Sonderdruck aus: Nicht im Handel

ANTIKE UND ABENDLAND

Beiträge zum Verständnis der Griechen und Römer
und ihres Nachlebens

herausgegeben von

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Band XXXIV

1988

Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York

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Holiness and Justice
Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* in the Context of Plato's *Euthyphro*

Plato's early dialogue the *Euthyphro* and Lessing's final drama *Nathan der Weise* share much in common. Most importantly, each work attempts to define holiness. Socrates' interlocutor Euthyphro offers a series of definitions. His first is dogmatic and subjective. Euthyphro asserts that holiness is acting as he does: «the holy is what I am now doing» (5 d). For Socrates this definition does not capture the essence or form of piety; it is a mere instance. In his second attempt Euthyphro reaches a universal level: holiness is doing what pleases the gods. Socrates responds that the gods are at variance with one another. They quarrel and disagree. Whereas Euthyphro had earlier asserted – sensibly enough – that the holy and unholy are opposed (7 a), they become under these conditions interchangeable (8 a). Since what is pleasing to some gods is not pleasing to others, the same things will be holy and unholy. For the sake of argument Socrates agrees there may be situations where a particular action is pleasing to *all* the gods, but he then asks, is what all the gods love an adequate definition of holiness. What is the cause and what the effect when one considers what is holy and what god-loved: «Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?» (10 a). For Socrates the answer is clear: what is holy is holy or virtuous not because the gods approve it, but rather the gods approve it because it is holy. Holiness transcends the potentially relative concept of what is god-loved. Unless the gods are bound to love what is already holy, what they may love at any given moment becomes a matter of happenstance. Euthyphro next attempts to define holiness as that part of justice which has to do with our relations to the gods, not men, in particular with our service to the gods. Socrates undercuts this final definition as well. Since service and care are rendered in order to improve the welfare of the object served, what advantages could we possibly offer the gods? Since they are perfect, they do not need our services.

Each of Euthyphro's definitions corresponds to a significant moment in Lessing's play. Euthyphro's first definition parallels the positions of Daja and the Patriarch: these characters make blind, unphilosophical claims for the validity of their own religion. Related to the disagreements of the gods is Lessing's depiction of the difficulties of defining holiness in a world that has more than one religion. Sittah, meanwhile, criticizes the Christians who follow Christ's commands not because his commands are good but because Christ is their God. Finally, Nathan's critique of Recha, as she worships an «angel,» who, as an angel, could not possibly need her service, is structurally analogous to Socrates' final rebuttal. By focusing on Lessing's variations of the definitions proposed in Plato's dialogue, I will try to shed new light on the major themes of the play as well as contribute to a definition of holiness.

Daja blindly asserts the validity of her religion over competing ones. Confident, like Euthyphro, that she knows the truth, Daja is possessed of a missionary zeal. Just as Euthyphro refers to the Greeks' traditional beliefs about the gods (5e–6d), so does Daja fail to propose arguments for the validity of her religion: she cites traditional Christian dogma and narrates the lives of Christian heroes in her attempts to persuade Recha of Christianity's exclusive claim to truth[1]. Nathan continually admonishes Daja for her careless use of words and, therefore, ideas. Certainly more dangerous than Daja, but similar in his confidence and blind faith is the Patriarch. The Patriarch refuses to enter a discourse. He scorns theoretical debate, the weighing of an issue for its own sake[2]. He wants to know whether what the Templar tells him is «ein Faktum oder eine Hypothes'» (IV, 2, 133):

> Denn ist der vorgetragne Fall nur so
> Ein Spiel des Witzes: so verlohnt es sich
> Der Mühe nicht, im Ernst ihn durchzudenken.
> Ich will den Herrn damit auf das Theater
> Verwiesen haben, wo dergleichen *pro*
> *Et contra* sich mit vielem Beyfall könnte
> Behandeln lassen. (IV,2,141–47)

Lessing places this self-cancelling commentary into the unknowing mouth of the Patriarch, thus reinforcing the audience's lack of identification with him. The Patriarch demonstrates his un-Socratic spirit when he shows concern not for the essence of justice but solely for its appearance as law. Like Euthyphro, the Patriarch is confident enough in his knowledge of holiness that he is ready and eager to take another's life. He does not consider that his standards may be arbitrary and his application of them even more so. Again like Euthyphro, the Patriarch believes that he is a special messenger of God – the Patriarch alone knows why the Templar was saved (I,5,581–83) – and that his ideas on religion (and religious politics) are above criticism. In a telling slip the Patriarch refers to himself as an angel[3].

