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Apel and Lessing—or: the Ethics of Communication and the Strategies of Comedy

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For Edson M. Chick on
his seventieth birthday

I

Transcendental pragmatics is the attempt to make transcendental reflections—reflections on the condition of the possibility of objectively valid knowledge—productive for the present by extending them beyond the subjective sphere of Kant and to the sphere of intersubjectivity and communication and ultimately to a dialogically developed normative ethics. Unlike Kant, Apel does not underestimate the role of language or dialogue within the sphere of transcendental questions, the role of intersubjective subject-subject or I-thou relations (as opposed to subject-object relations). According to Apel, there is no position from which discourse can be relativized or meaningfully called into question; to do so would be to fall into a pragmatic contradiction: one cannot argue against argumentation without presupposing the validity of argumentation. Our entry into dialogue already presupposes certain absolutely binding norms, for example, that we not act blindly, but rather seek via rational argumentation the correct alternative of action, that we do so by presenting our views honestly and by listening, fairly, to alternative positions, and that we attempt to reach a consensus on norms.

Apel's essay "Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgesellschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik" offers an interesting modernization of Kant's categorical imperative (*Transformation der Philosophie 2*: 358–435). Drawing on the transcendental conditions of discourse, Apel sketches a twofold imperative: first, that we not destroy our *real* community of discourse, that is, that we work for the preservation of humankind (by not eliminating humanity through nuclear war, environmental destruction, or philosophical-political disintegration); second, that we enrich the community of rational beings by projecting the goal of an *ideal* community of discourse and that we work to realize this goal. The first imperative is the necessary condition of the second, which in turn gives meaning to the first, a meaning that is counter-factually anticipated in every dialogue. The ideal community of discourse is presupposed but not fully actual-

ized in the real community of discourse, and the imperative exists to work toward overcoming this contradiction.¹

In a number of ways transcendental pragmatics can be viewed as the culmination of not only Kant's idealism but also Lessing's earlier elevation of reason and his stress—which Kant did not share—on the rhetoric of the good, the means of defining, teaching, and motivating goodness. Kant and Lessing share with Socrates the figure of self-cancellation, but only Lessing shares Socrates' dialogical spirit—and in this sense points beyond the philosophy of subjectivity against which nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers react and which—after passing through a very non-Kantian focus on language, dialogue, and hermeneutics, social and economic embeddedness, and the realization of truth as the transcendence of mere knowledge—has culminated in a return to transcendental arguments enriched by the categories of intersubjectivity.

Above all in his famous Enlightenment drama of tolerance, *Nathan der Weise*, Lessing develops the criteria of an ethics of discourse: recognition of alternative models, measuring those models against themselves and against transcendental norms, justification of our positions, honesty and fairness, the elevation of spirit over nature and of reason over authority and tradition, precision in language, and principles of universal love and justice that transcend all particularities (Roche). Indeed Lessing's concept of a macroethics has only now become one on which, not just the improvement, but the survival, of humankind depends, and among modern thinkers Apel seems to work most in the spirit of Lessing, especially if we consider arguments of Apel's that sound like philosophical analogues to the tolerant "unity and difference" rhetoric of the ring parable.²

Though Lessing's famous aphorism in "Eine Duplik" may seem to question normative truth (we are finite beings who can only approximate truth), transcendental pragmatics would solve this contradiction for Lessing in the spirit of transcendental reflection. Lessing's notion of truth as unreachable—except in an infinite approximation—already presupposes criteria for proximity and distance, truth and falsity, which are themselves taken to be true and obtainable. Lessing is not as much an opponent of truth or of norms as a simplistic reading of this passage might render him.³ A student who takes Lessing's ideas seriously for the present could well learn from transcendental pragmatics. But as I shall attempt to show below, the philosopher interested in normative definitions of ethical behavior modelled on symmetry, honesty, and fairness could also learn from Lessing, in particular his literary works, more specifically, his comedies.

II

Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*, arguably the greatest of all German comedies, is situated in the aftermath of the Seven Years War.

Tellheim, a discharged officer, is tempted to withdraw from the world because of (erroneous) accusations by the Prussian authorities of financial misconduct. His Saxon fiancée, Minna, tries to win Tellheim back to society—and into her arms. His sense of honor conflicts with her desire for love. Tellheim's stubbornness is finally overcome—but not without hints of a possible tragic scenario, Minna's turning to trickery, and the additional assistance of a *deus ex machina*.

