

Samuel Hirsch, Hegel, and the Legacy of Ethical Monotheism*

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■ Abstract

This essay examines Samuel Hirsch's *Religious Philosophy of the Jews* as a forerunner of twentieth-century works of ethical monotheism in modern Jewish thought. In particular, it explores Hirsch's use of the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry as a way to resist Hegel's attempts to incorporate Judaism into his developmental history of religion. Hirsch frames his opposition to the Hegelian account of religion by means of providing a rival interpretation of Genesis 3 to that offered by Hegel in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. After juxtaposing Hegel's and Hirsch's respective interpretations of Genesis 3, I explore Hirsch's account of religion, which, unlike Hegel's, is presented in terms of the dichotomy of true and false religion. Finally, I will briefly highlight how Hirsch's basic strategy for understanding Judaism vis-à-vis other religions—namely, casting the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in starkly ethical terms—is taken up and utilized by Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas in the twentieth century.

■ Keywords

Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden/The Religious Philosophy of the Jews, Samuel Hirsch, G. W. F. Hegel, Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen, Emmanuel Levinas, Genesis 3, ethical monotheism

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Introduction

In recent years, the question of the nature and character of modern Jewish thought has been actively debated by scholars.¹ Jewish thought has customarily been understood as an activity internal to Jews and Judaism, where thinkers seek to reconcile traditional Jewish theology with modern, scientific sensibilities.² However, as the study of modern Jewish thought has increasingly migrated out of philosophy departments into those of religion and history,³ scholars increasingly attend to the manner in which Jewish thought has been situated, and works to situate itself, with respect to major theological and cultural discourses in Europe and the United States.⁴ This latter approach accords well with recent characterizations of the world religions discourse as a site for establishing European identity.⁵ It also complements recent work in the study of German Jewish history that has treated the emergence of modern Jewish studies as a response to the exclusion of Jews from theology departments.⁶ In approaching modern Jewish thought in this manner, the concern

¹ See, for example: Steven Schwarzschild, "Modern Jewish Philosophy," in *Pursuit of the Ideal: Jewish Writings of Steven Schwarzschild* (ed. Menachem Kellner; SUNY Series in Jewish Philosophy; Albany: State University of New York Press: 1990) 229–35; Norbert Samuelson, "Is Jewish Philosophy Either Philosophy or Jewish?" in *La Storia della Filosofia Ebraica* (ed. Irene Kajon; Biblioteca dell'Archivio di filosofia 9; Padua: CEDAM, 1993) 463–85; Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon, "Introduction: Modern Jewish Philosophy, Modern Philosophy, and Modern Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Michael L. Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 1–13; Michael Zank, "Zwischen Den Stühlen? On the Taxonomic Anxieties of Modern Jewish Philosophy," *European Journal for Jewish Studies* 1 (2007) 105–34; Aaron W. Hughes and Elliot R. Wolfson, "Introduction: Charting an Alternative Course for the Study of Jewish Philosophy," in *New Directions in Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Aaron W. Hughes and Elliot R. Wolfson; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) 1–18; Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Michael Zank, "The Heteronomy of Modern Jewish Philosophy," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 20 (2012) 99–124; Martin Kavka, introduction to *The Modern Era* (ed. Martin Kavka, Zachary Braiterman, and David Novak; *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy vol 2*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 1–31; Willi Goetschel, "Jewish Philosophy? The Discourse of a Project," in *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) 39–57; Aaron W. Hughes, *Rethinking Jewish Philosophy: Beyond Particularism and Universalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Robert Erlewine, *Judaism and the West: From Hermann Cohen to Joseph Soloveitchik* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

² For such an approach, see Morgan and Gordon, introduction.

³ For a helpful overview of the history of Jewish thought in the American academy, see Kavka, introduction. On the effects of disciplinary differences in the study of modern Jewish thought and philosophy, see Hughes and Wolfson, "Introduction," 1.

⁴ The respective works by Zank, Hughes, Batnitzky, and Erlewine mentioned in n. 1 are in this vein.

⁵ See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology* (trans. William Sayers; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁶ On this point, see Susannah Heschel, "Jewish Studies as Counterhistory," in *Insider and Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah

of the scholar is less with assessing the philosophical viability of claims than with examining how these claims position Judaism over against other religious traditions and as belonging, or not, to the contested, charged, and highly fraught notions of “Europe” and “the West.”

One strategy for situating Judaism employed by many prominent thinkers in modern Jewish thought is the concept of ethical monotheism. In it, the radical distinction between true and false notions of God, as refracted through the prism of ethics, is utilized in order to present Judaism as possessing a unique, irreplaceable, and unsurpassed standing with regard to all other religions.⁷ For ethical monotheism, the distinction between monotheism and idolatry has vital relevance for modernity precisely because it understands injustice as bound up with, and ultimately stemming from, improper, idolatrous, and/or pagan conceptions of God. Judaism is then affiliated with a rationalistic theological view which pairs the distinction or difference of God from human beings, often configured in terms of God’s transcendence, with an emphasis on human responsibility, making it a—or *the*—religion of ethical seriousness and maturity.⁸ As a corollary of this view of Judaism, Christianity, presented as pagan or as partly pagan, is associated with immanent notions of the divine and the romantic celebration of the mythical and the irrational and is considered ethically suspect.

Heschel; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 101–16, and Heschel’s monograph from the same year, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Christian Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); and Ismar Schorsch, *Leopold Zunz: Creativity in Adversity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁷ To be sure, the dichotomy of true and false notions of God, often framed as that between monotheism and idolatry, is by no means limited to thinkers who embrace ethical monotheism, such as Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas. One also finds it in Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emil Fackenheim, among others. The dyad of monotheism and idolatry has also been used to structure a wide range of scholarly works within modern Jewish thought in recent years. See, for example: Elliot R. Wolfson, *Giving Beyond the Gift: Apophasis and Overcoming Theomania* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Gideon Freudenthal, *No Religion without Idolatry: Mendelssohn’s Jewish Enlightenment* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012); Robert Erlewine, *Monotheism and Tolerance: Recovering a Religion of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁸ The philosophers Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas, as well as the theologians Leo Baeck and Kaufmann Kohler, are the clearest representatives of this tradition in the twentieth century. One sees elements of it employed in Martin Buber, who is characterized as an ethical monotheist by David Novak, “Emmanuel Levinas an Ethical Monotheism,” in *Ethical Monotheism, Past and Present: Essays in Honor of Wendell S. Dietrich* (ed. Theodore M. Vial and Mark A Hadley; Brown Judaic Studies 329; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2001) 240–58, and Ehud Benor, *Ethical Monotheism: A Philosophy of Judaism* (London: Routledge, 2018). Recent thinkers who share many, if not all, the traits of ethical monotheism described above—they are less inclined toward polemics with regard to Christianity and other religions, for example—can be seen in Kenneth Seeskin, *Autonomy and Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and L. E. Goodman, *God of Abraham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

