

## Research Article

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# The Mythical Absolute: The Fiction of Being

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0217>

received May 28, 2022; accepted August 5, 2022

**Abstract:** The concept of “conceptual personae” is a contradiction in terms. On one sense of the term, personae are the characters in a work of art, such as a play or a novel. As characters, they are not common terms – King Lear is a particular; he is not a universal, for he cannot be shared in common. However, concepts are quite unlike King Lear. As universals, they are common terms that can be shared in common. “Conceptual personae” renders the particular universal and thereby declares the universal not to be universal. However, I argue that as long as philosophers maintain a traditional attitude toward conceptual truth, philosophers will not be able to successfully think the structure of being without appealing to the mythical imagination, of which conceptual personae form an essential constituent.

**Keywords:** mythology, Schelling, Cassirer, the Absolute, dialetheism, mysticism, religion, art, philosophy, imaginative universal

## 1 Introduction

A skeptical reader might object that the concept of “conceptual personae” is a contradiction in terms. On one sense of the term, personae are the characters in a work of art, such as a play or a novel. As characters, they are not common terms – King Lear is a particular; he is not a universal, for he cannot be shared in common. However, concepts are quite unlike King Lear. As universals, they are common terms that can be shared in common. “Conceptual personae” renders the particular universal and thereby declares the universal not to be universal. Despite such worries, I argue that as long as philosophers maintain a traditional attitude toward conceptual truth, philosophers will not be able to successfully think the structure of being without appealing to the mythical imagination, of which conceptual personae form an essential constituent.

### 1.1 The problem of philosophical consciousness

Because philosophy is a way of being, in order to *understand itself*, and the kind of being that constitutes philosophy, philosophy must inquire into *what it is to be*. What is it to be? “Being” is the *unity* of all beings, insofar as it expresses that in virtue of which each being is a member of the totality of everything that exists. The questioner is investigating the predicate that would *distinguish* being, what it is that would set being *apart* from beings. Accordingly, the interlocutor *ought* to reply as follows: “being is such and such.” “Being” does *not* differentiate between any beings; to proclaim that a being is does not differentiate it from *any* other being that is. Being does not introduce any differentiation into the field of being. Thus, the interlocutor would not be wrong to proclaim that “being is *absolutely* undifferentiated” where “*absolutely*

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undifferentiated” replaces the abstract form of the predicate “such and such.” As Schelling taught us, being is *gleichgültig*.

However, the predicate “absolutely undifferentiated” immediately negates itself. Each being is *a* being – “this” or “that” being – each is a particular being *distinguished* from and relative to the others. Because all other beings (besides “being itself”) are differentiated from each other, the predicate “absolutely undifferentiated” specifies the way that being is different from all other beings. The predicate “absolutely undifferentiated” differentiates being from all relative, differentiated beings. Thus, the predicate “is undifferentiated” distinguishes being from all other beings. As a result, being is *one differentiated being among others*, since it is different from all differentiated beings in virtue of its undifferentiated character.

Being is also the totality of all beings. Since the distinguishing feature of being is its *indistinctness*, and given that we *can* quantify over all beings, being itself cannot be distinct from any being. Because it cannot be distinct from any being, it cannot be distinct from any differentiated being. Because being is indistinct from every being, being has no limit and must thereby be an *absolutely unlimited totality*. The unlimited totality is not relative to anything else for everything falls within it. Thus, being is *Absolute*. In sum: being is the unconditioned universal that all beings have in common, a particular being, and the totality of all beings.

Because being is *absolutely* undifferentiated, being must be differentiated from all other differentiated beings. Thus, it must be true both that “being is absolutely undifferentiated” and that “being is differentiated.” This is a contradiction for at least two reasons. First, it is a contradiction because absolute indistinctness allows for no difference in being whatsoever, and yet being is a differentiated being distinct from all other beings. Second, being is a contradiction because being is differentiated in virtue of not being differentiated. Or to put it otherwise: because being is undifferentiated, it cannot be different from what is differentiated. Face to face with the contradiction, philosophy stands dumbfounded before what Otto calls the Sacred – the *Mysterium Tremendum*. In the words of Rudolf Otto:

The truly mysterious object is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently wholly other, whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Absolute dialetheism

As Gabriel writes in *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, “there is no ultimate way of undoing contingency, of eliminating the paradoxes of the domain of all domains.”<sup>2</sup> Every philosophical conception of the Absolute leads to contradiction. Accordingly, we are invited to affirm Absolute dialetheism – the view that the Absolute *is* and can *only* be conceptually *articulated* as a contradiction. Because every concept of the totality leads to contradiction, some contemporary philosophers have plausibly reasoned that the Absolute *is not*.<sup>3</sup> Can the existence of the Absolute be salvaged from such critiques?

We stand before two possible paths: either philosophers can reform the logic of the concept or *abandon* the concept as the privileged means to Absolute knowledge. On the first option, in order to salvage the conceptual approach to the Absolute, one must deny that the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) is a necessary condition for conceptual truth. By re-thinking the logic of the concept, philosophy can attempt to rescue the conceptual approach to Absolute knowledge. The reformist position is a *rational* dialetheism and

<sup>1</sup> Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, 65.

<sup>3</sup> See Badiou, *Being and Event*, PT I, Section 3; and Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, BK II, Section 3.1. Although Gabriel would not accept this argument against the Absolute as I have given here, for more on his skepticism concerning the existence of the Absolute, see Gabriel, *Fields of Sense*, 7.

can take many forms. For example – one can develop a *formal* paraconsistent logic after the manner of Graham Priest, or a non-formal one as developed by Hegel. On the second option, all attempts at reform are abandoned. On this view, the Principle of Non-Contradiction is a principle governing all conceptual form, and according to the PNC, *contradictions cannot be true*. Because every concept of the Absolute falls into contradiction, no concept of the Absolute can be true. Thus, concepts can never truly articulate the totality, and the Absolute truth must transcend all conceptual determination – a form of *mystical* dialetheism. Thus, on this view, to conceive the Absolute, one must abandon the concept as a means of knowing the Absolute. Insofar as being transcends our concepts, philosophers find themselves confronted with what Blumenberg calls the “absolutism of reality.” The “absolutism of reality” means that “man came close to not having control of the conditions of his existence and, what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them.”<sup>4</sup> Although Blumenberg links this experience with the “emergence from the primeval forest” and “into the savanna,”<sup>5</sup> we philosophers too are confronted with the absolutism of reality and the *Angst* that it generates. Although Wittgenstein thought in this direction when he proclaimed the existence of the world to be the mystical,<sup>6</sup> it is most clearly advanced by Kyoto School thinker, Keiji Nishitani, in his seminal text *Religion and Nothingness*. Today, we see further inclinations in this direction by thinkers such as William Franke.<sup>7</sup>

Knowing how to respond to this *aporia* is the key to any future philosophy of the Absolute. In order to make a philosophically informed decision, we should understand in each case what we are affirming. Toward that end, for the sake of thinking through the consequences of the mystical position, in these reflections I focus on mystical dialetheism and abstain from reflecting on the reformist position.<sup>8</sup> I argue that *if* we endorse mystical dialetheism, then we must be prepared to embrace a *return* to mythical consciousness.