The parable of the three rings attempts to solve the problem of quarreling deities and competing religions. As with religion, the ring is passed on from one generation to the next. In order to treat all his children equally, one eventual owner of the ring decides to have two copies made, such that the original ring is no longer distinct – not even to the owner himself. After the father dies, his three sons quarrel over who has the true ring. The conflicts that arise among the family members tell us that the ring alone, not to mention family bonds, does not suffice for proper

1 III,2,67–73. I cite *Nathan* by Act, Scene, and line number according to the Lachmann/Muncker edition (LM). Other quotations are given by volume and page number.

2 While the Patriarch admits of no conversation dealing in conjecture and possibility – his interest is power, not truth – it is precisely the realm of possibility to which Nathan appeals when he convinces Recha that the Templar is not an angel. Schröder writes: «Die Sprache tritt nicht als realitätsbezogene Mitteilung, sondern, ganz aus den eigenen vernünftigen Möglichkeiten lebend, als ein reines Mittel der Verständigung auf» (253).

3 IV,2,103. There is a subtle allusion here to Pastor Goeze. See LM 13, 120. The best commentary on the Patriarch stems from Seeba, 99–109.

behavior. Recognizing that the sons battle and that the ring is allegedly magical, the judge tells the plaintiffs that the genuine ring must have been lost. He challenges each one to prove to the others that his own ring is genuine. The brothers should do this by acting justly toward one another. The ring is not the cause of good behavior; instead one can make a case for the validity of one's ring (or religion) through the goodness of one's actions. Just acts are primary, history and religion secondary.

Nathan responds to Saladin's challenge for a justification of Judaism by suggesting that his own religion is mere chance, mere tradition; significant alone is one's justice. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are common in the sense that each religion bases its validity on tradition, but Nathan implies that tradition is no basis for absolute religious truth[4]. The one relative argument he does give for following family tradition is based not on the primacy of history or blood but on the simple idea that in the family one sees many just acts[5]. For another family member one does good deeds intuitively. In the family and in religion one learns love; ideally, this love would extend beyond the immediate family (or religion) and reach mankind as a whole[6]. Lessing's major concern is not one's choice of the correct religion (man's relationship to God) but, as with Socrates, justice (man's relationship to man). In the ring parable the universal definition or form of holiness is nothing other than human virtue. A religion should be embraced not simply because it has been passed on from one's parents but because the religion is conducive to the development of just acts. The principle of justice rather than divine ordinance or religious orthodoxy should guide our actions and determine what is holy.

The specific test for holiness in the ring parable becomes the question, whom do two of you love the most. The sons' subjective responses tell us that the ring (or traditional religion) does not suffice. Moreover, implicit in both the judge's advice and the earlier statement that the ring was always passed along to the most loving son is the idea that with love the ring is superfluous[7]. The Friar insists that wherever a choice is necessary, love is more important than religion (IV,7,635–37). The ring parable limits the claims of each religion (history is not an argument for universal truth), but it solidifies through its stress on human relations the claim of each religion within its own tradition. The ring (or traditional religion) has a role insofar as it helps one to love; but because traditional religion is subrational, it can also motivate unjust acts.

4 In his short essay «Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft» Lessing himself argues in a well-known passage that accidental historical truth, i.e., tradition, can never be made the basis of necessary truth: «*Zufällige Geschichtswahrheiten können der Beweis von nothwendigen Vernunftswahrheiten nie werden*» (LM 13,5). The truth of any religion, including Christianity, functions independently of its historical foundation.