My concern in this essay is not so much with the merits of or challenges facing ethical monotheism as a strategy for understanding Judaism as with how it uses the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry to position Judaism within modernity vis-à-vis other religious traditions and notions of European or Western identity. In this essay I treat ethical monotheism as a response to the thought of G. W. F. Hegel, in particular to his philosophical appropriation and utilization of the world religions discourse in his account of religion.⁹ And while Hegel's thought is more often the subject of caricature and polemic than sustained engagement in modern Jewish thought,¹⁰ it nevertheless plays a prominent role in setting the agenda for it. Indeed, Emil Fackenheim, one of the most astute and careful readers of Hegel among twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, claims that Hegel's philosophy of religion presents an unprecedented challenge for Jewish thought, and this challenge lies with its use of the world religions discourse, though he does not use this precise term. That is, Fackenheim sees the unique challenge presented by Hegel in his claim to incorporate Judaism, along with all other religious traditions, into a single whole, whose culmination is Protestant Christianity.¹¹ For Fackenheim, Hegel's thought radically challenges Judaism, not merely in its being relegated to a subordinate moment in the developmental history of religion, but also because this very account of history operates according to criteria that Fackenheim thinks are antithetical to Jewish sensibilities about God and human beings. Fackenheim puts it as follows. "Jewish religious existence bears witness through the ages to the absoluteness of at least two distinctions—between God and man, and between the one true God and all the false. On its part, Hegel's philosophy seeks to mediate all absolute

⁹ Both Arvind-Pal Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), and Thomas A. Lewis, *Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 190, make the case for Hegel's relevance to the world religions discourse, even though it is not featured prominently in Masuzawa's *Invention of World Religions* and other genealogies of the field mentioned in n. 5. Indeed, Mandair suggests that Hegel's thought provides the "conceptual engine necessary for the world religions discourse to emerge" (*Religion and the Specter of the West*, 157). For an attempt to present modern Jewish thought in terms of this world religions discourse, see Erlewine, *Judaism and the West*.

¹⁰ Notable exceptions here are Franz Rosenzweig, *Hegel und der Staat* (Munich and Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1920; repr., Aalen: Scientia, 1962); Emil L. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1967); and idem, "Moses and the Hegelians: Jewish Existence in the Modern World," in *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1973; repr., Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994) 79–169.

¹¹ Emil L. Fackenheim, "Samuel Hirsch and Hegel," in *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy* (ed. Michael Morgan; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) 21–26. It is worth noting that Thomas A. Lewis, who remains otherwise quite insistent on the continuing relevance of Hegel's philosophy for constructive philosophy of religion, nevertheless finds this particular dimension of Hegel's thought significantly less compelling than Fackenheim, noting that he considers it to be "the most problematic, least defensible, and most dated aspect of [Hegel's] philosophy of religion" (*Religion, Modernity, and Politics in Hegel*, 179).

distinctions, not excluding those between God and man and true and false gods. No more radical contrast is possible.”¹²

Despite the rather essentializing conception of “Jewish religious existence” employed here, Fackenheim nevertheless provides an important insight for understanding the allure of positing a dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish thought. Indeed, in modern Jewish thought, the emphatic distinction between monotheism and idolatry, or the “one true God and all the false,” trades heavily on that other “absolute distinction” mentioned by Fackenheim in the passage quoted above, that between God and human beings.¹³ This interrelated set of claims about God’s uniqueness—in terms of the God of Israel’s radical distinction from other gods and in terms of this God’s essential difference from human beings—is understood to be incompatible with Hegel’s desire to incorporate all religious traditions into a single continuum, and it provides Jewish thinkers with resources for resisting the central presuppositions of Hegel’s system.

And yet, while prominent Jewish thinkers in the ethical monotheist tradition like Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas express an overt hostility toward Hegel and use his thought as a foil to throw their own positions into relief, they rarely directly engage his thought in any sustained manner.¹⁴ *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden* (which I will refer to as *The Religious Philosophy of the Jews* in the body of this essay) published by Samuel Hirsch (1815–1889) in 1842 is worthy of consideration in this context.¹⁵ While it significantly antedates the major works of

¹² Fackenheim, “Moses and the Hegelians,” 85.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Several scholars have argued, for instance, that Levinas’s relationship with Hegel is more ambiguous and complicated than might be imagined, given the polemical tone Levinas takes when discussing Hegel. See, for instance: Martin Shuster, “Levinas and German Idealism: Fichte and Hegel,” *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas Online* (ed. Michael Morgan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 1–26, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190455934.013.32; Rozemund Uljée, “Hegel and Levinas: On Truth and the Question of Interruption,” *The Hegel Bulletin*, 39.2 (2018) 221–35; Christopher Irwin, “God, Otherness, and Community: Some Reflections on Hegel and Levinas,” *The European Legacy* 12 (2007) 663–78; Robert Bernasconi, “Hegel and Levinas: The Possibility of Reconciliation and Forgiveness,” *Archivio di Filosofia* 54 (1986) 325–46; and idem, “Levinas Face to Face—with Hegel,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 13 (1982) 267–76. I am indebted to Claire Katz for bringing many of these sources to my attention. There is less scholarly discussion of Cohen’s treatment of Hegel, but Walter Kinkel notes that Cohen is negatively disposed to Hegel throughout his writings (*Hermann Cohen: Eine Einführung in sein Werk* [Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder, 1924] 34), and in a letter to his mother from 15 April 1918, Franz Rosenzweig famously wrote, “Dass Cohen viel hegelianischer war als er wußte, ist viel gesagt worden und richtig” (*Franz Rosenzweig, Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften: Briefe und Tagebücher* [ed. Rachel Rosenzweig, Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann, and Bernhard Caspar; 2 vols.; Dordrecht: Springer-Science and Business Media, 1979] 1:538). Rosenzweig also discusses this theme in his influential “Einleitung” to *Hermann Cohens Jüdische Schriften* (3 vols.; Veröffentlichungen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums; Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924) 1:xvii–xix.

¹⁵ Samuel Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden oder das Prinzip der jüdischen Religionsanschauung und sein Verhältniss zum Heidenthum, Christenthum und zur absoluten*

Cohen and Levinas—by more than several decades in the case of Cohen (at least with regard to his Jewish writings) and over a century in the case of Levinas—it is of a piece with them in interpreting the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in ethical terms and making this dichotomy central to its presentation of Judaism. However, in contrast to these better known figures, Hirsch develops his account of the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in terms of an explicit and sustained engagement with Hegel's system.¹⁶

My concern in this essay is not so much with whether or not Hirsch's thought succeeds in overcoming Hegel. Indeed, while *The Religious Philosophy of the Jews* has a fairly extensive reception history,¹⁷ even Hirsch's most sympathetic readers have not wrongly deemed his attempt at overcoming Hegel unsuccessful.¹⁸ What I take to be worthy of further scholarly analysis today, rather, is the particular manner in which Hirsch constructs and deploys this dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in an attempt to resolve the challenges that Hegel's philosophy presents

Philosophie dargestellt und mit den erläuterten Beweisstellen aus der heiligen Schrift, den Talmudim und Midraschim versehen (Leipzig: Hunger, 1842). For a partial translation, see "Samuel Hirsch," in *Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (ed. and trans. Gershon Greenberg; Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2011) 171–204. In what follows, all translations from the text are my own, and I will include the German original in the footnotes where translation choices are highly pertinent.

¹⁶ There was, of course, significant interest in, and engagement with, Hegel's thought among a wide variety of Jewish thinkers in the nineteenth century, most of whom do not fit in the tradition of ethical monotheism as sketched here. For a discussion of the engagement with Hegel among Jewish thinkers in the nineteenth century, see Sven-Erik Rose, *Jewish Philosophical Politics in Germany, 1789–1848* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ The reception of Hirsch's *Religious Philosophy of the Jews* is significant, but it has mostly been restricted to surveys on the history and development of Jewish thought and of the Reform movement: Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (trans. David W. Silverman; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964); Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation* (Berlin: Philo Verlag, 1933) 131–47; H. J. Schoeps, *Geschichte der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie der Neuzeit* (Berlin: Votrapp, 1935) 93–132; Nathan Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968) 120–36; Eliezer Schweid, *A History of Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy* (trans. Leonard Levin; 3 vols; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 2:61–91. On the Reform movement, see Michael A. Meyer, "Reform Jewish Thinkers in Their German Intellectual Context," in *The Jewish Response to German Culture: From Enlightenment to the Second World War* (ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg; Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985) 64–84, and idem, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995). See also Fackenheim, "Samuel Hirsch and Hegel"; Gershon Greenberg, "Samuel Hirsch: Jewish Hegelian," *REJ* 129 (1970) 205–15; idem, "Religion and History According to Samuel Hirsch," *HUCA* (1972) 103–24; and idem, "Religionswissenschaft and Early Reform Jewish Thought: Samuel Hirsch and David Einhorn" in *Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness: Identities, Encounters, Perspectives* (ed. Andreas Gotzmann and Christian Wiese; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 110–44.