### 1.3 The problem of religious consciousness

Since the Absolute exceeds all concepts, the practice by which the Absolute is revealed must be a *non-conceptual attentiveness* to the Absolute – a form of relation that eschews conceptual mediation. Since such a consciousness does not draw any conceptual distinction, it does not draw a conceptual distinction between itself and the Absolute. As Nishitani formulates it, the awareness of the Absolute would be “the real self-awareness of reality”<sup>9</sup> or the Absolute’s immediate consciousness of itself. This is nothing but *mysticism*, for mysticism is the non-conceptual experience of the Absolute in which one *is* the Absolute that one knows. With Schleiermacher, we can say that religion wishes to “intuit the universe.”<sup>10</sup>

As Nishida acutely observes in *Basho*, because such awareness is radically non-conceptual, and all contradiction requires the presence of a concept, religious consciousness no longer encounters any contradiction.<sup>11</sup> Religious consciousness can resolve the problem of self-contradiction by ceasing to conceive altogether. Although the contradiction remains *unresolved in thought*, it is resolved by *transcending* thought. However, since mysticism attempts to know the Absolute by transcending all *determinations* of the Absolute, mysticism *excludes* differentiated being and knowing. Since mystical intuition *excludes* what

<sup>4</sup> Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.44.

<sup>7</sup> See Franke’s *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* for a contemporary proponent of this view. Franke writes: “What we most strongly and deeply think and believe, what we passionately love or ardently desire, inevitably escapes adequate articulation.” Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth investigation into Hegel’s rational dialetheism, see Moss, *Hegel’s Foundation Free Metaphysics* (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Schleiermacher, *On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> See Nishida, “Basho,” in *Place and Dialectic*, 76.

is differentiated, it excludes *relative* or mediated knowing. By excluding what is relative, it becomes relative, for it is determined as other to differentiated and relative knowledge. Indeed, if the Absolute is *unknowable* in any relative or *mediated* form, then it is not Absolute, for the form and structure of relative knowledge *conditions* its very being.<sup>12</sup> By itself, the mystical Absolute fails to be Absolute. Therefore, if we endorse mystical dialetheism, then we find ourselves in a further dilemma: the Absolute can neither be known conceptually nor non-conceptually.

#### 1.4 Out of the impasse: Absolute art

As undifferentiated, the Absolute cannot tolerate *the distinction* between the universal and the particular.<sup>13</sup> But this is exactly what conceptual determination insists upon, for the universal *qua* universal is *not* particular, and vice versa. Because of the indifference to difference, being (the unconditioned universal) cannot help but be a relative, particular being. Accordingly, to bring the Absolute into a form of relative knowing requires the following criteria. One must uncover not only (i) a form of *relative* thought, but also a form of thought that (ii) *identifies* the universal with the *particular*. In the following, I argue that the imaginative universal is a form of relative knowing that can successfully identify the universal with the particular and thereby successfully fulfill both conditions.

Being – the Absolute – is empty of all determinations. If the Absolute is to acquire some form, this form must be acquired from the *domain of relative* and differentiated being. As Heidegger eventually realized, every thought about being renders it a being – “the Absolute is such and such” constrains the Absolute to a *relative* determination. Every thought about the Absolute synthesizes the Absolute and the relative into *one identity*. Or what is the same: every thinking of the whole *selects* an element of the whole and *raises* it to the status of the Absolute. Since the Absolute is empty of all determinations, or is *no* determination, the act of raising the element to the whole is the process whereby what has *absolutely* no form in thought receives a relative form: the Absolute *becomes* relative by means of raising the relative to the Absolute.

Without the attribution of the relative to the Absolute, the Absolute is *nothing* in knowing. Thus, by raising the relative to the Absolute, the relative gives the Absolute the status of being *something*. Since the imagination is that act of thought by which the object is grasped *as a sensuous particular*, and being is universal, by imagining being, the *imagination can think the universal as a sensuous particular*. Since this creates a novel identity for the Absolute, this particular act of the imagination is synthetic, for synthetic acts are *ampliative*. In short, it is the *synthetic* imagination that thinks the indeterminate through some sensuous, relative, and particular content, e.g., an image or a sound, whereby the Absolute becomes mediated and acquires determinate identity in thought. To employ a term from Vico, this particular universal is the *imaginative universal*.<sup>14</sup>

To eschew the form of the concept does not mean to throw off the universal altogether,<sup>15</sup> but to keep it in contradiction with itself – by bringing the universal into *identity* with the particular. Here, we are close to the great Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* where he writes:

<sup>12</sup> One may object that if no agents capable of knowing the Absolute existed, then it would not be a limitation on the Absolute if it remained unknown. However, such agents do exist. Because the failure to know the Absolute is a failure to realize that possibility, failing to grasp the Absolute does constrain the Absolute such that it is *not* what it *ought* to be. What is more, if mystical consciousness denied the existence of mediation, it could not account for the fact of differentiation even in the case where no knowing agents happened to exist.

<sup>13</sup> I first elucidated the arguments in Section IV in Moss, “Absolute Imagination: The Metaphysics of Romanticism (2019).” The following is a recapitulation of the argument presented there applied now to the concept of conceptual personae.

<sup>14</sup> See Vico, *New Science*, 93, 148, 158. Also see Hans Jonas’ discussion of myth as a vehicle of the imagination. Jonas, “The Concept of God After Auschwitz,” 4.