The extraordinary use of mirroring between characters in *Minna* and the play's elaborate portrayal and critique of asymmetrical behavior makes Lessing's comedy a fascinating text for any reader interested in the transcendental pragmatic argument that all behavior should be symmetrical and communicative. The linguistic and theatrical technique of mirroring serves to highlight contradictions in Tellheim's behavior and lead him toward a union with others. Mirroring is a formal analogue to the play's content: Tellheim's self is portrayed through the other characters, just as Tellheim, eventually, finds his own selfhood in others.

Tellheim's initially overriding subjectivity is evident, for example, in his sending a letter to Minna. The letter is a formal analogue to Tellheim's denial of intersubjectivity. Less an issue of the language of reason versus the language of the heart, it is symbolic of unmediated reason overriding the reason of dialogue. Tellheim is unwilling to engage in any dialectic that would force him to confront other views and encounter the unpredictability, spontaneity, and development that is a part of open discourse. Minna answers Tellheim with a dose of his own medicine: she returns the letter without comment, thus mirroring back Tellheim's monological act.

This technique of mirroring is the guiding principle of the play and evident throughout. Just mirrors Tellheim, just as in the tradition servants serve as keys to the traits of their masters: Just is honest, loyal, and giving. He opens the play literally awakening from a dream (1.1), just as Tellheim figuratively awakens at the end (5.12). Like Tellheim he shuns dialogue (2.6. and 3.1). Much as Tellheim refuses to accept payment from the widow, Just declines Tellheim's money. Further, Tellheim's relationship to Just mirrors his later relationship to Werner and Minna. He does not want to owe the other anything, and he does not want to bring the other down to his level. Tellheim will accept Just qua dependent poodle, but not as someone whom Tellheim needs.⁴

Riccaut is introduced as both Tellheim's and Minna's mirror—partly parallel, partly contrasting. He is a discharged officer, an aristocrat, a foreigner, and Minna—with modest deception—manages to give him money without appearing to be superior. Minna, like Riccaut, embraces the sport of gaming and risk-taking, even deception (though their motivations for deception differ). Above all

in the parallels with Riccaut, the stress seems to be on the unity of unity *and difference* (Martini).

More importantly, Tellheim finds mirrors in his relations with the widow Marloff and Werner. Tellheim lies to the widow Marloff in order to create a context of generosity. He disclaims any debts. Though the widow feels Tellheim looks down on her, she accepts the money—for another, namely, her son (1.6). Werner, in order to give his money to Tellheim, must lie to him. Tellheim cannot stand to be in need of others, to be below them. Werner puts him in the widow's position, but Tellheim refuses Werner's aid—even when Werner disparages money vis-à-vis intersubjectivity by stressing the value of friendship (symbolically, water) over instrumental relations (symbolically, gold) and by suggesting that Tellheim already owes him more than money, namely his life. Tellheim stubbornly adopts an asymmetric stance whereby he helps less fortunate individuals but resists help when *he* is less fortunate. The asymmetry behind Tellheim's ethics is clearly not universalizable. If everyone were to refuse help when he or she needed it, no one would be able to give help to others when they needed it. When Tellheim takes responsibility for the other's difficulties but refuses the other's offer of assistance, he denies the other an ethical privilege.⁵ Minna's later unwillingness to accept Tellheim's assistance highlights this contradiction. Adopting Tellheim's rhetoric, Werner tries already at this point to make the need for symmetry clear: "Wer von mir nichts nehmen will, wenn er's bedarf, und ich's habe, der will mir auch nichts geben, wenn er's hat, und ich's bedarf" (3.7). Tellheim eventually relents, borrowing Werner's money—as did the widow Marloff—for another, in this case for Minna, later in the play and as a result of her trick (5.1).