¹⁸ The two most extended discussions on Hirsch's attempt to provide an alternative to Hegel both conclude by emphasizing its failure. Fackenheim, in his essay "Samuel Hirsch and Hegel," states explicitly that "Hirsch's Jewish confrontation with Hegel ends in failure" (39). Similarly, Greenberg, in his essay "Religion and History According to Samuel Hirsch," judges Hirsch's philosophy to reproduce the very problems for which he faulted Hegel's thought in the first place (123–24).

for modern Jewish thought. That is, where Hegel seeks to incorporate Judaism into a larger developmental process that unfolds in terms that subvert the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry, Hirsch asserts the fundamental incompatibility between Judaism and all other religious traditions because it alone grasps the one true God and thus it alone understands the true purpose and meaning of human existence.¹⁹ Examining Hirsch's *Religious Philosophy of the Jews* will help us formulate a more accurate understanding of the emergence of the concept of ethical monotheism and enable us to appreciate more fully the significant place of Hegel's philosophy in the development of modern Jewish thought.

This essay proceeds by examining the manner in which Hirsch's *Religious Philosophy of the Jews* seeks to engage Hegel's thought and positions itself with respect to it, particularly with regard to its use of a dichotomy posited between monotheism and idolatry. Hegel's account of Genesis 3 from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* will be briefly reconstructed. This will enable us to grasp how Hirsch frames his own constructive position in terms of providing an alternative interpretation to Genesis 3. That is, both Hegel and Hirsch see Genesis 3 as a moment representing a profound shift or transition in the history of spirit. Their very different understandings of this story have significant ramifications for the rest of their subsequent philosophies of religion. Where Hegel casts religion's development in terms of a single trajectory, Hirsch presents a notion of spirit in conflict with itself, riven between Judaism, understood as the worship of the one true God, on the one hand, and the religions of paganism, mired in sin and falsity, on the other. Finally, I will briefly highlight how Hirsch's basic strategy for understanding Judaism vis-à-vis other religions—namely, casting the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in starkly ethical terms—is taken up and utilized by Cohen and Levinas in the twentieth century.

■ Hegel, Genesis 3, and the Inevitability of Sin

That Hirsch chooses Genesis 3, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden, as the staging ground of conflict with Hegel is not an arbitrary decision. Indeed, Peter C. Hodgson notes that "Hegel's preoccupation with the story is noteworthy, and it represents his most sustained piece of scriptural exegesis."²⁰ Hegel's reading of Genesis 3 is, aside from its profundity, extraordinary for the boldness with which it undercuts the straightforward sense of the story, incorporating it into the framework of his system.²¹

¹⁹ Christianity is, for Hirsch, a strange amalgamation of Judaism and paganism, which becomes the historical agent that mediates Judaism's message to the world. In this view of Christianity as being mired in paganism, as well as in claiming Jesus's Jewishness and charging Paul with falsifying and paganizing Judaism, Hirsch clearly anticipates better-known twentieth-century thinkers like Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Leo Baeck.

²⁰ Peter C. Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology: A Reading of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 151.

²¹ Hegel's reading of Gen 3 has received some attention in Anglo-American scholarship in recent

While there are scattered references to Genesis 3 throughout Hegel's corpus,²² the reconstruction that follows will derive from the discussions of it in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.²³ In this work, Hegel traces the developmental course of spirit—which is the term that connotes the developmental subject when dualisms between self and other, human and God, and finite and infinite have been transcended—in terms of a “history of religion” traced through a “single sequence of configurations.”²⁴ The progression of spirit follows a three-fold path: it begins with spirit as in itself; it then proceeds to become separated from itself or to become for another; and finally this difference is sublated and spirit now becomes “*object to itself*.”²⁵ Hegel characterizes this developmental process in terms of the realization of freedom. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Christianity, understood as the culmination of the sequence of religions, is the moment where spirit can be said to have “arrived at freedom,” as having itself as its own object and thus finding itself at home with itself.²⁶

It is within the course of the progression of spirit toward freedom that Hegel discusses Genesis 3.²⁷ Hegel insists that, despite being riddled with distortions

years. See Stephen Crites, *Dialectic and Gospel in the Development of Hegel's Thinking* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998) 501–4; Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002) 46–75; Christopher Anderson-Irwin, “‘But the serpent did not lie’: Reading History, and Hegel's Interpretation of Genesis Chapter 3,” *Clio* 35 (2005) 29–50; and Hodgson, *Hegel and Christian Theology*, 141–54.

²² See Anderson-Irwin, “‘But the serpent did not lie,’” 39, for a helpful discussion on the consistencies in Hegel's account throughout the many different references to the story in his corpus.

²³ With the relatively recent publication of the critical edition of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, the discrepancies and changes in Hegel's thought on this subject can now be tracked. To illuminate best the emphases of Hirsch's argument, I will make use of the different editions—particularly the 1821 manuscript and the lectures from 1827. My discussion of the 1821 lectures will make use of Peter C. Hodgson's edition of *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of H. S. Harris; 3 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 3:61–58. I will refer to this as *The Consummate Religion*. When discussing the 1827 lectures, I will make use of *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-volume Edition; The Lectures of 1827* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of H. S. Harris; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). I will refer to this as *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. By employing this approach of reading across the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, I by no means seek to minimize the important differences between the different iterations of Hegel's lectures. For a helpful discussion of the important differences in the conclusions of the 1821 and 1827 lectures, for instance, see Thomas A. Lewis, “Religion, Reconciliation and Modern Society: The Shifting Conclusions of Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,” *HTR* 106 (2013) 37–60.

²⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 109.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 103 (italics in original).

²⁶ *Ibid.* For a lucid account of Hegel's notion of freedom as spirit's being at home with itself, see Allen W. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 45–46.

²⁷ It should be noted that Hegel positions the discussion of Gen 3 differently among the lecture cycles. In the 1821 and 1824 courses, the discussion of the fall is found in part 3, “Consummate Religion.” In the 1827 lectures, it appears at the beginning of part 2, “Determinate Religion,” as part of his discussion of natural religion, as well as again in part 3, “Consummate Religion,” as a prelude to his discussion of Christianity. In the 1831 lectures, it is placed before the discussion of Judaism

and contradictions, Genesis 3 is “very profound” and articulates “the eternal and necessary history of humanity.”²⁸ For Hegel, the distortions and contradictions arise primarily from the form in which the content of Genesis 3 appears, namely, representation (*Vorstellung*). That is, while Genesis 3 contains profound conceptual truths, it presents them in a form—representation—that is not suitable for elaborating them. Hegel explains “that a deep speculative content cannot be portrayed in its true and proper form in images and mere representations, and hence it essentially cannot be portrayed in this mode without contradiction.”²⁹ Contradictions and problems emerge because the action of the story proceeds in terms of a seemingly contingent series of events pertaining to specific individuals when it is really about the necessary developmental process of humanity as such.