<sup>15</sup> One might object that the application of the concept in judgment realizes a unity of universal and particular. Because any judgment *regarding the Absolute* leads to contradiction, and the PNC is a necessary condition for the truth of any judgment, no

This productive power is the same whereby art also achieves the impossible, namely to resolve an infinite opposition in a finite product. It is the poetic gift ... the one whereby we are able to think and couple together even what is contradictory – and its nature is imagination.<sup>16</sup>

The imaginative universal is an act of synecdoche, which represents the whole by means of an element of the whole. Because *conceptual personae* transform the particular into a universal, and this is the very essence of the imaginative universal, conceptual personae are essentially imaginative universals. Consider the following example: “Jesus Christ is God.” “Jesus is God” is synecdoche, for the particular and relative human being – Jesus of Nazareth – is posited as the unconditioned universal – being itself – the finite person is posited as the infinite God. “Jesus Christ” – the second person of the Holy Trinity – is a conceptual persona of the Absolute. In regard to the whole, whenever we claim that “the Absolute is such and such,” we are engaging in an act of synecdoche, for we are *identifying* the whole by means of some element of the whole.<sup>17</sup>

Because the whole has no relative being *in knowing* prior to the act of synecdoche, synecdoche gives the Absolute its *very identity* in the domain of knowledge. Synecdoche, to be sure, is a *literary* device. Nonetheless, here where it gives epistemic form to the Absolute, it acquires an *ontological* function. Synecdoche is *one kind of metaphor*. Metaphor, most generally, is an act by which one “carries the difference over,” meta – *phora*. In an *absolute* synecdoche, one carries the relative *over the difference* between relative and Absolute: what applies in one domain, the relative, now applies to another domain, the Absolute. The metaphor *identifies what is non-identical*. Whereas the form of conceptual determination forbids the identification of the non-identical, the metaphorical act of imagination certainly does not preclude such an identification.

Usually, we know the identity of the characters in a metaphor before we use the metaphor. In Shakespeare’s metaphor, “Juliet is the Sun,” we know in advance who Juliet is, and how she is different from the sun. However, independent of the metaphor, we do not know in advance what the Absolute is, for it has *no identity* in knowing apart from the metaphor. Thus, the act of absolute synecdoche is fundamentally different in kind from the usual literary use of metaphor: absolute synecdoche *forms the very identity of the Absolute in knowledge*; it does not presuppose it in advance. As Hegel writes in his poem *Eleusis* to Hölderlin:

Fancy brings the eternal nigh to sense and marries it to form.<sup>18</sup>

An *absolute* synecdoche is creative – *not productive*. Unlike artificing, which forms a given material by modeling its activity on a Form given antecedent to the production, absolute synecdoche has no model to guide its activity. If we understand creation in the traditional theological sense as the arising of *something from nothing*, absolute synecdoche is *creative*, for in virtue of its transference of the relative to the Absolute, the Absolute comes to be something in knowledge from having been *nothing* at all in knowledge. Accordingly, the synthetic imagination is not just ampliative, but it is also creative.

Because the genius is the one who invents the model that is employed by others, the creation of the epistemic form of the Absolute can be properly described as an act of *genius*. Although the creation of the

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judgment about the Absolute can be true. However, we should first observe that the imaginative formation of the Absolute does not exclude all conceptual determination. For instance, conceptual determination is certainly necessary to articulate the form of *personhood* in the story of God as a person. But the concept at work in that story is only present in the *form of a contradiction* – a form that transcends the form of the *non-sensuous* conceptual domain. To put it simply, we have a sensuous content – a work of art such as a song or a story – that does not admit of *consistent* conceptual analysis. Indeed, because conceptual knowing is a kind of relative knowing, and conceptual knowing *is*, it does not exist by itself, but *only* exists within the Absolute. Indeed – since the Absolute acquires relative form in knowing first by means of the imaginative (and thereby *sensuous*) universal, any conceptual ordering of the Absolute in science would depend upon the imaginative formation of the Absolute.

<sup>16</sup> Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), 230.

<sup>17</sup> Contra the late Schelling, in the sense developed here, I do not take Christian revelation to be different in kind from mythical revelation.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, “Eleusis,” 6–9.

Absolute is not an act of artificing, the creative imagination must still draw from given sensuous content in order to *transform it into an Absolute content*.

The act of genius is not guided by any rational measure. The genius is that creative *artist* who achieves what the philosopher cannot: the realization of the relative in the Absolute and the Absolute in the relative. What is singular in the act of genius is the way that the genius raises the relative to the Absolute, for which no guiding principle exists in advance. Socrates must learn to make music. Although there is no *a priori* rational standard given in advance, the artistic creation of the Absolute ought to live up to the experience of the failure to know the Absolute conceptually that is constitutive of the philosophical experience. Although the philosopher cannot achieve a complete understanding of the Absolute without turning to creative imagination, the direction of their creative imagination ought to live up to their experience of the Absolute in mystical non-knowing. Philosophy ought to inform the direction of genius without undermining its character as genius. Of course – not all absolute creations of genius are true, for not all creations reveal the Absolute as that which transcends the concept. Because one *can* know what one can create, the Absolute is knowable. In respect to the Absolute, one can only *know* the whole if one *creates* the whole, for without the imagination of the whole, there would be no form to know at all. By knowing what I *have* imagined the Absolute to be, I can attain knowledge of the Absolute in its mediated form. This principle is *analogous* to Kant's principle, such that we can know what we create. Before Kant, Vico famously argued that human beings can only know what they create.

Because the Absolute is all-inclusive, it *excludes nothing*. Thus, the creation of the form of the Absolute in relative knowing via the imagination does not happen *outside* the Absolute, but must be an act that occurs *within* the Absolute. The unconditioned Absolute is absolutely *self-determining*. Since it is genius through which the Absolute is formed in relative knowing, and genius is a moment of the Absolute, the Absolute determines itself by means of a moment of itself – the human artist. To put it in brief: the human being is an *organ* of the Absolute – the *vehicle* of Absolute self-creation and self-knowing. The etymology of genius implies this too: a genius is one who is accompanied by an attendant *spirit*. The finite genius feels herself *possessed* by a power greater than herself. The work of art is simultaneously her own and the work of another.

Genius – by means of the creative imagination, autonomous and ungoverned by an antecedent principle of reason – brings the Absolute into an epistemic form through absolute synecdoche. So, although the creative imagination achieves what reason could not – the realization of the relative in the Absolute – this achievement is an *absolute achievement* – for and by the Absolute. As Hegel writes:

Gott ist nur Gott, insofern er sich selber weiß; sein Sichwissen ist ferner sein Selbstbewusstsein im Menschen und das Wissen des Menschen von Gott, das fortgeht zum Sichwissen des Menschen in Gott.<sup>19</sup>

## 1.5 The mythical Absolute

Religion and art are two interpenetrating forms of *Weltgeist*. On the one hand, religion is a practice constituted by the non-conceptual, intuitive relation to the infinite whereby the infinite is revealed as it is *in itself*. On the other hand, art is the relative or *reflected* form in which the non-conceptual experience is revealed. Religion is incomplete without art, for it cannot achieve the mediated relation to the Absolute without it. Moreover, this mediated relation to the Absolute achieved via art must be further construed as myth. The Absolute is all-encompassing – it cannot be truly absolute without existing in *language* as well, which always has a sensuous as well as a semantic dimension. In its etymology, mythology is the *telling* of a story. But what kind of *logos* is it?

