- GW 27, 2: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters 1824/25.*
- GW 27, 3: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Wintersemesters 1826/27.*
- GW 28, 1: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst. Nachschriften zu den Kollegien der Jahre 1820/21 und 1823.*
- GW 28, 2: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst. Nachschriften zum Kolleg des Jahres 1826.*

Hegel, G.W.F. 1983ff. *Vorlesungen. Ausgewählte Manuskripte und Nachschriften.* Hamburg.

- V 3: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion. Teil 1. Einleitung. Der Begriff der Religion.*
- V 5: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion. Teil 3. Die vollendete Religion.*

Aesthetics = Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

Enc = Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller, revised by M. Inwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

PR = Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ This debate only recently gained new momentum after several proposals to reconsider Marx's notion of *Gattungswesen* (Butler 2019; Khurana 2022; Schuringa 2023). These approaches come together in rejecting the view that the notion of *Gattungswesen* necessitates a hopelessly essentialist humanism (Althusser 2003).

⁵ The notion of *Absenzzeit* stems from Karl Jaspers. A history of this concept was put forth in Assmann (2019).

⁶ For a more detailed account of Egypt, see Davis (2018).

⁷ There are remarkable differences in Hegel's Berlin lectures. In 1820–21, symbolic art is only presented as a two-step process of the 'Naturesymbol' (GW 28, 1: 67) and 'Das wahre Symbolische' (GW 28, 1: 69). In Griesheim's notes from 1826, symbolic art has four parts, and interestingly, Judaism is also included (GW 28, 2: 656). The problem of where to place Egypt chronologically only increases in complexity if one includes Hegel's lectures on religion (cf. Stewart 2018: 169–97). Apart from all the differences in Hegel's account of Egypt, I think it is fair to say that his views are relatively stable on the major role Egypt plays in liberating spirit from nature.

⁸ Especially on Egypt there are clarifying remarks on Hegel's historical misunderstandings in (Assmann 2019: 72f.)

⁹ It is fascinating to see how strongly Hegel seems to be drawing from this book. Take, for example, what Stuhr is writing on India: ‘das Wesen ihres ständischen Verhältnisses durch ein natürliches Prinzip bedingt setzen, und nicht als Wert des Menschen und abhängig von ihrer Freiheit, sondern als das unmittelbare der Gottheit’ (Stuhr 1812: 17). His central claim is that history begins in India and consists in the gradual process from *natural principles* towards *freedom*. He writes that there is a conceivable ‘Streben [...] sich blinder Naturgewalten zu entziehen [und] die Freiheit herrschend zu machen’ (1812: 251).

¹⁰ Christoph Menke argues that ethical life only is possible due to something which is no longer justifiable within ethical life. He calls this ‘Tatsachenfeststellung’ (2021: 134).

¹¹ Readings revolving around this understanding can, for example, be found in Kreis (2014, 2018), Mooren (2017), Bertram (2018), Mooren, Rojek and Quante (2018) and Sandkaulen (2018).

¹² Pippin draws heavily from the same passage but without spelling out the consequences this might have for a reading of absolute spirit. ‘[S]pirit is a product of itself, only what it takes itself to be’ (2008: 60).

¹³ ‘Religion, the first mode of self-consciousness, is the spiritual consciousness of the spirit of the people itself, the universal spirit, the spirit that exists in and for itself, according to the determination it gives itself in the spirit of a people. It is the consciousness of what is true in its purest, undivided determination. It is the place where a people defines what it considers to be true. [...] People must be educated in religion; religion must be perpetuated continually, just as science and art must be taught. However, one should not imagine the relationship in such a way that religion should be added later. Rather, the point is that the state has already emerged from a specific religion, that it shares the same communal principle with religion, and that the state has this political, artistic, and scientific life because it has religion. This is a firm foundation.’ (*GW* 27, 2: 491f., my translation).

¹⁴ ‘The needs of people vary according to their education, the free development of their minds, and thus, within this diversity, there also belongs that standpoint of trust that belief be placed in authority according to the stage of development.’ (*V* 5: 183f., my translation)

¹⁵ ‘Collective representations are the product of a vast cooperative effort that extends not only through space but over time; their creation has involved a multitude of different minds associating, mingling, combining their ideas and feelings—the accumulation of generations of experience and knowledge. A very special intellectuality, infinitely richer and more complex than that of the individual, is concentrated in them. We can understand, then, how reason has the power to go beyond the range of empirical knowledge. It owes this power not to some mysterious virtue but simply to the fact that, as a well-known formula has it, man is twofold. Within him are two beings: an individual being that originates in the organism and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact; and a social being that represents within us the higher reality of the intellectual and moral order that we know through observation –by which I mean society. In the realm of practice, this duality of our nature makes it impossible to reduce a moral ideal to a utilitarian motive; and in the realm of thought, this duality makes it impossible to reduce reason to individual experience. Because he participates in society, the individual naturally transcends himself when he thinks and when he acts’ (Durkheim 2008: 18).