Most importantly, Minna mirrors Tellheim. In their very first encounter (2.8), she mirrors his language back to him.⁶ Not saying anything new, she simply draws attention to Tellheim's formal address. Like Werner, Minna takes Tellheim literally, thereby pointing out the absurd consequences of his words and eventually his actions. This mirroring continues in the following scene, where she asks Tellheim to justify himself publicly, then finds herself speaking in his melancholic voice and resolves to provide not an exact mirror but a mirror with a difference. She addresses precisely this difference within unity by confronting Tellheim with a polyptoton, "Aber lassen Sie doch hören, wie vernünftig diese Vernunft, wie notwendig diese Notwendigkeit ist" (2.9). She then rephrases his situation, describing it in words that render it a parody of tragedy.⁷

Even on the most finite level she mirrors back his words and phrases. In 3.10 even Franziska mirrors back Tellheim's earlier rhetoric. Tellheim cannot eat with them because he might lower their spirits. Later, Minna redefines for Tellheim what honor is (4.6), reducing it to an empty (and uncommunicative) tautology and

anticipating in her language what the great Austrian novelist Hermann Broch would later analyze as a reductive or partial value system: "Nein, nein, ich weiss wohl.—Die Ehre ist—die Ehre" (4.6).⁸ When Tellheim in the same scene describes his position in a self-pitying tone ("Sie werden Ihnen einen abgedankten, an seiner Ehre gekränkten Offizier, einen Krüppel, einen Bettler, trefflich beneiden" [4.6]). Minna attempts to take apart his sentence word for word: "Lassen Sie uns doch jedes näher beleuchten" (4.6). Tellheim sees himself as not good enough for Minna—a hidden elevation of himself via self-pity, and he fails to see that his noble act causes misfortune in the other. Tellheim's obsession with his inadequacies, his apparent modesty, is really a form of vanity and gives hidden credence to Franziska's statement that we tend not to have the virtues of which we speak.⁹ In order to appear moral, Tellheim makes others miserable. Minna must break this pseudo-tragic pattern with comic deception.

Minna's entire trick ("ihn wegen dieses Stolzes mit ähnlichem Stolze ein wenig zu martern" [3.12]) is a mirroring of Tellheim's former stance: in her loss of honor, her concern with the consequences for the other, and her resolution: "Sie würden nicht die geringste Spöttere über mich dulden, und doch würden Sie täglich die bittersten einzunehmen haben . . . so gewiss soll die unglückliche Barnhelm die Gattin des glücklichen Tellheims nie werden!" (5.9). She does not hide this mirroring: "Wollen Sie es wagen, Ihre eigene Rede in meinem Munde zu schelten?" (5.9). This is not just the age-old trick of courtship (feigned indifference or rebuff generating more ardent affection), Minna pretends to be in a web of necessity and tragic despair, and it is not only this tragedy that Minna mirrors back to Tellheim but, more importantly still, its fictionality and pretense (Tellheim himself refuses to accept her situation as tragic).¹⁰ Earlier she had stated to Tellheim in a mocking tone: "Das klingt sehr tragisch" (2.9). Tellheim almost senses Minna's parody when he asks, "Spotten Sie, mein Fräulein?" (4.6).

Minna's deception helps unravel Tellheim's self-deception, his inability to see or hear the truth.¹¹ Mirroring leads to recognition. This is true in terms of action (by mirroring Tellheim's words and action, other characters, most especially Minna, lead Tellheim to recognize himself in others) and symbolism (other characters are part of Tellheim and Tellheim part of them). Tellheim finds his identity and his desire to live (his subjectivity) in another (in intersubjectivity): "Der Trieb der Selbsterhaltung erwacht, da ich etwas Kostbarers zu erhalten habe als mich und es durch mich zu erhalten habe" (5.5). Hegel writes, almost as if commenting on this passage: "Dies Verlorensein seines Bewusstseins in dem anderen, dieser Schein von Uneigennützigkeit und Selbstlosigkeit, durch welchen sich das Subjekt erst wiederfindet und zum Selbst wird, diese Vergessenheit seiner, so dass der Liebende nicht für sich

existiert, nicht für sich lebt und besorgt ist, sondern die Wurzeln seines Daseins in einem anderen findet und doch in diesem anderen gerade ganz sich selbst genießt, macht die Unendlichkeit der Liebe aus" (14: 183). Tellheim's obsessive self-consciousness, the structure by which subject and object are identical, finds its truth in intersubjectivity (if subject and object are identical, then the truth of that identity is subject-subject relations). Tellheim is led to see that he needs others (and develops with others), just as gestures have shown this throughout the play—Tellheim literally needs others, for his right arm is paralyzed. Tellheim learns not only about himself. He recognizes that Minna is not a simple object about which he makes decisions, but a complex (and equal) subject.