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften III*, Paragraph 564, 374.



As Ernst Cassirer deftly uncovered, mythological consciousness is constituted by an undifferentiated identity of thought and its object, which can be constituted in different ways by sign and signified, name and object, or *image and thing*. Cassirer offers a formula for the undifferentiated content of mythological consciousness: the *law of the concrescence or coincidence of the members of a relation*.<sup>20</sup>

Since the identity of the Absolute, the unconditioned universal, consists in the *very identity* of the particular with the universal in the imaginative universal, and myth is constituted by the identity of the members of a relation (in this case, the particular and the universal), the imaginative universal is essentially *mythical*. The mythical story is the mythical universal further articulated in language. As Gabriel points out:

The indispensability of constitutive mythology does not preclude thinking the absolute, as Meillassoux claims, but rather allows us to absolutize relativity.<sup>21</sup>

Miki is on point when he claims that “the reality of this world must be founded by means of the logic of the imagination.”<sup>22</sup> This “logic” is nothing other than the law of mythical consciousness, whereby the “the individual is universal and the universal is individual.”<sup>23</sup> Insofar as myth provides the mediated relation to the Absolute that is missing in religion, myth completes religion. As Schlegel writes,

[...] in the world of language ... religion necessarily assumes the guise of mythology or a Bible.<sup>24</sup>

Cassirer’s law of mythical thought can be translated into the language of semiotics, such that the mythical law signifies *the identity of the sign and signified*. Given that the human being has the capacity and freedom to manipulate the sign, and the sign is not distinguished from the thing that is signified, the human being can manipulate whatever thing is signified by manipulating the signs. In the mythological view of language, the word-sign is identical to the thing that it connotes or denotes, such that by manipulating the word one can manipulate the thing as well. Magic consists in just this – the capacity to manipulate all things by the use of signs – whether they be verbal or otherwise. As a result, this mythical law is most clearly visible in magic. As Cassirer notes:

In Egypt, which as the classical land of magic and specifically of name magic has most clearly developed this trait in its religious history, the universe is considered to have been created by the divine logos, and the first god himself is held to have been created by the power of his own mighty name: in the beginning was the name, which from out of itself brought forth all being, including divine being. He who knows the true name of a god or demon has unlimited power over the bearer of the name; an Egyptian legend tells how Isis, the great enchantress, tricked Ra, the sun god, into revealing his name to her, and how she thus gained dominion over him and all the other gods.<sup>25</sup>

In his discussion of the way that the Greek Epic breaks from myth via cunning, Adorno also emphasizes the identity of word and thing in mythical thought:

Mythical fate had been one with the spoken word. Within the sphere of ideas in which mythical figures executed the unalterable edicts of fate, the distinction between word and object was unknown. The word was thought to have direct power over the thing, expression merged with intention.<sup>26</sup>

As Strauss notes, magic could not have survived for as long as it did if it never succeeded.<sup>27</sup> There are many reasons for this, sociological and psychological, such as the Placebo effect. Blumenberg too makes it clear

<sup>20</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*. Vol. 2, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Gabriel, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Miki, “Myth,” 39.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>24</sup> Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*. Vol. 2, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Excursus I, 47.

<sup>27</sup> Strauss, “The Sorcerer and his Magic,” 168.

that mythical consciousness can have the therapeutic function to reduce anxiety by reducing the absolutism of reality. However, in most domains,<sup>28</sup> we must admit that the sign represents the signified and is *not* identical to it. Thus, we must speak with disenchanted modernity when we argue that one cannot manipulate the rain by manipulating the sign for rain. However, this same analysis cannot hold for the Absolute. By poeticizing the Absolute, the Absolute itself is transformed and is true to itself. Absolute poetry is, to employ a term from Schelling, the “*Ewige Magie*.”<sup>29</sup>

Because myth is constituted by an identity of word and thing, the word is not an allegory of another *thing*, in the sense of allegory as “speech about something else.” To employ Schelling’s concept (developed by Coleridge), myth has a “tautegorical” form.<sup>30</sup> Rather than speech about something else, “tautegory” means “speech about itself” or *self-referring* speech. Because the Absolute is mythological, mythological speech is all-encompassing and must refer to itself. What is more, because mythological consciousness identifies the universal and the particular, the particular says what the universal is; it does not represent a form that is beyond it. There is a Buddhist saying that reads: “the bird flies and is like a bird.” Quite enigmatic on its surface, it is quite evident what is meant: the likeness *is* the thing itself, *not* something *other*: the simile is the thing. Vico says something similar in his *New Science*. Geoffrey, the hero of the Medieval Italian Epic, is no particular representation or instance of a separate universal, such as courage. Rather, he *is* courage; one becomes courageous by taking on the form of Geoffrey, not by becoming like him.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, from the standpoint of reason, the identity of universal and particular cannot be tolerated. To be sure, myth constitutes a contradiction: courage is a predicate, while Geoffrey is a subject that cannot be a predicate, and yet they are identical.<sup>32</sup> That particulars be directly conceived as universals is “non-sense to the rational mind.”<sup>33</sup> As Schlegel preaches:

For this is the beginning of all poetry, to cancel the progression and laws of rational thinking reason, and to transplant us again into the beautiful confusion of the imagination, into the original chaos of human nature [...].<sup>34</sup>

For the most part, the twentieth century did not learn Schelling’s lesson and continued to read myth allegorically. Claude Levi Strauss represents a prominent example of the allegorical reading of myth. Strauss reads the Oedipus myth about the inability of culture to provide a “satisfactory transition” from the theory that humanity is born from the earth to a theory that humanity is from the union of a man and a woman.<sup>35</sup> Although Jung denies that his myth is allegorical, since myths are not conscious products, Jung too denies the tautegorical reading. Jung argues that myths *represent* psychological facts, such that “the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious.”<sup>36</sup> In this respect, Jung – like Strauss – insists upon a differentiation between sign and signified within the heart of mythological meaning.

Mythical consciousness is not just magical; mythological meaning is necessarily *incarnated*. To quote Cassirer again:

The mythical fantasy drives toward animation, toward a complete “spiritualization” of the cosmos; but the mythical form of thought, which attaches all qualities and activities, all states and relations to a solid foundation, leads to the opposite extreme: a kind of materialization of spiritual contents.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For Cassirer, in the case of other minds, the sign is the signified.

