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The Formation of German Religious Thought in the Passage from Enlightenment to Romanticism RS371b (YDS 13-199)

I produce here Frei's notes on Lessing and Kant. Lessing was a key figure in Frei's historical work in the 1970s, and appears (alongside Kant and Herder) as one of the subjects of the Rockwell Lectures in 1974, and as the sole subject of the George F. Thomas memorial lecture in 1978. Kant is even more important for Frei, who returned again and again to Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, finding that much of the structure of modern theology was already established in its pages. The course certainly ran until 1981, and the notes include a 1981 exam paper, but Frei may have written the lectures considerably earlier. CPH 1981a.

1. Lessing

[Frei begins with a paraphrase of Lessing's *Proof of the Spirit and of Power*.¹]

The Promise-fulfillment scheme: if I can't experience it myself but have to take the word of others, what use is it? It's the same with miracles. (Contra the mediating theologians, as much as contra (non-Pietistic) orthodoxy.) If I had lived at the time of Christ – fine; or if I experience miracles done by believing Christians, and experience prophecy-fulfillment *now* – fine. I would have subjugated my reason to him, or to claims like those made in his name, gladly.

I. The arguments are those of Hume, concerning tailoring belief to fit the evidence. But something is different. There is an emphasis on the *present* and on the time interval that Hume doesn't have: Now is when I want to be in the presence of such proofs. One mustn't forget (1) that Lessing was himself (like Goethe!) a pietist believer once, and that he prefers this with its orthodox rather than Rationalist leanings always to the brittle, intellectualistic and dishonest compromises of the Neologians; and (2) that he's talking about proof of spirit and power, i.e. of a here-and-now inward strength that gives *certitude*, not simply a weighing of evidence for and against the facts. And that's where the gulf or time interval becomes so important: Past so inexorably a dimension I cannot experience, a past occasion cannot be immediately, inwardly-certainly present to me: *Reports* of prophecies fulfilled, of miracles done, are not the same as prophecies fulfilled and miracles done. 'Those ... done before my

eyes work immediately ... the others are supposed to work through a medium which robs them of all power.'

II. Now what about the certainty (certitude? – I don't think so) of historical reports, i.e. probability statements, on the basis of which I am supposed to believe that something extraordinary has happened? Here Lessing switches from stress on how one becomes inwardly convinced to how likely an unusual fact, i.e. a miracle, is – This now is much more in the spirit of Hume. But Lessing's reply is not the conventional one, historical reports of miracles have a low probability value. Of course he believes that and with it – since the two were connected for him – belief that Jesus is Son of God also goes away. But this is not exactly what he stresses. He stresses that 'no historical truth can be demonstrated' and therefore 'nothing can be demonstrated by means of historical truths' (i.e. facts). What we have here in large part is the distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact drawn by Leibniz and Wolff. You recall that for them these were two distinct but coordinate, harmoniously related objective realms, each real in its own right, with the non-physical realm guaranteeing the orderliness, the intelligibility of the realm in which causal efficacy (sufficient reason) rules. You recall also that it is the personal God in whom freedom for factual occurrence and change, sheer rational coherence (principle of contradiction, envisagement of what is rationally possible) are united. Hence the ability of the two realms to be coordinated.

Philosophically this is going to fall apart through Kant who will find the coincidence of these two realms a *given* in singular occurrences, but not known apart from such occurrences. And *no* metaphysical conclusions can be drawn from their coincidence because (1) we do not know the individual physical fact in itself, to say nothing of the full concatenation of facts, from which we could reason to the reason for this fact being here and now; and (2) the limits of the other realm are that it operates only as a series of forms and categories in relation to occurrences presented to it – and not as an independently 'real' realm in its own right.

Theologically, here is Lessing knocking the same scheme just as hard as he can. You are *not* he, tells us, going to be able to indicate, short of God himself – and he's not available as an ordinary fact, at least not like Jesus ought to be – that you can account for the occurrence and character of historical fact in such a way that you can thereby also indicate its relation to the realm of necessary, purely rational truth. Now if you say that Jesus is the Son of God, then no matter how much miraculous evidence you cite, that evidence has nothing to do with this supposed status of his, for *that* is a claim of a logically and metaphysically different order. 'If I have no historical objections to the claim that Christ raised a dead man, do I therefore have to hold it to be true that God has a Son who is of the same essence as he? If I have no historical objection to

the claim that this Christ himself was raised from the dead, do I therefore have to hold it to be true that this resurrected Christ was the Son of God?' You cannot conceive historical occurrence and metaphysical being together in one concept.