Intersubjectivity is nicely mirrored in the symbolism of the ring. At first Tellheim fails to see which ring Minna has given him; this symbolizes his inability to recognize the essence of their relationship. Finally, however, Tellheim realizes in his love for Minna—as with his friendship for Werner—that the oneness and circularity of the ring suggests that what goes out, returns, that giving is taking and taking is giving.¹² Honor, representing above all subjectivity, appearance, and reflection, gives way to the more substantial, more concrete, intersubjective value of love.¹³ Even Tellheim's misreading of the ring symbolically illustrates a moment of truth. Whose ring is whose? Is Tellheim's ring the one he gives Minna, or the one he takes from Minna? In a sense they are both his, as both are Minna's. The circularity of the ring is reflected in the confusing, intertwined possessives, as is Minna's act of *taking* Tellheim's ring in order to *give* it to him.

Circularity and symmetry function also as elements of the play's structure, defining not only goodness but beauty. In acts 1 and 3 the heroes are essentially alone: in 1 the focus is on Tellheim, in 3 it is on Minna. In 2 we see Minna and Tellheim together, with Tellheim departing; in 4 we see Minna and Tellheim together, with Minna departing. In 5 the two are together, as they were before the play. The importance of symmetry ranges from such major structures to minor events such as Werner telling Just in 2.1 that they cannot fight the innkeeper, for two against one would represent an unfair advantage. Symmetry is symmetry with others as well as symmetry with oneself, consistent, noncontradictory behavior. One is measured against one's earlier comments. As in many comedies, an identity-crisis is presented, and mirroring, a form of doubling, confronts the hero with his own self. Werner's references to loose relations with women (20 rings) later haunt him. No less than tragedy, the ideal of comedy is of a consistent, unified character, even if the hero must struggle to reach that ideal.

Minna's comedy defeats Tellheim's tragedy, suggesting a philosophical confrontation in which tragedy is to be met—wherever possible—by a higher genre, comedy.¹⁴ To the tragic refrain, 'I have

held true to my ideals and nobly failed,' comedy retorts, 'You have nonetheless failed.' In order to overcome disaster, the comic spirit is willing to invoke trickery. Minna is the spirit of comedy both in her strategic thinking and her goal of symmetry. In fact the two are related insofar as Minna's role-playing (whereby she takes Tellheim's role, thus placing Tellheim in her own), is a form of reciprocity that (comically) anticipates a (genuine) symmetry. A potential tragedy of collision (two justified positions in conflict, that is, honor and love) gives way to a comedy of reconciliation insofar as each advocate—wittingly or unwittingly—adopts the position of the other.

Tellheim's intersubjectivity is nonetheless not complete. An element of asymmetry remains. Tellheim will gladly accept symmetrical relations, and he condones asymmetry when he can lower himself to the level of another. Tellheim is willing to abandon public honor for Minna's sake. But he cannot tolerate asymmetry when the other must lower herself to Tellheim's level. Tellheim does not believe that Minna's love is as strong as his own, that is, he doesn't think that she would be willing to spite the world for him. Tellheim's limits are evident in a male-female dichotomy (which contradicts Lessing's emphasis on humanity and on the universal as opposed to the particular) and in his tendency to view the question of symmetry in purely monetary, i.e., instrumental, and proprietary, i.e., conventional, terms.¹⁵ The play ends on a note of progress: love and friendship are attained, as is a double—and thus mirroring—betrothal and a symbolic union of the state and the individual as well as of Prussia and Saxony. Yet the play's conclusion also includes moments of regress: intersubjectivity remains partially restricted; and the final lines—not unlike those of Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday*—address the issue of continuing wars and so recall an earlier reference to honor as a means of recruiting soldiers (4.6). Though the play's ending is not entirely harmonic, we see, as in transcendental pragmatics, the projection of an ideal community of discourse, "eine heitere Utopie der Vernunft" (Hass 28), toward whose realization we have an ethical imperative. Lessing anticipates central tenets of the twentieth-century's as yet most advanced application of transcendental categories.