<sup>29</sup> See Schelling’s extended discussion of the *Ewige Magie* in “Über die Philosophie als Wissenschaft,” 224–46.

<sup>30</sup> Schelling, *Historical-Critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, 136.

<sup>31</sup> Vico, *The New Science*, 307.

<sup>32</sup> “Allegories gave myth meanings, based on identity rather than analogy.” See Vico, 92. Further: “Poetic truth is metaphysical truth; and any physical truth which does not conform to it must be judged as false.” Vico further states that as regards Godfrey of Bouillon, “he is the true military commander” and “all commanders who do not entirely conform to this Geoffrey are not true ones.”

<sup>33</sup> Vico, *The New Science*, 308.

<sup>34</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> See Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” 216.

<sup>36</sup> Jung, “The Origin of Myth,” 79.

<sup>37</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*. Vol. 2, 55.



As mythical thought embodies the material world in the flight of fancy, it *simultaneously* descends into the material. Given that the sign is the signified, and the sign is a *sensuous* content, it follows that the signified must also be sensuous. The signified is completely unified with the sensuous content – it is *incarnated* through and through. Given the undifferentiated quality of mythological synthesis, Cassirer unveils a concept of mythology that is just as much magical as it is material.

Philosophy, having realized the impossibility of a *purely* conceptual relation to the Absolute, must recognize the necessity to appeal to the sensual content for its creation and representation. Philosophical *Ideas* of the Absolute, such as God and being, must become *sensual*. In mythology, the idea of the Absolute is here given *sensual* realization. Indeed, this is exactly how mythology is described in the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, where mythology is the *sensual* realization of the idea. The *Oldest Systematic Program* calls for a new mythology.

First I will speak about an idea here, which as far as I know, has never occurred to anyone's mind – we must have a new mythology [...].<sup>38</sup>

Once such Ideas are given sensual form, the philosophically informed artist (*the music-making Socrates*) can give mythical form to the Absolute via metaphor, synecdoche, and other devices. In the technical sense, an Idea takes the Absolute as its *object*. Mythology, as a sensual realization of the idea, provides a (*sensual*) *realization of the Absolute*. Indeed, because philosophy cannot in principle explain *why* there is anything at all, it falls to art to provide the story by which the determine world comes to be. Thus, it is philosophy itself which calls mythology to fulfill its vocation to give the *cosmogony* – the story of the beginning of the world. As Gabriel puts it:

Non-conceptual language is thus a necessary means of showing that which cannot be said in ordinary propositional language, but nevertheless needs to be said in some way or other [...].<sup>39</sup>

Myth must speak of the beginning, a beginning before time. However, it must also tell a story of the beginning, and all stories are temporal. The story of the beginning cannot help but be temporal and atemporal – it must be a story of the ancient or *eternal* past. To critique the mythological story as incoherent is to miss the point entirely – myth cannot be treated as an attempt to give an account of events as they *actually* transpired in historical time. Such a sense of time cannot be verified by the study of history, for all history must presuppose it. *If* the Absolute has an end, it would fall to mythology to tell the story of the end of the Absolute: the *apocalypse*.

On account of the long process of disenchantment from Plato through the Enlightenment, we have become accustomed to think about the term “myth” as synonymous with “lie” or “deception.” However much (in other respects) it may have earned this reputation, we cannot *truly* say of the Absolute that the imaginative form specified of it by genius is constituted by a “lie.” First – the Absolute cannot exist in relative knowing except by means of the synecdoche that is specified of it. Second, since there is no rational form that governs the formation of the myth, one cannot judge the images specified of the Absolute as *false* because they fail to conform to that form. Still, the imaginative universal is a *fiction*, for it is a contingent being that *only exists* as a creation. But since this constitutes its very relative being in knowing, one cannot say that its fictional being is merely fictional. Rather, it's fictional being is *non-fictional* or what it is in itself. Without fictionality, the Absolute would not be true to itself. Simply put: the Absolute is the fictional Absolute. The Absolute can only be true to itself if it exists in the form of a fictional truth, or a *true fiction*. Myth is not synonymous with “lie.” It is a *true* fiction: an identity of word and thing. As Kant says about poetry, it

<sup>38</sup> Behler, “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism 1797,” 162. Although the author(s) of this document are most likely envisioning a new political myth, here I set aside all questions about a new political myth and focus entirely on the metaphysical and epistemic dimensions of the question.

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, 81.

[...] plays with the illusion which it produces at will, yet without thereby being deceitful [...]<sup>40</sup>

Considered abstractly, the genius is a *story-teller*. Indeed, a myth is a kind of story. But she is not just any story-teller. She tells a story of the *Absolute*. Accordingly, in this context, the myth of genius is a *cosmological logos* by means of metaphor and synecdoche that makes rational cognition of any element or domain of the Absolute possible. The *form of myth is itself the origin of the Absolute* in knowing. Following Vico, when the human being fails to know the whole, she must extend herself to it. In this case, she *extends* her imagination to the whole – by extending relative objects of the imagination to the Absolute, she extends *her own imagination* to the Absolute.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, mythology, as that mediated form of knowing in which the Absolute exists in cognitive form, is indeed a kind of *anthropomorphism*. Nonetheless, the form of myth is a *true* anthropomorphism, for without anthropomorphism, the Absolute cannot exist in knowing.

We should not forget Blumenberg's lesson that myth reduces the absolutism of reality. By such a reduction, reality becomes manageable:

What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible, in terms of significance, by telling stories. Panic and paralysis, as the two extremes of anxiety behavior are dissolved by the appearance of calculable magnitudes to deal with and regulated ways of dealing with them [...]<sup>42</sup>

However, myth does not only reduce reality – it also *expands* it. Blumenberg overlooks the way that myth *fulfills* the absolutism of reality – the way that it saves and preserves it.<sup>43</sup> Once we concede with Heidegger that the poetic word is the house of being, then we must also concede to him that “only a god can save us.”<sup>44</sup> However, unlike Heidegger, I do not concede that we can only wait and prepare for the appearance of the god. Rather, we are called to *think that god into being*. Without participation in the cognitive life of the imagination in *mythology*, the Absolute would remain incomplete in its very being (and thereby untrue to itself), for it would remain excluded from human knowing. As Nietzsche reminds us,

The sphere of poetry does not lie outside the world, like some fantastical impossibility contrived in a poet's head; poetry aims to be the very opposite, the unvarnished expression of truth [...].<sup>45</sup>