To interpret Genesis 3 properly, Hegel avers, one must first recognize the limitations and distortions inherent in the representational form in which the story is told. In its plain sense, the story seems merely to follow a series of arbitrary or unnecessary events, depicting the “first act of disobedience” as “something contingent or accidental.”³⁰ The human beings are forbidden to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they transgress this command because the serpent tempts them by saying it will make them like God. Hegel writes: “everything follows in a completely finite and ordinary sequence—everything depends on such an external inheritance of evil—entirely lacking in ideal or speculative character. It is so logical.”³¹

And yet this “logical” progression belies a profound tension at the heart of the story. In regard to the straightforward sense of the story, the action centers on an act of disobedience and the punishment that ensues. On this level, the transgression—the humans eating of the forbidden tree and acquiring knowledge of good and evil—is depicted as something that should not have transpired. However, the external, contingent trappings of the story fall away when we consider that God’s prohibition does not pertain to “just any tree and ordinary fruit,” but rather to the knowledge of good and evil as such, which are “absolute, substantial characteristics of spirit.”³² God’s prohibition forbids the human beings from acquiring precisely what, in Hegel’s estimation, distinguishes them from the animals.

In his philosophical interpretation, then, Hegel seeks to free the profound truth contained in the story from the distortions that inhere in its presentation within the

in part 2. See Peter C. Hodgson, editorial introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; translated R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of H. S. Harris; 3 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 2:58.

²⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 215.

²⁹ Hegel, *The Consummate Religion*, 105. Hegel most extensively treats what he sees as the contradictions of the literal level of Gen 3 in the 1821 lecture manuscript. My discussion in the next few paragraphs will follow the 1821 manuscript.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 105.

medium of representation. The rupture or cleavage depicted by this story is not to be understood, so Hegel insists, as a contingent event—the actions of particular individuals—but rather as something endemic to human existence as such. This story depicts the emergence of human consciousness from nature in ambivalent terms. Hegel finds evidence of this ambivalence in the surface details of the story. While the transgression is depicted as something that “should not have happened,”³³ it is nevertheless important to note what the serpent tells the human beings when it tempts them, that they will be like God, “was no lie.”³⁴ Indeed, the correctness of its claims is “corroborated” by “God himself” when he recognizes that “Adam has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”³⁵

This story, for Hegel, is not really about disobedience, but rather, it is about the pain of the cleavage from nature that emerges with the dawn of consciousness. For consciousness to emerge, Hegel claims, there must be a self-othering of spirit. This diremption or self-othering, this break from a state of immediacy, constitutes an essential moment in the process of spirit’s development; it is necessary for the subsequent achievement of a higher reconciliation. It is at this point that the humans achieve “formal freedom,”³⁶ as existing for themselves. Grasped philosophically, this sense of having the choice between good and evil is not ultimate but rather is only a moment in terms of the larger progression of spirit, which “must come to an end with reconciliation, in the union with the good.”³⁷ Thus, there is a sense that this knowledge of good and evil is something that “ought not to be.”³⁸ However, this only means that this moment, while necessary, must itself be sublated in the course of spirit’s development. If consciousness is a source of cleavage, it is also “the principle or source of healing, of freedom, i.e., it is spirit.”³⁹

Hegel finds the portrayal of time to be a major source of the confusion around Genesis 3. Paradise, where human beings live in a state of unity with both God and nature, is presented in terms of the remote past, as something that has been lost. While the sense that contemporary human existence represents a fall from an earlier, higher state appealed to his contemporaries like Schlegel and Schelling, Hegel rejects it as self-contradictory. He writes: “the very fact that it is a *lost* paradise shows already that it is not an essential state. The true or the divine does not get lost; it is eternal, and abides by itself.”⁴⁰ Paradise, then, is not to be found in a primordial past. Rather, if interpreted correctly, at least in Hegel’s estimation, the paradisaical situation of Genesis 3 actually points forward to spirit’s full self-development,

³³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 216. In what follows, I will refer to the 1827 edition of the lectures.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 216–17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 213 (*italics in original*).

when it is at home with itself. This reconciliation, this harmony with God and nature, is not given as an originary state but rather must be produced actively by the toil of spirit itself. Confusion arises because there is a different sense of unity in the primordial past, which, far from paradise, is that of “the state of savagery, an animal state,”⁴¹ where spirit had not yet emerged as spirit but rather slumbers in a “wholly immediate mode.”⁴² Since, for Hegel, the human being is spirit not nature, and “spirit is precisely this self-elevation above nature,” then a “self-extrication from the natural” is necessary.⁴³ Rather than constituting a fall from paradise, that human beings’ break with nature was inevitable if there is to be the full development of spirit, which is the true content reflected in the image of paradise.

Hegel’s account of Genesis 3 follows a traditional Christian framing, proceeding from Adam’s fall—understood as the concept’s diremption from the in-itself into a stage of actuality—to the redemption—that is, the reconciliation of spirit with itself—inaugurated by Jesus and the rise of Christianity.⁴⁴ Yet this account is quite radical insofar as it shifts the story’s meaning from disobedience and sin, such that it represents instead a necessary moment in the developmental process of spirit.

■ Hirsch, Hegel, and Freedom

Hirsch frames *The Religious Philosophy of the Jews* in terms of an opposition to Hegel’s system, particularly its understanding of freedom. By elaborating a notion of freedom at odds with Hegel’s own understanding of this term, Hirsch seeks to explode Hegel’s system and to provide an alternative account of religion. To be sure, Hirsch’s reading of Hegel’s thought as presenting a single, deterministic, developmental process that is ultimately incompatible with human freedom is at odds with current readings of Hegel in the Anglo-American tradition.⁴⁵ My concern at present is not so much with the adequacy of Hirsch’s presentation of Hegel as with the manner in which Hirsch’s reading of Hegel is generative of his own constructive account of freedom.

Hirsch faults Hegel for the determinism of his system, which he charges with dissolving rather than clarifying human freedom. The problem for Hirsch lies with Hegel’s effort to resolve the “contradiction of *formal* freedom,”⁴⁶ where the human beings are situated between good and evil. To recall the discussion above, Hegel thinks this situatedness between good and evil is a necessary moment for

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 207.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴⁴ In the 1824 lectures, Hegel explains that the “higher explanation” of Gen 3:22, where God says Adam has become like us, is that “by this ‘Adam’ the second Adam, or Christ, is understood” (*The Consummate Religion*, 207).

⁴⁵ For a helpful account of the current state of Anglo-American Hegel scholarship, see Thomas A. Lewis, “Beyond the Totalitarian: Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion in Recent Hegel Scholarship,” *RC 2* (2008) 556–74, esp. 557–62.

⁴⁶ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 36 (italics in original).

securing human freedom as such, but it is one which is inevitably sublated in the progression of spirit. The source of Hegel's error, according to Hirsch, lies in his attempt to resolve, necessarily, "natural freedom" into "concrete, fulfilled" freedom.⁴⁷ That is, because Hegel sees this transition as inevitable, Hirsch finds him to lose—rather than sublata—“that which constitutes *his* [the human being's] *height* and the *excellence*, namely, that nothing can compel the human being.”⁴⁸ This disagreement foreshadows Hegel's and Hirsch's very different approaches to Judaism and its relationship to other religions. Where Hegel presents Judaism as one moment in a larger continuum, Hirsch presents it in terms of a radical break with other religious traditions and in diametrical opposition to them.