III. Suppose Christ did miracles and taught that we have to believe him to be the Messiah, the reasons for accepting or rejecting these things are *quite* different from the grounds on which I accept other kinds of teachings that he set forth. That they were set forth in connection with, indeed by means of miracles, has nothing to do with their validity. The *Glaubenslehren* of the Christian religion are one thing, the practical (moral) elements based on them a wholly different thing.

Typical of the period (Semler,² whom Lessing disliked and vice versa; Karl Auer³) the difference between religion and theology, religion the permanent and true element, theological expression the variance. This among *Rationalists*, and not pietists! Schleiermacher by no means the first to make this basic distinction. Lessing made it and extended it to the Bible: Its inner meaning – the building itself – remains, even if the 'scaffolding,' or the 'architects' plans, are lost. Against Goeze he says, 'Even if one is unable to answer the objections which reason raises against the Bible, nonetheless the religion (of the Bible) remains undisturbed in the hearts of those Christians who have gained an inner feeling of its essential truths.'⁴

Again, 'The Bible contains more than belongs to religion', there was religion before there was 'Bible'. 'No matter how much depends on these writings, it is impossible that the whole truth of the Christian religion rests on them' 'The Religion is not true because evangelists and Apostles taught it but they taught it because it is true. The written traditions must be explained from their inner truths, and if there is no inner truth, they can't provide it.'

2. Kant

Why is it that everyone regards this philosopher as so vitally important for Protestant theology? If true in general, is it true in Christology also?

(1) The fundamental impact of Kant – as I see it – is the way he rescued the human being from his loss of a role, his loss of a status in the universe at large. (Badly put. Man could not suffer loss – eighteenth- and nineteenth-century people convinced of it, hence applauded Kant for showing how man *not* a loser in universe even when it begins to look that way.) Recall that up to now the self had been ingredient in the universe of objective things or substances. The soul was as real as the body – if one believed in

the soul at all – and the self–body–soul was the link between immaterial reality and the material world in the order of reality. But suppose one denied that we know ‘substances’ out there, in agreement with Hume? Why, then external reality and internal reality being alike, one also denied the unitary or substantial self. Hume took Locke’s ideas of sensation and reflection and denied the conclusions about substrates at both ends, external and internal.

- (2) Kant’s revolution was to bring the self back again, but now in a manner in which it no longer fitted into the world of substances / objects. The formal presupposition of all knowledge is the ‘I think’ that accompanies it, but as soon as we make that the object of our thinking – or for that matter the same willing or feeling – being, no longer the spontaneous subject–self, the thinker or the agent, but one in a series of objects or phenomena. From this it follows
- (a) that the subject-self, or the ‘I world’ is a perspective upon the world. The metaphysical body-soul distinction and unity in effect gone, and instead we have a dual perspective upon the one psycho-physical organism. (a) As objective or phenomenal the whole self is simply part of the mechanical efficient-causal series, in principle (Kant is a Newtonian, thinks that all objective phenomena are causally determined) (whether Kant carried it out or not!) totally explicable in that series. (b) As subjective or noumenal, or as rational–moral agent the whole self stands outside that series and cannot be ranged in it – neither phenomenally nor metaphysically (even as God and the world can’t be data of genuine knowledge).
 - (b) It follows further – and this is the task that Kant only hinted at, whereas

- (2) We have said nothing about second critique so far – moral man;
- (3) Nor have we touched on the problem of ‘history’ for Kant, i.e., the extent to which he paralleled Lessing – But let’s postpone these and other issues. Let us note the formal features of this remarkable book.
- (1) Kant wants to trace the process of conversion, and he wants to do it by indicating a point of genuine change in – well in what? In ideality, i.e. in the realm of ends echoing in history? – But that’s a remote reality because ‘ought’ and ‘is’ always remain in tension. Let’s say at any rate in the individual. Now that’s fascinating problem in itself because it involves description of a sort which later comes to be called ‘dialectical’.
- (2) Kant also wants to make sense out of religion – and we note an odd combination here: (a) the Bible’s content (unified canon!) (b) Religion as a human state – the referent of statements about God must be man (c) Religion a not only descriptive but normative objective state of affairs – true religion.
- (3) The seat of evil in the rational will, i.e. freedom of choice in an irreducible way: Not sensuality but the deliberate superordination of sensual maxim over rational maxim. Presupposition or ground of freedom? – itself: this is subject–agent who cannot be known.
- (4) The moral order = (a) good nature and inexplicably (b) actual evil over which we cannot help ourselves. Yet it cannot be hereditary (traducionist) and not historically originated. It must be prior to time and experience, presupposed in them – ‘transcendental’ factor. (Where then location of change? Not primarily in sensate experience, obviously.) Hence we are responsible for evil but cannot help sinning. R. Niebuhr: sinning inevitable but not necessary.⁵ Thou oughtst therefore thou canst abide.