The Christian story offers us an illuminating example of how the mythological may give sensuous form to being. As we read in gospel of St. John, “ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.”<sup>46</sup> This logos is a poetic, mythical logos. Christ – who is the word – is a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of God and man. “Jesus Christ is God” is synecdoche, for the particular is posited as universal, the finite as infinite. Through death and resurrection, Christ returns to God and is seated “at the right hand of the father.” This story, as well as the images and words that constitute it, is not true for it fails to correspond to any empirical or historical fact or set of facts. It is mythology. However, the mythology is also true, for its sensual rendering of the Absolute is the original disclosure of Being to us in a mediated and reflected way. Without mythology, being has no form in mediated knowing. The Christian story about the birth and death of God as a person is indeed a myth that extends the human person to the Absolute – but the story is itself a product of genius that gives the Absolute being, a true, though fictional anthropomorphism. In this way, mythology makes possible our engagement with the Absolute on the field of difference and determination. Indeed, the mythological could be described as a *fictional truth*, necessary for intellectual

<sup>40</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Paragraph 53, 5:327.

<sup>41</sup> Vico, *The New Science*, 160. Vico writes: “Homo non intelligendo fit omnia (Man makes all things by not understanding). ... When he does not understand, he makes them [things] out of himself, and, by transforming himself, becomes them.”

<sup>42</sup> Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Although my concept of myth is more deeply inspired by the Christian tradition that Hans Jonas' is, my own conception of myth coincides with Jonas' concept of the “becoming God” as a being that “progressively becomes different through the actualizations of the world process.” For more on this theme, see Jonas, “The Concept of God After Auschwitz,” 7.

<sup>44</sup> See Heidegger, “Der Spiegel Interview,” 326.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> *The Greek New Testament*, John 1:1, 312.

and lay person alike.<sup>47</sup> Myths are the *conceptual persona of being* – the character that being takes on in the knowing subject.

Because the Absolute has its truth in a cosmological fiction, it is easy to be misled about the truth or falsehood of its form. On the one hand, one might absolutize the side of truth and thereby fail to see the fictional dimension of mythology. If one believes that Jesus Christ actually resurrected, and there is no fictional dimension to the telling, one fails to see the myth as a myth. On the other hand, one might simply condemn the myth as a simple fiction without any truth, as is the case in with *scientism*. Both attitudes are problematic and one-sided.

Our need for *mythologizing the Absolute* underpins Schlegel's call for a new mythology.<sup>48</sup> As Max Weber put it, modernity conceives of the world as *disenchanted*. A disenchanted world is one in which all things are subject to *calculation*. Because the Absolute transcends all calculation, disenchanted modernity is *alienated from the Absolute*. Indeed, the Absolute is present in disenchanted thinking, but it exists there as a world *alienated from itself*. Because the creative imagination brings the Absolute into a form of mediated knowing which transcends conceptual determination, mythological imagination *liberates the Absolute* and Absolute thinking from that alienation, thereby freeing it to be true to itself.

As is evident, I have relied heavily on Cassirer and Schelling's tautegorical view of myth, as well as Vico for his concept of the imaginative universal. Given these results, however, I do think Cassirer is misguided when he claims that science is the "highest form of human culture." Likewise, the call back to myth does not demand a cyclical view of history that always repeats in triadic cycles as Vico envisioned. Finally, although I hold with Schelling that the human being is "God positing consciousness,"<sup>49</sup> I consider myth not only to be the revelation of existence as divine (as Schelling does), but as the act by which existence itself becomes divine.

## 1.6 The transformation of mythical consciousness

As Gabriel argued in *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, "we must set up a new mythology."<sup>50</sup> Although we too follow Schlegel's call for a new mythology, the fact that we must turn *back* to mythology out of our alienated disenchantment means that the turn to mythology is a *return* and thereby a *transformation* of mythological culture. In order to understand how myth is transformed by its return, we must elucidate the status of myth prior to the process of disenchantment initiated by Greek philosophy.

We must remember that originally, myth is not aware that its creations are its *own*. Because these signs are sensuous (or material), mythical consciousness cannot recognize the sense of what is signified as independent of the given material. Because of this identity of sign and signified, mythical consciousness encounters the meaning of the sign in the external material, which is given from without. Thus, mythical consciousness experiences its own signs as *external material entities* that determine it from without. As Cassirer states, the mythical form of mediation merely "substitutes" the given with its own signs:

Thus myth rises spiritually above the world of things, but in the figures and images with which it replaces this world it merely substitutes for things another form of materiality and of bondage to things. What seems to free the spirit from the fetters of things becomes a new fetter which is all the stronger since it is not a mere physical force but a spiritual one.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Of course, this is one mythology among others, and there is no necessity to determine the infinite as God. As Schleiermacher notes in *On Religion*, whether we think of the infinite as God depends on the direction of our imagination. See Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> See Schelling, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, Lecture Eight, 123–38.

<sup>50</sup> Gabriel, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter*, 74.

<sup>51</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*. Vol. 2, 24.

Having merely substituted things with its own signs, mythical consciousness experiences the products of its creative determination of the world as independent forces that determine it. To quote Cassirer, “in creating its mythical, artistic forms the spirit does not recognize itself in them as a creative principle.”<sup>52</sup> Exactly for this reason, originally mythical consciousness does *not* understand its stories to have their origin in a free invention of genius.<sup>53</sup>

What is more, because myth has not differentiated the universal from the particular, and contradiction requires the differentiation of the universal from the particular, myth has not yet uncovered the contradictory character of the imaginative universal. The contradictory character of myth is not fully illuminated from within myth itself, but is most clearly illuminated with the onset of philosophical culture. Cassirer notes that

Wherever philosophy sought to establish a theoretical view of the world, it was confronted not so much by immediate phenomenal reality as by the mythical transformation of this reality.<sup>54</sup>

Although Adorno is correct that the divorce from the tautegorical structure of magical–mythical consciousness is already at work in the Homeric epic,<sup>55</sup> the divorce from the tautegorical structure of myth is most clearly visible in Plato’s famous Theory of Forms. Plato’s Theory of Forms draws an absolute distinction between the universal and the particular. Because myth is constituted by the identity of particular and universal, Plato’s Theory of Forms is fundamentally a critique of myth. With such a theory in hand, the philosopher is empowered to critique Euthyphro and the mythological position he represents. The critique of the poets in the *Republic* is not simply an addendum to an otherwise independent philosophical theory – the Theory of Forms is already a critique of myth. When Plato himself evokes myths at the conclusion of his dialogues (or as noble lies in the education of the youth), they are *informed* by philosophy and are thereby *transformed* by and *subjected* to philosophical thought as myth determined according to a *plan*.