Hirsch takes issue with Hegel's account of freedom, claiming that it fails to treat sin with sufficient seriousness. That is, Hirsch charges Hegel with trivializing sin, because it is presented as a point of transition in the realization of freedom, as merely one moment in a dialectical process, as “only the *necessary passage* to the good.”⁴⁹ If Hegel casts the transition from natural freedom to concrete or fulfilled freedom as inevitable, Hirsch offers an alternate account of natural freedom, understood in terms of the prehistory of the self. Where Hegel primarily reads Genesis 3 in terms of humanity as a whole rather than in terms of specific individuals,⁵⁰ Hirsch seeks to emphasize its relevance for both the individual and humanity in general.

The term “natural freedom” is itself indicative of a contradiction insofar as it involves two mutually antagonistic elements, natural life (*Natürlichkeit*) and freedom.⁵¹ While the two elements are antagonistic, they limit and structure each other, existing as ever-present alternatives. Human beings are cast as between animals and God. Like animals, they are corporeal beings driven by the drives and lusts of the body. But they are like God insofar as they are free, able to determine themselves. Indeed, actualized or concrete freedom subdues and sublimates the body and the state of the natural in general in the process of choosing itself, i.e., choosing or actualizing freedom. The free individual “constantly strives not to *exclude* the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁸ Ibid. (italics in original).

⁴⁹ Ibid., 43. The original sentence from which this quotation is taken reads: “Nach Hegel . . . ist die Sünde nur der *nothwendige Durchgang* zum Guten” (italics in original).

⁵⁰ To be sure, to the degree that everyone must go through the same process as the whole in terms of development, Hegel's account also involves a replication of this story for each individual. Indeed, in *The Encyclopaedia of Logic: Part 1 of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze* (trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, H. S. Harris; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991) 62, Hegel says, in regard to the antithesis, or the split from the state of immediacy, that Gen 3 represents “the awakening of consciousness [that] lies within human beings themselves, and this is the story that repeats itself in every human being.”

⁵¹ Hegel also uses the term *Natürlichkeit* in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, casting it in terms of the prehistory of freedom, that which is overcome. In translating *Natürlichkeit* as “natural life,” I am following Hodgson's edition of *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (532). In the glossary of this term, Hodgson lists a range of terms—“natural life,” “natural state,” “naturalness”—which could all be used to translate Hirsch's use of *Natürlichkeit*. However, he also includes the terms “simplicity,” “unaffectedness,” which would not be appropriate for Hirsch's use of the term.

sensuous but rather to use it as a means and for service to his freedom.”⁵² However, for freedom to be actualized or rendered concrete, there must be the possibility of sin, of not choosing freedom but indulging the sensuous and corporeal. Of course, as free, human beings possess the capacity to avoid sin, such that “this possibility to sin should remain a mere possibility and never become actual.”⁵³ Indeed, the possibility of sin, as well as the avoidance of sin, is the very condition of the human being’s freedom.⁵⁴

And yet, positing this intermediate state between freedom and natural life does not answer the question of how one freely appropriates freedom. At some point the self must either freely assume freedom or freely reject it. Thus, while the essence of the human being is freedom, all human beings must freely make the choice as to whether to recognize freedom as their essence or not. “Every person,” Hirsch insists, “must experience this contradiction within himself, to become anxious by it, in order to resolve it, [in order] to emerge from this *natural freedom* and elevate himself to true freedom.”⁵⁵ This resolution is cast in terms of an either/or: “Either he grants himself his freedom at the expense of the natural life attached to it, or, conversely, his natural life at the expense of his freedom.”⁵⁶

The stakes of resolving this contradiction for Hirsch are dire, the difference between “life” and “death.”⁵⁷ The choice for natural life, which is equated with sin, is seen by Hirsch to corrode the dignity of the human being, which roots out and obliterates the freedom of the one who chooses it, consuming it. Yet, paradoxically, Hirsch insists the freedom to choose otherwise, even for the self hardened in natural life, is, at least in theory, always present.⁵⁸ To embrace freedom, on the other hand, is to embrace virtue. While the state of natural freedom might be cast in terms of the prehistory of the self, there is another sense that the self is constantly at this crossroad between freedom and natural life, virtue and sin. The choice for freedom

⁵² Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 41 (italics in original).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 41–42: “Aber diese Möglichkeit zur Sünde soll auch blosse Möglichkeit bleiben und niemals Wirklichkeit werden” (italics in original).

⁵⁴ For overviews of freedom and sin in Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, see Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 315–16; Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy*, 131–32; Wiener, *Jüdische Religion*, 132; and Schoeps, *Geschichte der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie*, 111–12.

⁵⁵ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 35: “Jeder muss diesen Widerspruch in sich erfahren, auf dass er aufgeregt werde, ihn zu lösen, aus dieser *natürlichen Freiheit* herauszutreten und sich zur wahren Freiheit zu erheben” (italics in original).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40: “Entweder er verschafft ihn seiner Freiheit auf Kosten der ihr äusserlich anhängenden Natürlichkeit, oder umgekehrt seiner Natürlichkeit auf Kosten seiner Freiheit.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁸ Hirsch seeks to work through this paradox in terms of his discussion of Judaism, Christianity, and revelation. These sections evoke Lessing’s notion of the education of the human race, which for Hirsch means an education into freedom and away from paganism. Fackenheim is quite critical of this strategy, charging it with incoherence (“Samuel Hirsch and Hegel,” 36). How Hirsch attempts to do this, and whether or not it is successful—outside of emphasizing an opposition between monotheism and idolatry—is beyond the scope of this essay. For further discussion of this issue, see nn. 69, 70, and 84.

is, then, “not a *one-time* act, but rather [a] perpetual way of living, but rather *perpetual activity*. The free man is always active in freedom.”⁵⁹

Hirsch seeks to correct Hegel’s developmental account of freedom by presenting the possibility of sin as a necessary condition for freedom but not as something inevitable or necessary for its realization. That is, while the possibility of sin is necessary for any account of human freedom, Hirsch insists that its actualization is not inevitable. Hirsch claims that Hegel’s account of freedom is flawed because it treats sin as something both inevitable and as facilitating later, higher developments in spirit, rather than recognizing it as a sheer loss, as something that should not have happened.

■ The Garden Revisited

Hirsch links Hegel’s exegesis of Genesis 3 to his account of freedom, which Hirsch finds to be problematic. If Hegel understands freedom to be the consequence of a dialectical process, which—at least in Hirsch’s understanding—operates according to necessity, Hirsch emphasizes the profound fragility of freedom in human existence.⁶⁰ Against Hegel’s reading of the events of Genesis 3 in terms of the inevitable progression of spirit, Hirsch reads it as depicting a genuine fall from grace. Far from being inevitable, Hirsch insists that Genesis 3 depicts the free choice of unfreedom, sin.

Where Hegel seeks to incorporate Genesis 3 as one moment in the developmental progression of history, Hirsch seeks to read Genesis 3 in a manner that is both ahistorical and historical simultaneously. Hirsch treats the Bible as “myth,” which he defines as “*the representation of the innermost life of our soul in the clothing of external history, which expresses only this inner life of the soul free from everything accidental.*”⁶¹ He insists that the Bible operates on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand, Hirsch maintains that the events it depicts really transpired, but, on the other hand, he also maintains that its stories illuminate the inner life of the soul freed from the accidental accretions that external history brings with it.⁶²

Where Hegel casts Genesis 3 in terms of the larger framework of the history of spirit, as a trace of the forgotten history of human beings as they left behind the stage of immediacy, Hirsch reads the story as illuminating the tendency to sin faced

⁵⁹ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 41: “So ist die Freiheit nicht ein *einmaliger Akt*, sondern immerwährendes Leben, sondern *immerwährende Thätigkeit*. Der freie Mensch ist immer in der Freiheit thätig” (italics in original).