III

But there is more to Lessing's play than transcendental pragmatics might at first condone: Minna's instrumentalization of Tellheim, not to mention Tellheim's lying vis-à-vis the widow Marloff, Werner's lying vis-à-vis Tellheim, and Tellheim's lying vis-à-vis Werner.¹⁶ The conflict between the transcendental pragmatic demand for noninstrumentalization and the strategic, if good-willed, behavior of Lessing's characters leads to two overarching questions, one theoretical, the other generic.

First, to what extent does Lessing's play shed light on an issue transcendental pragmatics has difficulties dealing with, just as the intellectual ancestor of transcendental pragmatics, Kant, was unable to recognize tragedy or any genuine conflict of goods?¹⁷ I'm thinking of justified violations of the transcendental pragmatic imperatives, transgressions that appear necessary for the attainment of a higher good,¹⁸ a position Lessing unambiguously adopts. Just as Apel enhances Lessing, so can Lessing help us advance Apel's thoughts. Apel argues that consensus is in principle valid, but what if you can't convince the other of your position? What if there is a finitude that is not of principle but of practice, that can be corrected and overcome? Is it legitimate to violate lesser goods strategically and tactically in order to reach a greater good? Can asymmetry ever advance the cause of symmetry?

Adopting a Hegelian position, one in line with the comic stance of *Minna*, I would contend that under unusual circumstances deception can be condoned—if deception advances a higher good, if every legitimate alternative path is blocked, and if there is a realistic chance of success.¹⁹ *Minna's* deceit helps Tellheim come to himself, and the maxim that deceit can engender truth appears, symbolically, in the fact that the cheat Riccaut is in fact an agent of truth.²⁰ The agent of such deception must of course be on guard against the excess of subjectivity that deception fosters. Not unlike Tellheim, *Minna* suffers a superabundance of subjectivity. She thinks she can give Tellheim everything he wants and so obfuscates his needs (2.7 and 2.9); she acts—according to Franziska—partly owing to egotism, that is, wanting more to feel loved than to help Tellheim (4.1); her playfulness and deception do not acknowledge his genuine vulnerability; and she pushes the trick to the edge, going a bit too far.²¹ Most importantly, Tellheim fails to fully grasp the pedagogical purpose of *Minna's* "Lektion" (4.1), and so the audience laughs not just at Tellheim but at *Minna* as well. Lessing suggests that tragedy resides in Tellheim's subjectivity and withdrawal (though their truth is the intersubjectivity and reconciliation partially achieved by *Minna's* comic trick) as well as *Minna's* subjectivity and manipulation (though, having been extended too far, they need the assistance of her uncle's arrival). Comedy requires subjectivity (both as obstacle and as a means of overcoming the obstacle), even as it culminates in intersubjectivity. The comedy's references to chance and fortune are another way of stressing the limits of subjectivity.²² One is dependent on something beyond oneself. The arrival of the Graf is symbolic of what we might call the "cunning of the genre," that is, the speculative idea that subjectivity is ultimately subordinate to a broader sphere, be it chance, providence, or simply other subjects.

Second, what literary forms, more specifically, what forms of comedy, are elicited by transgressions of symmetrical behavior? In

a variety of comedies instrumentalization is readily criticized. The protagonist acts not symmetrically and communicatively, recognizing the other as a subject, but negatively, manipulating the other as an object, and the protagonist, who ultimately fails, is ironized or comically undermined. The innkeeper of *Minna* fits this model, as does the Patriarch in *Nathan*. The heroes are not justified in their transgressions, and their purposes are illicit. The character becomes more comic and less satiric only when he or she displays wit, resourcefulness, and imagination, as in Goldoni's *Il bugiardo* or Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*. In some such comedies one character strategically manipulates another who has himself manipulated others, demonstrating by a kind of symmetrical instrumentalization or double negation, the untenability of instrumentalization. One thinks of works by Hauptmann, Sternheim, and Brecht.

Another dramatic hero, wanting to treat everyone with utmost honesty and symmetry, does not act strategically, yet this non-strategic thinking contributes to the hero's frustration, failure, and eventual misanthropy. Molière's *Alceste* comes to mind; to a degree also Lessing's *Al Hafi*. The early *Tellheim* moves in this direction, though outside forces eventually free him from this stance. Such apparently tragic heroes are among the most interesting, because most substantial, of comic figures.