Although philosophy could only develop its own autonomous form *against* myth and as critique of myth, philosophy has also been instrumental in its preservation. Having drawn out the fundamental *krisis* between universal and particular, philosophy read this distinction back into myth itself. Achilles is no longer courage itself but a symbol of courage. Tautegory could not survive the philosophical revolution: myth was cancelled as tautegorical and preserved as allegorical. As Luc Brisson documents in *How Philosophers Saved Myths*,<sup>56</sup> from the Sophists to the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists, myth is re-cast as allegory – as speech about something *else*. Philosophy may have preserved myth, but only at the cost of destroying its tautological character.

Philosophy – in its origin – was set free from myth. However, we have now set philosophy free *for* myth, for a return *of* myth and a return *to* myth. Naturally, this must not only initiate a transformation of philosophy but also of myth. By returning to myth, myth is transformed into a *free* act that *completes* the work of reason, a synthesis of tautegory and allegory, that is fully self-conscious of its contradictory form.

Originally, mythical consciousness is unaware of the imaginative and fictional status of its content. However, the poet who initiates the return to myth creates their myths with the lucid philosophical self-consciousness that their creations stem from their imagination. The philosophical poet, or to use a Nietzschean image – the music-making Socrates<sup>57</sup> – knows them to be fictions. In addition, originally mythical consciousness ascribes to determinism, for it takes its mythological creations, e.g., the Gods, to

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>53</sup> Cassirer and Schelling are clear that originally myth is not an “invention.” For each of them, myth is an unconscious production – in Cassirer’s case, this is the unconscious production of the symbolic function, whereas in Schelling’s case, this is an unconscious production of nature – in particular of the God positing consciousness.

<sup>54</sup> Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythical Thought*. Vol. 2, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 5, 47.

<sup>56</sup> See Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths*, 1–3.

<sup>57</sup> See Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 82. Nietzsche employs the music-making Socrates as his symbol for the return of tragedy and mythology: “the symbol which we would propose for this cultural form is that of the music making Socrates.”

be external agents that determine the fate of people. Since the music-making Socrates knows its story to be its *own creation*, it is no longer determined by an external agent and thereby transforms myth into an expression of its very freedom.<sup>58</sup> As a result, myth can be re-imagined as a creation of genius, who gives the rule to nature.<sup>59</sup> Human history can be re-thought as the progressive realization that the human being is the God positing consciousness – they who convert the profane into the sacred.

Moreover, because the return to myth is mediated by a thorough analysis of the form of the concept itself, the music-making Socrates is fully aware that the formula of myth violates the normative principles of conceptual form, such as the Principle of Non-Contradiction. Thus, having run through and beyond the reflective relation to the Absolute, the music-making Socrates is fully *self-conscious* that the form of its mythologizing is a *contradiction*. While the original mythical consciousness does not even acknowledge the contradiction implicit in their own utterances, and the philosopher traditionally denies those contradictions to be true, the music-making Socrates both acknowledges and accepts the *truth* of contradiction. The music-making Socrates joyfully echoes Hegel's hard truth: "contradictio est regula veri, non contradictio falsi."<sup>60</sup> The return to myth presupposes the *overcoming* of philosophical or conceptual knowledge of the Absolute. As a result, this new mythology cannot be *pre-logical*, to employ a misleading description by Lévy-Bruhl, but that which is *post-conceptual*. The return to myth fulfills a completely new function: the *completion* of reason's drive to know the Absolute.

Most importantly, by overcoming the conceptual relation to the Absolute, the return of myth constitutes a *revitalization* and transformation of the tautegorical approach to myth. By cancelling the conceptual relation to the Absolute, the music-making Socrates not only *cancels* allegory, but also *preserves* it in a transformed tautegorical form. This synthesis of the allegorical and tautegorical can be read out of the post-conceptual or contradictory form of myth.

Because mythological awareness is defined by the *identity of the relata*, myth identifies the universal with the sensuous particular. Because the particular is identical to the universal, it does not signify anything beyond it. Rather, because the universal it signifies is identical to the particular, the sensuous particular refers to itself. Thus, the myth is *self-referring* – it is tautegorical. However, mythology can only be a contradiction if the particular is *not* universal. From the Traditional Square of Opposition, we know that the **A** proposition, "All S is P," stands in contradiction with the **O** proposition, "Some S is not P."<sup>61</sup> The negation makes the contradiction possible. Applied to the case of myth, it is both the case that **A** "every particular is universal" and **O** "some particular is not universal." Given the difference between the universal and the particular, the sensuous particular signifies something *other* than the universal. Thus, myth is also allegory – literally the "speech about something else." In short, the contradiction in myth can be most concretely characterized as the *identity* of allegory and tautegory: *every reference to itself is a reference to another, and every reference to another is a reference to itself*. As Schlegel recognized, the poetry of the Absolute is always *ironic* or ecstatic in form, whose very being is to exceed itself. Schlegel's *ironic allegoresis* (i.e., the presentation of the unrepresentable)<sup>62</sup> calls for an integration of Schelling's tautegorical vision of mythology, whereby they are integrated into a new dialectic vision of the mythical Absolute.

Because the music-making Socrates acknowledges the difference between the sensuous particular and the universal, the universal transcends the sensuous content of the particular sign. As a result, the return to myth *negates* the materialism engendered by the tautegorical form of myth. Qua allegorical, the meaning of myth is an ideal form that *transcends the material*. Hence, for the music-making Socrates, myth does not necessarily adhere to the materialism of mythical consciousness. However, because myth is also self-

<sup>58</sup> Miki is right that we cannot identify "primitive" and "contemporary" myth. Miki, "Myth," 37.

<sup>59</sup> The Bible can be re-interpreted as a "holy Bible" that is the product of the co-operation of the Absolute and the relative – God and the human being.

<sup>60</sup> Hegel, "Dissertationi Philosophicae de Orbitis Planetarum," 227.

<sup>61</sup> "Not every S is P" is another formulation of the O proposition. For more about the debate over the formulation of the O proposition, see the SEP entry on the Traditional Square of Opposition: Parsons (2017) <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/square/>.

<sup>62</sup> Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, 89–90.



referring, the meaning of myth cannot be separated from the sensuous particular. Rather, myth is the *Absolute incarnate*: while the being of the Absolute transcends the material, the Absolute is simultaneously identical to it.