The change lies in the noumenal realm of the self. Justification lies for Kant in divine bridging of the distance between new intention and actual execution! But the change must be (1) in us: duty to good abides, waiting on God’s help = sin of lassitude (2) Yet must be conceived or represented as *extraneous* because we cannot conceive or think the process of change from before and after. Hence *we* do, but must represent our doing as substitution for us by Son of God holding ‘before’ and ‘after’ change together.

The passage marked for deletion ends here.

Clearly the framework of questions and problems is one that represents a change from what we have seen hitherto, though to some extent prepared for in Lessing.

Special source of insight, awareness or knowledge which cannot be translated directly into metaphysical or general knowledge: It is not information about reality. Hence it is quite as much descriptive about an *a priori* human situation as it is normative or truth-claiming. The latter indeed has to be left in position of risk or question.

The move may be made in at least two ways.

- (1) Kant himself: Practical reason, distinct from theoretical reason is the source and sanction for religion. There is no special *a priori* or transcendental religious function either in the human being or in the structure of knowing in which all human beings necessarily participate.
- (2) Schleiermacher, Tillich and many others: There is a primordial, pre-cognitive, i.e. pre-knowing, pre-relationship-to-specific-objects awareness that does not reduce to metaphysics or to morality. This awareness constitutes the relationship. I *am* my unitary awareness. Man = consciousness. (How about what I've called 'ontology'? That's more difficult to establish. In both Schleiermacher and Tillich there seems to be a more *direct* relation of this primordial awareness to ontology than to metaphysics or morality – but even so (a) the two are not identical; nor (b) is there a denial of relation between awareness and morality, though metaphysics is another question.)

Question is about relation of *both* (1) and (2) to Christology. For *both* the question of the category change that bothered Locke fleetingly: Christ is due to failure on our part to be consistent monotheists, worship rightly, and live right moral life. In other words, sin – but not hereditary original sin and full condemnation, was presupposition. But the question made him uneasy for a moment: What has *historic faith* got to do with this? So he accentuated (a) the fact that we were unable to help ourselves (b) the benefit derived from Christ (c) the external evidence that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. All this Kant does too – at the *representational* level; but he cannot get beyond its allegorical status, if it is to happen genuinely *to us*. Kant cannot get an historical ('positive') answer to a moral non-historical question. As for the other possibility, from position (1), i.e. Schleiermacher and Tillich, re Christology of *person* rather than *work* of Christ, this is *out* for Kant as it was for Locke. Neither metaphysics, nor ontology, nor primordial awareness but morality = sin only led to Christology. Hence no Christ as crown of creation, no Christ = undisrupted self-awareness in relation to God. But even in this position, category confusion remains: for the primordial is different from, logically (ontologically?) prior to historical, so that 'ideal' in fact cannot enter history.

Result of both (1) and (2): A) 'History' status now highly ambiguous – does it belong to realm of phenomenal, objective heteronomous series, or is it part of man's very being = subject. Re. nature no question that the former is

true, but history something else again. B) The ambiguous status of finitude = evil.