In other works we see a synthesis of strategic and communicative action. A character manipulates an other in order to realize an end that will benefit the manipulated other; the other will recognize the benefit and so in the end be grateful for the instrumentalization. This corresponds to the comic or maieutic structure of education as well as the ironic or playful elements of love. The good teacher doesn't force a lesson on a passive student, but works indirectly, which is to the student's benefit; the student eventually recognizes this. The beloved uses irony to exhibit the depths and resources of the self that the lover might otherwise underestimate.²³ These models appear to fit *Minna*, a reading reinforced by *Minna*'s insistence on symmetry; *Tellheim*'s oxymoronic address, "O boshafter Engel!" (5.12)²⁴; and his gracious recognition of her and Franziska as "Komödiantinnen" (5.12).²⁵ An additional example, similar in its structure to *Minna*, is the deceit of Miss Hardcastle, which elicits the love of Marlow in Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. The positive use of deception is likewise evident in the drama of reconciliation, as in *Nathan*, especially with regard to *Nathan*'s tactics of education, for example, with Recha in 1.2, or in *Nathan*'s reflection that love is allowed to deceive, "wo getäuscht zu werden, uns heilsamer war" (3.7).²⁶

Other instances of instrumentalization point toward, but do not lead to, harmony and recognition. In one of the least harmonic versions a character instrumentalizes another in order to realize an end that will benefit the manipulated other, an end with which the

other agrees—or at least should agree, though the other recognizes only the manipulation²⁷; he or she does not fully recognize the benefit and so remains hurt. It is this scenario that Tellheim experiences in *Minna*, but only momentarily (5.10); so too the sons who receive the father's multiple rings in *Nathan*. A milder version of non-harmonic, but justified, deception occurs in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the women deceive the courtiers and in this way lead them to recognize the shallowness of their claims to true love and the folly of their excessive wit. The Princess announces: "There's no such sport as sport by sport o'erthrown" (5.2.153). The men eventually recognize the deception, but this recognition does not lead to any immediate harmony; having already broken their original vows, the men must first prove themselves over time. In another form of instrumentalization harmony is reached, but recognition remains partial: one person instrumentalizes another in order to bring about a good that the other will recognize, though the other never discerns the actual process of manipulation. Shakespeare's comic world is full of such scenarios; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the most prominent example. Within the German tradition one thinks, for example, of Theodor's manipulation of events so as to bring about Jaromir's turn from false subjectivity to intersubjectivity in Hofmannsthal's *Der Unbestechliche*. The issue of comic instrumentalization and deception is complex, evoking many possible strategies, many possible outcomes. The issue invites further reflection—with regard to Lessing and beyond.

Apel's transcendental reflections advance and give a ground to Lessing's concepts of reason and intersubjectivity, and Lessing's play—with its mirroring and its movement toward intersubjectivity—offers an aesthetic analogue to various tenets of transcendental pragmatics, yet Lessing's art also challenges Apel's positions, eliciting theoretical and aesthetic questions that complicate and enrich the transcendental pragmatic paradigm.²⁸

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1 Apel's imperative can be grasped in the light of a dialectical typology of comedy. Comedy is (1) an affirmation of a benevolent objectivity (the hero's conscious interests are thwarted or redirected, but a life-affirming harmony is restored—as in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or Holberg's *Maskarade*); (2) a negation of false subjectivity (the hero has an intuitive sense of the good but reduces it owing to weak means—as in Lessing's *Die Juden* or Brecht's *Herr Puntilla und sein Knecht Matti*, the hero has clever means but seeks evil ends—as in Jonson's *Volpone* or Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*, or the hero consciously negates evil only to fail because of contingent contradictions within his or her own actions—as in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* or Schnitzler's *Professor Bernhardi*); or (3) a development of intersubjectivity (the hero overcomes serious obstacles and reaches friendship, love, and the communal sphere—as in Raimund's *Der*

Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind or Grillparzer's *Weh dem, der lügt!*). In the initial subgenre we see Apel's first imperative: a community exists and thrives. It is not a richly differentiated or necessarily enlightened community, but a community it is. Its existence—usually within the context of nature, its transcendence of the merely individual, and its continued preservation are all central ingredients. The goal of an ideal community is presented *ex negativo* in the antithetical comic subgenres, where the reduction of an ideal, the negation of an ideal, and the nonrealization of an ideal are all thematized. Finally, the realization of the ideal community, the development of richer intersubjective relations, is central to the synthetic subgenre of comedy. The fact that Apel is virtually silent with regard to aesthetic and poetic issues does not diminish the potential of his theories for these areas.