Because myth is a return to the tautegorical relation out of the allegorical one, it could not completely abandon allegory – allegoresis constitutes an essential moment in the history of mythical consciousness which it cannot completely abandon. If we completely abandoned the allegorical form, then we would lose our consciousness of the contradiction that constitutes myth and our self-consciousness of myth in general. Without attending to the contradiction, we risk falling into a *one-sided* consciousness of myth *qua* tautegory or myth *qua* allegory. With the former, we forget the philosophical critique of myth and the truth that it contains – the difference between the universal and the particular. With the latter, we risk falling into the delusion that philosophical thinking could maintain an absolute separation of the universal from the particular, which it cannot. Simply put: without the integration of allegory into tautegory, we would risk falling victim to a *bad* infinity, whereby we negate myth only to return to it again *ad infinitum*. Indeed, history may at times proceed as a loop unconsciously repeating itself. However, the Norns have lost their power to imprison us in such a loop, for as long as we preserve our consciousness of the contradiction – the mythical irony – we can forestall this mindless and infinite repetition.

Although the *Oldest System* calls for a *new* mythology, the return to myth does not demand that we tell a new story. Rather, it may only call for a rejuvenation and re-telling of an *old* mythological narrative. The Christian narrative is one such myth. The holy trinity instantiates the mythical law, for each person of the holy trinity is the whole of God himself, and yet only one person in the triune Godhead. Christ is God and is *begotten* by the Father. The contradiction is unmistakable. The reference to the other is a reference to itself – the indivisible God who is both three and one. Christ points beyond himself to his Father when he cries out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>63</sup> And yet, we find in the Gospel of John that in the beginning, Christ, who is the logos, is God himself: θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.<sup>64</sup> Immanuel, as the mythological realization of the Absolute, is God among us, the incarnated God – one person – fully God and fully human.<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard was right: The Christian story can be true only on the condition that it affirm the contradiction: Christ is the human who transcends humanity – the God who transcends God. In the words of Pseudo-Dionysius, the Godhead is the υπερούσια οὐσία.<sup>66</sup>

The *Oldest System* proclaims that the highest dignity is allotted to poetry:

Poetry thereby attains a higher dignity [*eine höhere Würde*]; it becomes again in the end what it was in the beginning – *teacher of (history) the human race* because there is no longer any philosophy, any history; poetic art alone will outlive all the rest of the arts and sciences.<sup>67</sup>

As the *Oldest System* has it, “poetry has the higher dignity” and will “outlive all other arts,” for it has a privileged relation to the Absolute. Indeed, the dignity of poetry consists in the fact that it is the only form in which the Absolute is *true to itself* in mediated knowing. Because the creative imagination brings the Absolute into its *Absolute existence* by means of its creative act, the Absolute exists *as Absolute* only on account of the creative imagination. For this reason, poetry has a “higher dignity” than all the other disciplines, for it is the power in virtue of which the unconditional is and *can be known*. The dignity of the human being is located in the *divinity* of her being: her being as the self-creating and self-knowing power of the Absolute.

Is the birth of the mythical Absolute the death knell for philosophy and religion? Far from it. Philosophy is cancelled, but it is preserved in religion. Likewise, religion is cancelled, but is preserved in Absolute art. Absolute art is a synthetic unity of all three forms of *Weltgeist*.

<sup>63</sup> The Greek New Testament, Matthew 27 45–7, 112.

<sup>64</sup> The Greek New Testament, John 1:1, 312.

<sup>65</sup> For a recent study of the contradictory character of Christ, see Beall, *The Contradictory Christ*.

<sup>66</sup> See Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names,” 49 [585–8].

<sup>67</sup> Behler, “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism 1797,” 162.



If we follow the path of mystical dialecticism, then philosophy perishes whenever it attempts to conceive the Absolute. As a result, philosophy turns to an immediate, non-conceptual consciousness of the Absolute: religion. However, within this new religious orientation, philosophy is reborn as a *religious* practice. As Tanabe himself teaches, rather than expect philosophy to successfully correlate their concepts to the Absolute, the task of philosophy must be re-envisioned as an activity whereby *the trans-conceptual* is revealed.<sup>68</sup> In this way, philosophy cannot be deemed a failure if it fails to conceptually articulate or achieve demonstrative knowledge of the whole. Although it is cancelled as a conceptual knowledge of the Absolute, it is preserved as a religious practice, whose goal is to disclose the trans-conceptual by virtue of its very self-negation. By *ritually* drawing all conceptual distinctions into unity with the non-conceptual, philosophy transforms itself into a form of religious practice by which the truth of the trans-conceptual is revealed. Because philosophy is preserved, mystical dialecticism should *reject* the mere negation of reason engendered by the Surrealists call back to mythology, a call best illustrated by André Masson's *Acéphale* (ἀκέφαλος).

Religion too is cancelled when it recognizes that its immediate relation to the Absolute precludes mediation and therefore fails to realize the Absolute. However, religion does not just disappear within the return to poetic-mythological consciousness. Without the religious experience of the ineffable Absolute, the music-making Socrates has no principle in virtue of which to create their myths. Consider the following metaphor: “the Absolute is a wilderness.” This metaphor is an act of synecdoche that raises the particular, such as a forest, beyond its relative domain of proper application, to the Absolute. This imaginative synecdoche *corresponds* to the revelation of the non-conceptual character of the Absolute experienced in philosophy's conceptual failure and religion's mystical *Gelassenheit*. “The Absolute is a wilderness” is a *true metaphor* – not because the concept of wilderness corresponds with a given object, but in virtue of the fact that it lives up to the *non-conceptual experience* of the Absolute. Hence, religion is preserved within the mythological consciousness as the truth that guides the Absolute poetizing.

As Hegel reminds us, the true is the whole.<sup>69</sup> Philosophy is preserved within religion, and religion is preserved within art. All three forms of *Weltgeist* are alive and at work in Absolute art. Absolute art is the singularity of world spirit, for it is *one particular kind* of world spirit and *simultaneously* the *whole* of world spirit – it is philosophy, religion, and art. Whatever is Absolute cannot exclude the relative without relativizing itself, and Absolute art could not be Absolute if it were not itself both relative and Absolute. In a word, only in virtue of the philosophical and religious insight into the trans-conceptual and ineffable character of the Absolute can the music-making Socrates write the poetry of the world.

**Funding information:** The research presented in this article has been generously supported by the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong.

**Conflict of interest:** The author states no conflict of interest.

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<sup>68</sup> See Tanabe, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, “Ch. 2 Absolute Critique: The Logic of Metanoetics.”

<sup>69</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 13.

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