Kant: Religion within Limits

- (1) Had touched on three things I simply want to mention:
 - (a) Dialectic as concrete thinking which is an apprehension, recapitulation and actual shaping of the reality apprehended.
 - (b) Ambiguity of place of history: Does it describe subject–self perspective (realm) or phenomenal realm, that of sense experience? Kant said latter, his successors ambiguous.
 - (c) Subject–self = practical reason = agent: Is willing the same as reasoning, or is reasoning a comment on agency? Kant ambiguous. The matter is important because we are dealing with unitary or whole self in different perspectives. Self is not simply a substance like other realities in the world but a slant on the world.
- (2) Now the point is of course that what Kant posits – for many reasons – is that *this* self, this unitary perspective on the world, the *whole* self, is split against itself. Hence the beginning of Christology (= *work* of Christ) theory of all subsequent theology worth speaking of, until present time, takes its departure from this point, the unitary self split against itself which must become one.
- (3) That split, clearly non-historical or pre-historical in Kant, is *ambiguously* historical in his successors. In any case the simple historical starting point of a one-time beginning of sin, which Locke still had, is now *out*, just as objective God, who creates at one point in and with time is out for German Idealists – what about one-time occurrence of salvation?⁶ Apart from that, Locke’s structure is still there: You begin with a problem involving an experience of
 - (I) responsibility and
 - (II) inability to measure up. There is, in other words
 - (III) hiatus between actual and right states of affairs (Locke: loss of right state of affairs is that of bliss and immortality, due to sin. In other words, insuperable split or tension is not, at least not simply in man but in an ‘objective’ state of affairs beyond man’s internality. There is a similar Christological schema here but a different view and sensibility of the self and experience) which is inescapable and yet our own doing (R. Niebuhr: Sin is inevitable but not necessary).⁷
 - (IV) God’s justice, and the coincidence between his justice and goodness or mercy, must remain untouched by this hiatus between is and ought, between our being responsible and our being unable to deal

with the evil for which we are responsible: 'You ought, therefore you can' remains rule in principle, but between ought and can there is an enormous gulf. And cognate to that gulf is the gulf between ideal world and phenomenal world.

- (V) The presupposition for this complex dialectic within self, split of whole self, unity as well as total duality between ought and can is freedom and apprehension of freedom as a state of affairs for which no further reason can be given. (Quote Kant on irreducibility of derivation of freedom.) In effect of course, this means for Kant and in a different way for his successors
- (VI) the thing I called special insight last time, as a state of affairs distinct from ordinary knowledge and from metaphysics as an item in the same realm of discourse as knowledge of sense data: Dualism between metaphysics and morality / religion involves positing freedom as an ultimate item on the moral / religious side.
- (VII) The split of self involves then a free, unaccountable reordering of the maxims in their priority. Everything else can be put into an intelligible structure, this cannot. Why the *Willkür* chooses as it does, in contravention of the moral law, it is impossible to tell. '... The source of evil cannot lie in an object determining the will through inclination, nor yet in a natural impulse; it can lie only in a rule made by the will for the use of its freedom, i.e., in a maxim ... When we say, then, Man is by nature good, or Man is by nature evil, this means only that there is in him an ultimate ground (inscrutable to us) of the adoption of good maxims or evil maxims ...'⁸
- (4) The split must be healed in such a way that it can be shown that it takes place in the self, i.e., where it counts, where I am aware of (– no!) or rather apprehend the ground of the split to occur. Hence the problem of *continuity* of man under nature and under *grace* a basic issue. Hence the job of reconciliation must be autonomous, i.e., I must not be temporally eliminated. It must be organic or internal. There can be nor externally imputed righteousness *to me* which is not at the same time *my* righteousness, a decisive change in the pre-experienced, preexperientiable ground of the self.
- (5) The work of reconciliation, which is that of changing the radically evil self back to the good self which it *is*, is certainly that of a radical change in maxims and therefore of moral agency. At same time, however, it is a matter of rational insight into the 'moral law as a sufficient incentive of the will'.⁹ The moral law comes to the will with the force of an unconditioned imperative. But it also comes to reason as the idea embodying the perfect, rational structure which theoretic reason can only know as a regulative idea, not as actually informing, constitutive one. Reconciliation, to the

extent that it involves putting before us a rational, archetypal idea(l) as effective and good, is a rational transaction: The work of reconciliation is that of one for whom (A) his archetypal self and his works are one and the same – unity of person and work of Redeemer; (B) insight and change are finally the same – revelation and redemption are one (C) in the appropriation imputed and appropriated faith, rational apprehension and moral turn must be the same or at least continuous.

- (6) One of the most important aspects of the work of reconciliation is the fact of the continuity which we mentioned a few moments ago. The labor of actual improvement, i.e., of visible change, is only appearance. As connection with the real action, the source of change is only tenuous or shadowy. It's almost as if the visible realm – political, ecclesial, habitual-overt or empirical-ethical is a mythical realm. Again, that's of course what both Schleiermacher and Hegel faulted him for most severely. Rational, intelligible structure may be in nature as phenomenal realm, but not in history or society as phenomenal. Here one has to go back of what appears to the source of incentives, the direct interplay of moral law and *Wille* = *Willkür*.