¹⁶ Departing from the philosophy of religion the picture would be slightly differently because Hegel treats there on what he calls *sovrery* which he associates mainly with Africa. He explicitly excludes this from being an actual form of knowing the absolute and degrades it only to a form of *Willkürfreiheit* which enables him to exclude Africa from the history of freedom—in the *Aesthetics* he simply does so by not mentioning it at all.

¹⁷ On the significance of negativity in symbolic art, see Magnus (2001). On Hegel's interpretation of death in Egypt as advent of theories of the immortality of the soul, see Stewart (2018: 180ff.).

¹⁸ This is uncontroversial in sociological discourses on methodology which are not purely quantitative and led the social sciences over the past century to develop ever more engaging methods. The starting point marks Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and the idea of 'participant observation'.

¹⁹ Pinkard pointed into this direction by explaining Hegel's absolute through the notion of ideology in the sense of something that is capable of justifying social power structures (2021: 316).

²⁰ For a further critique of this view, see Hindrichs (2002).

²¹ This is a notion by R. G. Collingwood put forth in his very instructive *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940).

²² I tried to propose such a reading in Gante (2021).

²³ Even though it certainly is the self-description of Hegel's project that this differs in philosophy or the *Science of Logic*, there are many problems revolving around the idea of a presuppositionless self-knowledge. For a reading of the *Logic* centred around the notion of self-determination, see Martin (2012). For the problems regarding presuppositionless or self-transparency and liberation, see Menke (2016, 2018) and Khurana (2017: 298).

²⁴ It is my impression that there is a consensus on this in the literature. This is not to say that there are no differences in the readings of the passages in question but most commentators would agree that Hegel does not want to say art became insignificant or perished completely. Out of the abundant amount of literature on this topic, see Bungay (1984: 71–89), Geulen (2002), Donougho (2007), Rutter (2010: 7ff.) and Bird-Pollan (2020).

²⁵ On the importance of Hegel's philosophy of the symbol for his philosophy altogether, see de Man (1982), Magnus (2001) and Davis (2018).

²⁶ Birgit Sandkaulen thus fittingly wrote that we can understand symbolic art as a 'search movement' (2021: 14).

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/jan/13/worlds-oldest-known-cave-painting-found-in-indonesia>. On Lascaux as a beginning, see Bataille (1955).

²⁸ For an overview, see Atran (2002) and Pettitt (2012).

²⁹ 'Few can doubt that the painted caves, some of which were located deep underground, were the locus for ritual activities. Indeed the anthropomorphic images within this art, such as the sorcerer from the cave of Les Trois-Freres, are most easily interpreted as being either supernatural beings or shamans who communicated with them' (Mithen 1998: 200).

³⁰ For a critical discussion, see Insoll (2004: 94ff.).

³¹ Cf. Stone (2020). One of these passages from his lectures is the following: 'Was das Charakteristische des Geistigen der Racen betrifft, so ist es auch auffallend. Die Neger sind

eine Kindernation, die aus der kindlichen Interessenlosigkeit nicht herausgehn. Sie sind von außen sehr bildsam doch haben sie diesen innern Trieb nicht. Sie sind also einerseits höchst unbefangen, kindlich, gutmüthig, dann eben so fähig auf das Extrem der Wildheit und Grausamkeit überzugehn. In ruhigem Zustande ist ihre Bestimmtheit kindlich und gut müthig. Wie bildsam sie sind zeigt sich durch die Fortschritte der Missionare, und ihre Dankbarkeit, die sie für das Belehren bezeigen. Aber sie selbst haben sich aus ihrem Kindheitszustande noch nicht herausgerissen' (*GW* 25, 1: 35).

³² For an overview, see Fontein (2006). Even though Hegel, to my knowledge, does not treat on this specific example, other scholars have argued that Hegel is at least selective about the sources he presents. James and Knappik identify a '*confirmation bias*' (2022: 20) and also Robert Bernasconi shows how selective Hegel's use of sources in fact is (1998).

³³ In evolutionary biology Tomasello most notably works on social and cultural origins of human mindedness (see especially Tomasello 2000). This goes back to Vygotsky's project of explaining higher psychological functions as only possible in society, who's work Tomasello frequently refers to (see Vygotsky 1978). On the intrinsic sociality of the human life-form, see also Khurana's recent paper on *Gattungswesen* (2022).

³⁴ A helpful interpretation on what this reality *sui generis* is can be found in Berger and Luckmann: 'Society does indeed possess objective facticity. And society is indeed built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning. And, incidentally, Durkheim knew the latter, just as Weber knew the former. It is precisely the dual character of society in terms of objective facticity and subjective meaning that makes its 'reality *sui generis*', to use another key term of Durkheim's' (1966: 30).

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