⁶⁰ Gutmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 316, points out that Hirsch’s notion of freedom is much closer to Kant and Fichte than to Hegel. Schweid, in *Modern Jewish Religious Philosophy*, 73–74, emphasizes the role of Kant with regard to Hirsch’s notion of freedom. See also Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy*, 121–22, for a discussion of the respective notions of freedom in Hegel and Hirsch.

⁶¹ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 55 (italics in original).

⁶² Unfortunately, Hirsch does not elucidate how this mirroring between story and history actually takes place, nor does he explain how, in maintaining this correlation, he can avoid emphasis upon necessity in the process of historical unfolding, something for which he criticizes Hegel at length.

by every human self. If Hegel sought to resolve this prehistory of humanity into a single developmental sequence, Hirsch finds it to be indicative of not only the radical freedom of human beings but also as simultaneously embodying and laying the ground for a rupture in spirit itself, which manifests itself in paganism—which, as we will see, Hirsch equates with a developing dialectic of false religion in which all religions other than Judaism, and to some extent Christianity, partake. Genesis 3 is then, for Hirsch, both a historical document, which lays out the origins of the pagan religious traditions, and a representation of the moral, philosophical, and spiritual prehistory of every single individual.

For Hirsch, the events depicted in Genesis 3 were not unavoidable. In his estimation, the state of natural freedom, given its contradictory nature, is unbearable. Indeed, Hirsch reads the serpent's temptation as coinciding with the state of "dissatisfaction" in the humans as a result of their lack of determination,⁶³ hovering between freedom and natural life, between shaping oneself and being shaped by the external world. Yet the choice to follow the serpent was by no means inevitable. Had the human beings chosen to eat of the tree of life, which would have been the choice for freedom, for the concretization of their abstract freedom, then they would have recognized that God's prohibition of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was not some arbitrary limitation of their freedom. Rather, they would have grasped that God's prohibition was a guide enabling them to preserve their freedom. Had the human beings eaten from the tree of life, they would no longer see the prohibition as a barrier to them but rather "as *the confirmation*" of their freedom over against natural life.⁶⁴ Instead, the human beings turned away from the true source of freedom, their work and duty, by which they subjugated and ordered the natural world. In short, they embraced natural life at the expense of freedom.

From the initial contradiction of natural freedom emerges a second contradiction, one even more dire, namely, that of becoming conscious of one's guilt.⁶⁵ Hirsch insists that there is always the possibility for the self to abandon the path of sin, to recognize its guilt and return to the first contradiction, the crossroads of natural freedom, and to choose freedom. However, the primordial human beings reject this option and instead seek to hide their nakedness with clothing. Yet, in creating clothing for themselves, the human beings are only made even more aware of their nakedness. They hide from God and double down on their sin and remain unable to escape "the *nagging* consciousness of contradiction."⁶⁶ Even when directly confronted by God, the human beings still do not repent, thus cementing the "fateful step" into sin. Even worse, instead of taking responsibility for himself, Adam blames Eve for bringing him the fruit. Adam has now crossed a significant

⁶³ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 70.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 64 (italics in original).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 97 (italics in original).

boundary, such that what was once “true religion” has become “idolatry.”⁶⁷ In Adam’s answer, Hirsch finds the the origins of paganism—the idolatrous antipode to true religion—insofar as he denies his own responsibility for freedom, casting sin as inevitable rather than recognizing it as a free choice.

■ Spirit at War with Itself

The significance of Genesis 3 is, for Hirsch, not restricted to an allegorical interpretation about the prehistory of every single human self as perched at the crossroads between the either/or of freedom or natural life, virtue or sin. It is also to be understood as historical, as depicting an actual event. That is, Genesis 3 also functions in Hirsch’s thought as the origin of a sequence of world religions dialectically structured in a fashion quite similar to Hegel’s.⁶⁸ Of course, there is an obvious exception. Hirsch’s account of the dialectical development only pertains to the pagan religions; it is a developmental account of the different moments of idolatry as such.⁶⁹ Genesis 3, then, is not merely about sin, but also about the history of paganism, the antipode to true religion and virtue. Like Hegel, Hirsch also sees this story as a prehistory that inaugurates the movement to distinct, concretely existing, religious traditions. But where Hegel situates the emergence of determinate religions with respect to the movement out of nature, Hirsch views the appearance of paganism as a result of sin, of choosing natural life rather than freely choosing human freedom. For Hirsch, then, it is paganism—rooted in sin and natural life—that develops and unfolds dialectically, while Judaism, rooted in the timeless task of actualizing freedom, stands outside of the reach of the historical dialectic.⁷⁰

I will engage in a brief digression from the focus on ethical monotheism to gesture toward another direction in twentieth-century Jewish thought that also treads upon a trail that Hirsch’s *Religious Philosophy of the Jews* first blazes. The manner in which Hirsch seeks to position Judaism outside the developmental

⁶⁷ Ibid.: “Götzendienst.”

⁶⁸ In ch. 2 of *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, which is 334 pages in length, Hirsch traces the dialectical development of paganism. Included in this discussion are fetishism, shamanism, the religions of China, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Persian religion of light, Sabaism, the religion of Greece, and, finally, the religion of Rome. While Hirsch devotes significant attention to Christianity throughout *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden* as a whole, Islam is not discussed. Hirsch’s account of paganism is clearly engaging with Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, but it also explicitly draws on the work of the theologian Carl Immanuel Nitzsch (1787–1868), with whom Hirsch studied. For a nuanced discussion of Hirsch’s view of paganism in terms of the specific sources of *Religionswissenschaft* scholarship that his account draws upon, see Greenberg, “Religionswissenschaft and Early Reform Jewish Thought.”

⁶⁹ The disparity of the dialectical unfolding of paganism as opposed to the history of Judaism, which, because it is rooted in freedom, cannot develop dialectically, has been widely noted in the secondary literature: see Fackenheim, “Samel Hirsch and Hegel,” 32–34; Gutmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 317–18; Wiener, *Jüdische Religion*, 131; Schoeps, *Geschichte der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie*, 109.

⁷⁰ On the problems this distinction causes for Hirsch in terms of accounting for a Jewish tradition, see Fackenheim, “Samuel Hirsch and Hegel,” 32–35.

dialectic of paganism strikingly anticipates central elements of Franz Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, a work that is significantly at odds with the ethical monotheist tradition. To be sure, Hirsch and Rosenzweig understand paganism differently. Hirsch depicts paganism in terms of sin, while Rosenzweig understands it in terms of the absence of the living God, i.e., a God that is bound up with the world and who relates to human beings. Yet, despite these differences, for both thinkers it is paganism that develops in history, understood as a dialectical process, while Judaism is rooted in the eternal and thus, in important respects, stands outside of history. Indeed, while we have not discussed Hirsch's account of Christianity here, both he and Rosenzweig present Christianity as an amalgamation of Judaism and paganism, where Judaism serves as the spur to the moral consciousness of Christians to reject the lure of paganism. For precisely this reason, both thinkers present Judaism, rather disturbingly, as God's suffering servant, hated and oppressed by its Christian neighbors who resent that it is free from the paganism in which they remain mired.⁷¹ In seeking to evade the implications of Hegel's system, both thinkers cast Judaism, in important respects, outside the dialectical unfolding of history. Indeed, this similarity was not lost on Rosenzweig. In a letter to Martin Buber from 21 May 1924, Rosenzweig, rather bizarrely, refers to Hirsch as "the preplagiator [*Vorplagiator*] of the idea of the Jewish and Christianity theory" that he elaborates in part 3 of the *Star of Redemption*.⁷²

If Hegel presents the history of religions in terms of a single developmental trajectory culminating in Christianity, a process in which the difference between God and human beings is gradually sublated, Hirsch, like Rosenzweig, moves to preserve the distinction between God and human beings. However, where Rosenzweig emphasizes a notion of God that relates to human beings dialogically, Hirsch insists that religion is not to be understood in terms of the relationship between human beings and God but rather in terms of the relationship of the human being with its own potentiality for freedom.⁷³ Freedom "is also the essential and singularly true concept of religion. The religious life is nothing else than the *eternal*

⁷¹ While he does not present Judaism as ahistorical, Hermann Cohen shares the tendency with Hirsch and Rosenzweig to present Judaism as the servant of God who testifies against the paganism of Christianity through its suffering. For a discussion of the role of the suffering servant in Cohen, see Erlewine, *Judaism and the West*, 34–51. For an insightful discussion of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity in Rosenzweig's thought, see Gregory Kaplan, "In the End Shall Christians Become Jews and Jews, Christians? On Franz Rosenzweig's Apocalyptic Eschatology," *Cross Currents* 53 (2004) 511–29.