- 2 See Apel, *Diskurs* 167–78. Connections between Lessing and contemporary *Diskursethik* have so far been treated in general terms by Wehrli (22–52 and 168–71) and with reference to *Minna* by Schröder, “Lessing” 57–60.
- 3 See, for example, Bennett, who reads *Minna* in the light of this passage, and whose contribution includes a number of pragmatic contradictions.
- 4 The proximity is further evident in the finite fact that Franziska's “Ah! der unglückliche Mann!” (3.3) could be taken to refer to Just as well as Tellheim. Developing the implications of the play's first scene, Schwan discusses further parallels between Just and Tellheim.
- 5 The reader might recognize here an implicit critique of Levinas, who argues that “asymmetry is the very basis of ethics” (13). Lessing's suggestion that Tellheim's asymmetric principle is self-contradictory and non-universalizable could be said to shed light on the problems implicit in any ethics of asymmetry.
- 6 Schröder, who is particularly attentive to the dialogical moment in Lessing, also notes the *Spiegelfunktion* of Minna's language. See Schröder, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* esp. 232–40.
- 7 In general Tellheim's actions can be viewed as a parody of tragedy as much as a potentially tragic scenario; the text—as a substantial, yet comic work—is rich enough to allow for both seemingly contradictory moments. Rather than simply acting virtuously, Tellheim intellectualizes his virtue, exhibiting his obsession with it and thus with himself, an obsession that culminates not in heroic expansion but in inwardness, self-pity, and a lack of tact. In rejecting Minna, Tellheim fails to see that he is causing her more misfortune than if he took her; it is a reduced nobility that is an ethics of conscience, rather than of responsibility. The modern parody of tragedy often introduces protagonists who mistakenly identify with Shakespearean heroes, for example, Söller's identification with Richard III in Goethe's *Die Mitschuldigen* or the juxtaposition of Arturo Ui and Richard III in Brecht's *Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*; here the identification figure is Othello: Tellheim thinks he will destroy Minna (like Othello Desdemona) by marrying her, but this is true only to the extent that Tellheim underestimates Minna, like Othello Desdemona, a necessity that is erased as soon as it is recognized as a mere possibility. Much literature has been devoted to the play's integration of tragic and comic motifs (see most recently Aiken), but the recognition of a parody of tragedy is relatively rare. For exceptions see Seeba 69 and Schröder, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* 235, 237, and 239.
- 8 Cf. the landlord in 2.2: “Und Krieg war Krieg.”
- 9 2.1. Franziska's statement has logical as well as existential import. The statement, “I am modest,” is self-canceling: as soon as I say that I am modest, I am no longer modest. I am allowed to say that I am modest, only when I do not say it.
- 10 A further self-reflexive dimension consists in the fact that drama contains within it the seeds of such deceit: the actress pretends to be Minna, the actor pretends to be Tellheim. Cf. Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, no. 11.
- 11 On the motifs of seeing and hearing in the play, see Schröder, “Das parabolische Geschehen.”