For God the two, inner change and full outer reform may be seen as one; hence he judges the good as already accomplished, even though it is only potentially so. In other words, even if God imputes righteousness to us he does so in view of foreknows as our actual becoming righteousness. *But there is an act of God's foreknowing, judging us righteous, which coincides with our own doing or insight*, and that is the act of change in our deepest self – the change in freedom, i.e., in the order of incentive: Here what God does and what we do coincides. At this point we can look at what takes place, the 'moment' or the inner act of change = not a temporal moment or act – with the eyes of God.

- (7) Now it is important to remember what Kant said in Preface to second edition: You don't need to understand my system to understand what I'm saying here. I would suggest that what we have in this book is a description or rendering of change, rather than something like a critique, i.e., an inquiry into the transcendental ground or possibility of the change. What actually *is* changing, and what is structure or descriptive logic of the process – because concrete processes are notoriously difficult to explain, but not always so difficult to describe.

Still, there is also the fact that even if you merely want to give a description rather than an explanation, you've got to have a kind of thinking that's not like most: you've got to show that something is at point A or at rest, and then you've got to indicate that now it's at point B or totally changed in location without indication of intermediate locations. Suppose your problem is that of the moral self, and like Kant you don't

have a notion of self-substance but self as rational agent: You can't claim gradual modification of the attributes or predicates of the unchanging substance. You want to speak of *total change*, total conversion at the non-static, non-substantial core of the self. But you also want to speak of continuity. It is the same self, not two, through the change.

Did Kant have available to him the instrument that could describe this process? His successors, at least some of them, thought they did – Hegel par excellence. We described dialectic last time as concrete forward-moving thought, imitating and even shaping the process itself that it describes. It is an instrument that moves through the lapse of time, just as change itself does. Kant himself had denied the application of dialectic to anything concrete in the practice of pure reason. It is perhaps a different matter in the exercise of practical reason. But in any case, in *this* instance – religion – Kant wants to show something exceedingly difficult – a process, viz., the process of conversion even though he's mistrustful of dialectic here too 1) concretely–descriptively¹⁰ and 2) *in a manner indirectly because as though seen with the eyes of God – yet not!*¹¹

- (8) The notion of a Son of God who is the ideal of a humanity pleasing to God corresponds to that of a man having originated sin. Represented as though in time it is in fact not a temporal notion, the good principle is as it were incarnate in our reason, and its archetype is to be found there: to think of it as united to flesh and blood is to eliminate the possibility of a man who mirrors it being an example, an image of the archetype; He would be a mere moral automaton. (a) Morally, then, 'incarnation' can only have an allegorical meaning (b) Naturally, an incarnation is of course nonsense: For *miracles* are as inconceivable in regard to intelligible as to historical and as to physical being: 'they are events in the world, the operating laws of whose causes are, and must remain, absolutely unknown to us'.¹²
- (9) We are of course, in temporal representation either of the intelligible moral ideal as historical *or* in the notion of a substitutionary, satisfying atonement, in the realm of *allegory* this fact allows *person and work* to merge together. Literally the two become one in our appropriation of the moral ideal – pure conformity to the moral law – in inward fact: (a) at point of 'creation' and (b) at point of actual turning from evil to good within.

Allegory: either intentionally or unintentionally the true meaning of a story is the idea to which it points, personification of ideals and ideal entities: it is truth-or-meaning content represented in story form (But – said others – we can show that Biblical authors did not *intend* to allegorize. Who cares, says Kant). Yet what Kant is doing is *rendering* or describing (a) not only an *idea* but a *process*, and (b) describing something which is really *intelligible as such* but yet cannot be directly described. The process of conversion is *that* because it is a process.

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- ¹ Lessing, 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power' in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, tr. H. Chadwick, Library of Modern Religious Thought (London: A.&C. Black, 1956), pp.51–56.
- ² See above, p.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**
- ³ Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit* (Halle, 1929).
- ⁴ Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, 5 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1913), p.271.
- ⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribners, 1949).
- ⁶ [In margin, crossed through: '(3) Split can't be healed forcibly, plastered over – the job must be organic, i.e., internal, i.e., autonomous. (4) Work of Christ point of view, but because reason = morality, therefore work of Christ = person of Christ.']
- ⁷ See note 5 above.
- ⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Religions Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. T.M. Greene and H.H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960), p.17.
- ⁹ [In the margin: 'Work and person of Christ one and same because moral agency and reason one and the same.']
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.46.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.60–61.
- ¹² *Ibid*, p.81.