⁷² Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und Sein Werk*, 2:963.

⁷³ See Wiener, *Jüdische Religion*, 132, 135; Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy*, 123–31; and Manfred H. Vogel, "Does Samuel Hirsch Anthropologize Religion?," *Modern Judaism* 1.3 (1981) 298–322, at 303. Both Schoeps, *Geschichte der jüdischen Religionsphilosophie*, 105–6, and Fackenheim, "Samuel Hirsch and Hegel," 29–30, find Hirsch's motivation for this characterization in his desire to escape Hegel's strategy of collapsing the distinction between God and human beings. Fackenheim, however, charges that this strategy founders when Hirsch seeks to introduce revelation and miracles in his account of Judaism. This issue, while quite important, is beyond the scope of the present essay.

actual and *eternally actualizing* freedom.”⁷⁴ Religion, then, is to be grasped in terms of freedom, in terms of the human being’s choices in regard to whether or not to actualize freedom. To be sure, this is by no means divorced from God, but it cannot be characterized in terms of a direct relationship between the self and God.

Indeed, if Hirsch and Rosenzweig both move to position Judaism outside of history, Hirsch’s explicit denial of the possibility of a direct relationship between God and human beings—a move quite antithetical to Rosenzweig’s dialogical understanding of revelation—lines up with the essential commitments of ethical monotheists like Cohen and Levinas. In its standard usage, Hirsch claims, the term “relationship” implies mutual dependency, for example, the relationship between a child and a parent.⁷⁵ Each term or participant in the relationship needs the other: the parent needs the child in order to be a parent just as the child requires a parent to be a child. However, Hirsch avers that such a term cannot apply to God, because while human beings stand in need of God, God has no dependency upon human beings. Additionally, Hirsch thinks the term “relationship” is inappropriate to apply to that between God and human beings because it implies that the two terms standing in relation are discreet from one another. Yet, if God is grasped immanently, then there is no neat point of demarcation between God and human beings: “the human being cannot in this sense stand in relation to God, for where the human being is there God is also. For God there is no border.”⁷⁶ It is essential to grasp that, although he employs the language of immanence here, Hirsch nevertheless insists upon the distinction between the divine and the human. Or, as Hirsch puts it, the human being “also knows the divine life is *absolutely independent* from his own.”⁷⁷ That is, if the human being, living as it should, embracing freedom and thus virtue, can be seen to accord with God, to the degree that the human being sins, then, it opposes and falls away from God. In this sin, however, the human being has not harmed God in that God remains unaffected by the choices human beings make. Rather, the distortion or damage of sin pertains not to God but, as we will see, to the notion of spirit. The relationship with God, then, does not resemble relationships between finite things where one term affects and limits the other but remains indirect.

Hirsch’s rejection of a divine human relationship, then, can be traced back to his desire to preserve the distinction between human beings and God, which, in turn, is the basis for the distinction between Judaism and paganism. By insisting upon God’s distinction from human beings, Hirsch amplifies the stakes of religious existence insofar as there is no inevitable progression toward higher levels of development.

⁷⁴ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 13: “Das ist aber auch der wesentliche und einzig wahre Begriff von Religion. Das religiöse Leben ist gar nichts anderes, als diese *ewig wirkliche* und *ewig sich verwirklichende* Freiheit” (italics in original).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25–26: “Der Mensch kann daher auch nicht in diesem Sinne in einem Verhältniss zu Gott stehen, denn wo der Mensch ist, da ist auch Gott. Für Gott giebt es keine Grenze.”

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 49: “Aber er weiss auch das göttliche Leben *schlechterdings unabhängig* von dem seinigen” (italics in original).

That is, radical catastrophe and evil are now genuine possibilities within the realm of spirit. Indeed, the split between freedom and natural life, the contradiction in which the self finds itself, reflects the ambivalence of spirit itself. In Hirsch's account there is no spirit as such, just as there is no religion as such. Rather than a single developmental sequence, there is a polarity. Spirit either chooses itself or there is "the self-conscious hostility of spirit against itself," such that spirit suffers from a "self-incurred, arbitrary fall . . . from itself."⁷⁸ Whereas Hegel presents spirit's progression in terms of a single trajectory in the development of the concept of religion, from fetishism to Protestant Christianity, Hirsch presents the concept of religion as riven between true religion and false or idolatrous religions, a chasm that reflects the radical break in spirit itself, such that "[s]pirit is compelled namely to true or to false religion."⁷⁹

This rift in spirit, which corresponds to the self as either comporting itself toward God in freedom or falling away from God in sin, is typologically configured in terms of Judaism, on the one hand, and paganism, on the other. Where Judaism testifies to the capacity of human beings to be free, paganism is characterized by natural life. Where Judaism emphasizes freedom, insisting that human beings have the capacity to act blamelessly and avoid sin, paganism seeks to mitigate the perniciousness of sin by insisting that it is inevitable. Hirsch thus finds paganism to constitute an abdication of moral responsibility. "*I must sin*, so I displace the guilt of my sin on another being."⁸⁰ God created human beings as inextricably corporeal, and this corporeality is what paganism blames for sin; it is corporeality that "brought me to the fall."⁸¹ Paganism, for Hirsch, then, is to be understood precisely in terms of this "self-incurred, arbitrary fall of spirit from itself, as the self-conscious hostility of spirit against itself."⁸²

In Hirsch's telling, Genesis 3 does not merely illuminate the origin of sin, it discloses the very essence of paganism. The most fateful moment of the story—aside from the choice to eat from the forbidden tree—lies with Adam's refusal to take responsibility for the transgression. In shifting the blame to Eve, Adam not only undercuts his own responsibility for freedom, but he also casts sin as inevitable rather than recognizing it as a free choice. Indeed, Hirsch characterizes paganism explicitly in terms of the view that sin is the inevitable result of our finitude. The essence of paganism, for Hirsch, consists precisely in the denial of the freedom to do otherwise than sin, in the denial of responsibility by the human being for sinning. Paganism dilutes the notion of sin and views it as inescapable and thus not truly

⁷⁸ Ibid., xxvi: "Da aber das Heidenthum sich nicht als von Geiste gesetzt, sondern als der selbstverschuldete, willkürliche Abfall des Geistes von sich selbst, als die selbstbewusste Feindschaft des Geistes gegen sich selbst zeigen wird."

⁷⁹ Ibid., xxix: "Der Geist ist nämlich zur wahren oder zur falschen Religion genötigt."