- 12 For an excellent discussion of giving and taking, or the reciprocity of love, as a theme within the drama, see Graham.
- 13 Cf. Guidry. For an insightful analysis of honor as defined by subjectivity (whereas one might normally think of honor as public and love as private), see Hegel 14:177–80. The truth of honor is for Hegel—as for Lessing—love: “Wenn in der Ehre die persönliche Subjektivität, wie sie sich in ihrer absoluten *Selbstständigkeit* vorstellt, die Grundbestimmung ausmacht, so ist in der Liebe vielmehr das Höchste die *Hingebung* des Subjekts an ein Individuum des anderen Geschlechts, das Aufgeben seines selbstständigen Bewusstseins und seines vereinzelt Fürsichseins, das erst im Bewusstsein des anderen sein eigenes Wissen von sich zu haben sich gedrungen fühlt. In dieser Beziehung sind sich Liebe und Ehre entgegengesetzt. Umgekehrt aber können wir die Liebe auch als die *Realisation* dessen ansehen, was schon in der Ehre liegt, insofern es das Bedürfnis der Ehre ist, sich anerkannt, die Unendlichkeit der Person aufgenommen zu sehen in einer anderen Person” (14:182).
- 14 The best analysis of Minna’s lesson—in part as comedy triumphing over tragedy—is Nölle 96–108.
- 15 Even as the play endorses a particular historical norm, that of the *Hausvater*—as Wittkowski skillfully shows—it exhibits its partial restrictions.
- 16 Generally overlooked is that in the very passage where Tellheim admonishes Werner for lying, Tellheim is himself lying (3.7); he shames Werner with his lie that the widow Marloff has already paid him.
- 17 See, for example, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (8:330) and *über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen* (8:637–43).
- 18 A more standard criticism of Apel might focus on his formalism or on the contradiction between his transcendental and consensual concepts of truth. For the most thorough account and critique of Apel to date, see Höfle. Questions of strategy have recently been raised by transcendental pragmatic philosophers. See, for example, Kuhlmann 212–13; and Apel, “Lässt sich” 69–72; “Grenzen” 27–29; and *Diskurs* 62–68, 141–53, 213–16, 260, 268, and 464–69. In addition to a *Normenbegründungsprinzip*, Apel speaks of the need for *ein moralisch-strategisches Ergänzungsprinzip*, precisely in situations where the ideal cannot simply be realized. This fact weakens the extent of my *critique* of Apel but strengthens the *relevance* of art, in this case Lessing’s dramas, for further reflection on these issues. Where Apel appears to view strategic action that contradicts lower-level norms as regrettable, if legitimate insofar as it ensures progress toward the ideal, Lessing seems almost to embrace it, as in his theory of maieutic education. Further, the ambiguity—perhaps one should say vagueness—of Apel’s principle of strategy appears to derive from the fact that strategic rationality need not imply action contrary to ethical norms but is above all a general imperative for responsible action leading to a reduction of the disjunction between the ideal and real community of discourse.
- 19 In the space allotted I cannot give this notion the full defense it would otherwise warrant. To avoid a misreading, let me merely state that the position is not relativistic; on the contrary, it derives from a systematic hierarchy of values. Strategic reason is still subordinate to transcendental reason, and some norms are higher than others. Comedies like *Minna* do not of course justify deception philosophically, but they do speculate on its harmonic possibilities as well as its possible excesses.
- 20 My reading of the (comic) value of deceit differs from that of Hoelzel, who writes, “In Lessing’s view even benign lying has no redeeming virtues . . . lying, even for a good cause, is self-defeating” (34). Hoelzel’s argument focuses principally on Werner’s lying and Minna’s ruse, but the reason for their (partial) failure may lie less in the deceit itself, than in Werner’s ineffectual technique (and bad luck) and Minna’s extension beyond what is necessary. More in harmony with my reading of Lessing’s evaluation of deception is Martinson.
- 21 On Minna’s *Zu-weit-Treiben des Spiels*, see esp. Strohschneider-Kohrs.

- 22 I agree with Steinmetz, who confronts the either-or question of the solution (Minna's trick or a *deus ex machina*) by noting the significance of each in resolving obstacles to harmony. Giese is likewise sensitive to both moments.
- 23 Minna's need to reveal her subjectivity (in the face of Tellheim's treating her as an object) parallels Tellheim's need to be recognized as honest (vis-à-vis the apparent erasure of this virtue in the light of society).
- 24 Cf. also Minna's description of herself as "Zärtlich und stolz, tugendhaft und eitel, wollüstig und fromm" (2.7). True to the idea that comedy or providence transcends subjectivity, Minna continues: "Du wirst mich nicht verstehen. Ich verstehe mich wohl selbst nicht" (2.7).
- 25 Necessary deception is also characteristic of Lessing's *Der Misogyn*, even if the moment of reconciliation is muted by the stubbornness of Wumshäter.
- 26 Cf. also *Miss Sara Sampson* (3.3).
- 27 This may stem from two different perspectives: either the hero is insufficiently intelligent to grasp the true force behind the machinations, or the hero is shielded from recognizing this force because the surrogate director believes that knowledge of the forces might be detrimental to the hero's psychological welfare.
- 28 A much shorter version of this paper will appear in German as part of the proceedings of the 1991 International Lessing Conference on *Streitkultur: Strategien des Überzeugens im Werk Lessings*.

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