⁸⁰ Ibid., 98: "*Ich musste sündigen*, so verlege ich die Schuld meiner Sünde in ein anderes Wesen" (italics in original).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., xxvi.

blameworthy. Sin then ceases to be understood as a contradiction within the essence of the human being; it is no longer a rejection of who the human being really is or ought to be but is simply “just *another natural evil*,” a result of the constraints of “*the finitude of our nature*,” a result of “*blind necessity*.”⁸³

■ Hirsch and the Legacy of Ethical Monotheism

In *The Religious Philosophy of the Jews*, Hirsch asserts the radical incompatibility between true and false religion in an effort to prevent Hegel’s conception of religion—as a single, generic concept that dialectically unfolds—from absorbing Judaism into its process of development, a process in which Judaism would only play a subordinate role. Rather than construing religion in terms of a universal category, where all religions find themselves alongside all others on a single continuum, Hirsch configures religion in terms of a binary, an either/or. Or, more accurately, he presents religion in terms of a series of overlapping and largely synonymous binary oppositions: namely, good and bad, true and false, virtue and sin, Jew and pagan.

At the heart of these polarities are conflicting conceptions of God. The true religion presents God in terms that develop and support human freedom. While Hirsch occasionally uses the language of divine immanence, the true religion pertains to the human being’s relationship to its own capacity for freedom. In this account, God’s distance remains essential because religion is conceived as the emulation of God in one’s endeavor to actualize one’s capacity for freedom, and thus, this emulation of God, the sole genuine religious task, is only possible if it is freely undertaken by human beings.⁸⁴ In contrast, the pagan notion of God, in particular how this notion of God relates to human beings, makes sin and transgression appear inevitable, a necessary moment in the religious drama or unfolding of spirit. As a result, it undermines the human capacity for freedom and morality. In short, the emphatic distinction between true and false notions of God translates almost directly into the antipodes of virtue and sin.

Hirsch presents his own opposition to Hegel in terms of this dichotomic or polarized view of religion. If Hirsch is a theorist of Judaism, the embodiment of pure monotheism, he charges “Hegelianism” with being “nothing more and nothing less

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 98: “[S]o ist die Sünde nichts mehr und nichts weniger als jedes *andere Naturübel* . . . oder welches *die blinde Nothwendigkeit*, oder *die Endlichkeit unserer Natur* über uns verhängen” (italics in original).

⁸⁴ A contradiction emerges in Hirsch’s thought because, while he frames religion in terms of autonomy, as Fackenheim has correctly pointed out—both in “Samuel Hirsch and Hegel” and in a footnote in *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*—he nevertheless also inserts a prominent place for divine intervention and revelation. Unfortunately, due to lack of space, the tensions haunting Hirsch’s approach to revelation cannot be further discussed in this present essay. See Robert Erlewine, “Resolving Contradictions: Samuel Hirsch and the Stakes of Modern Jewish Thought,” *AJSR* (forthcoming fall 2020), for a critical engagement with Fackenheim’s reading of Hirsch that situates *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden* in terms of twentieth-century Jewish thought.

than *the sublimest paganism*.”⁸⁵ If Hirsch emphasizes the clear distinction between God and human beings, he casts Hegel’s philosophy as a form of “pantheism” that ultimately dissolves human freedom, conceived in terms of possibility and contingency, into an order that operates according to the deterministic necessity of the natural world.⁸⁶

Again, our concern in this essay is not whether Hirsch’s critical interventions regarding the Hegelian philosophy of religion are adequate or tenable, or whether his presentation of Hegel’s thought is accurate or fair. What is important, rather, is the manner in which Hirsch formulates his account of ethical monotheism in direct response to the threat Hegel’s philosophical mobilization of the world religions discourse poses to Judaism’s self-understanding and status. Hirsch secures the distinctiveness and continuing validity of Judaism against Hegel’s account by configuring the distinction between true and false religion in starkly ethical terms. If the accurate conception of God is the prerequisite of morality, then Hirsch is able to cast the difference between Judaism and all other religions as that between justice and injustice.

While Hirsch’s thought has largely been swept up into the dustbin of history, it is striking that two of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the ethical monotheist tradition within the twentieth century, Hermann Cohen and Emmanuel Levinas, are quite close to Hirsch in the manner in which they configure the distinction between true and false notions of God in moral terms as a means for articulating the meaning and significance of Judaism. This similarity can only be presented here in the form of a sketch of each particular thinker in this regard.

Cohen characterizes Jewish monotheism as antithetical to mythical conceptions of God focused on supernatural personalities. The latter conception of God he links not only to superstition but to notions of fate, and thus determinism, which threaten to undermine the foundations of ethics, given that it requires human freedom as a necessary precondition. For Cohen, then, “[m]oral offenses have their deepest origin in . . . fundamental notions of men about God,” and thus, “errors in men’s concepts of God . . . are the greatest afflictions of man, and perhaps the cause of the greatest suffering which men bring upon themselves again and again.”⁸⁷ In contrast, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and their inheritors in the Jewish commentarial tradition, discover the true God as rooted in ethics. Indeed, as the Jewish tradition develops, God—or, more precisely, God’s attributes of action—becomes the premiere model, the prototype, of human ethics and of that which undergirds the ethical task of the Jews, whose fervent opposition to idolatry is presented in terms of the education of the human race.

⁸⁵ Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, 98: “Der Hegelianismus ist daher nichts mehr und nichts weniger, als *das sublimirteste Heidenthum*” (italics in original).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁷ Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (trans. Simon Kaplan; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995) 233.

Levinas casts the dichotomy between monotheism and idolatry in terms of the distinction between conceptions of the divine that emphasize transcendence and those that emphasize immanence. For Levinas, idolatry is tied up with what he calls “the sacred,” understood in terms of a numinous presence that inspires enthusiasm and fervor and therefore undercuts the agency and individuality of the self. Only where the distinction is firmly established between God and human beings, or in Levinas’s parlance, only with regard to a self capable of atheism, i.e., a self that lives at a genuine distance from God, is there the possibility of a “spiritual notion of the Transcendent.”⁸⁸ It is in the sober ethical seriousness of the talmudic tradition that Levinas finds this thought to reach its pinnacle.

To be sure, there are substantive methodological and, indeed, metaphysical differences distinguishing the respective positions of Cohen and Levinas from Hirsch and from each other. Since these figures rarely cite Hirsch—indeed, Levinas rarely cites Cohen⁸⁹—it is difficult to trace the direct influence, if any, his thought exerted upon them. Nevertheless, it is striking that these thinkers follow the basic path laid out by Hirsch for characterizing Judaism and its significance in modernity. Since ethical monotheism maintains that the notion of God is thoroughly imbricated in ethics, or at least its cornerstone, the implications of the difference between true and false belief are dire. Like Hirsch, these thinkers articulate a polarized notion of religion, where Judaism is affiliated with freedom, responsibility, ethics, and maturity and thus stands radically opposed to, and as a corrective for, idolatrous religiosities rooted in abrogation of responsibility, spiritual immaturity, and enthusiasm. In short, Cohen and Levinas tacitly accept Hirsch’s basic refusal of Hegel’s attempt to conceive of religion as a continuum, insisting with Hirsch that Judaism’s wisdom remains vital for the spiritual well-being of humanity precisely because its conception of God is presented not only as distinct from those found elsewhere but as also indispensable to an ethical way of life.

⁸⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (trans. Séan Hand; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 11–23, at 15; see also idem, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 58, where Levinas writes: “One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated—eventually capable of adhering to it by belief.”

⁸⁹ On the references to Cohen in Levinas’s writings, see Edith Wyschogrod, “The Moral Self: Levinas and Hermann Cohen,” in *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy’s Others* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006) 405–23.