5 I would use such a position to limit Angress' otherwise persuasive account of the role of family in *Nathan*.

6 Alluding to the advice of the judge in the ring parable, Bennett suggests that «Nathan's aim is tension and competition among orthodoxies, not reconciliation» (77–78). He thus discredits the play's final communal image. The judge, however, wills a competition not for the sake of discord but with the purpose of expanding the realm of just acts, ultimately in the spirit of reconciliation. A harmony of this kind is not to be equated with emptiness. See Fuhrmann, 80–81. Bennett mistakenly assumes that Lessing's stress on striving eliminates the possibility of systematic perfection; this leads him into the kind of error his essay embraces. As soon as one recognizes a distinction between systematic and material perfection (see Hösle), the apparent tension between striving and truth is overcome, as is the absurd notion that truth implies not the sublation of error or the desire to resolve newly discovered errors but the undercutting of one's truth in the service of an arbitrary embrace of cyclical error.

7 See Böhler, 136–137.

In the parable religion is characterized above all by tradition (blood relations or inheritance) and obedience. As characters such as Assad and the Templar develop, they break religious boundaries; others, like Daja and the Patriarch, who blindly adhere to these boundaries are ironized. In the parable inheritance alone does not suffice as a criterion for goodness. Obedience meanwhile is mocked via several of Nathan's exchanges and the Patriarch's commands to the Friar and Templar. In the name of obedience to God the Patriarch would have the Templar spy on Saladin and eventually murder him. Tradition and blind obedience are also the objects of Socrates' critique in the *Euthyphro*. Though Euthyphro doesn't view blood as a guide to his actions, traditional definitions of religion remain primary in his mind. In completing his first definition Euthyphro relies on material examples unsupported by argument or reason. While disagreeing with what some men take to be holy, Euthyphro appeals for part of his proof precisely to what men believe and agree on. He cites divine precedents revealed to us through human convention and simultaneously pits himself against other standards of human convention:

> Does not mankind believe that Zeus is the most excellent and just among the gods? And these same men admit that Zeus shackled his own father [Cronus] for swallowing his [other] sons unjustly, and that Cronus in turn had gelded his father [Uranus] for like reasons. But now they are enraged at me when I proceed against my father for wrongdoing, and so they contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and what they say of me. (5e–6a)

Definitions derived from convention or common opinion will suffer from inconsistencies and contradictions wherever people differ. The very self-contradictions in public opinion that enrage Euthyphro should also warn him from being dependent on, rather than critical of, tradition.

Related to the insight gained via the ring parable, namely that piety is subordinate to goodness, and tradition to truth, is Sittah's critique of the Christians who do the good not because it is good but because Christ tells them that it is good[8]:

> Ihr Stolz ist: Christen seyn; nicht Menschen. Denn
> Selbst das, was, noch von ihrem Stifter her,
> Mit Menschlichkeit den Aberglauben wirzt,
> Das lieben sie, nicht weil es menschlich ist:
> Weils Christus lehrt; weils Christus hat gethan. (II,1,81–85)

As in the ring parable so here with the Christians, truth is accepted «auf Treu und Glaube»[9]. Sittah's position corresponds to Socrates' argument that holiness is determined not by what the

8 A variant of this argument for absolute goodness over convention stems from Nathan when he responds to the Templar's reliance on tradition by suggesting: «Nur Tempelherren? *sollten* blos? und blos / Weil es die Ordensregeln so gebieten?» (II,5,484–85).

9 II,1,88. Cf. III,7,461–62.

gods love but rather by what is worthy of being loved[10]. If one accepts the view that the gods are supreme, their arbitrary and irrational whims determine what is holy, and the holy correspondingly becomes unknowable. If the gods do not conform to reason, defining or delimiting holiness becomes an impossible task. All we can know are instances of acts loved by the gods at one time or another. The question of how the gods will act in the future or what might please them is left unanswered. History and tradition take precedence over *a priori* truth. Because we cannot know what is holy (we cannot know this because we have no guiding principles as to what the gods love), we are left with only individual – and one might add, competing – examples of what the gods happened to love at one time or another. Because the gods are not bound by reason or goodness, we don't even know if earlier examples are still valid today. Such an understanding of holiness not only makes man dependent on the inconsistencies of tradition and powerless before the dilemma of competing religions, it creates for the fanatic the freedom to claim superhuman insight and establish his or her own sense of divine justice. In this way the Patriarch claims that no one may question God's will as revealed to his servants[11]. Whenever a religious self suspends reason and takes recourse to the arbitrariness of the gods (or claims to divine the ideas of the otherworldly gods) in order to legitimize his or her actions, any and all acts, including of course violent and unjust ones, can appear legitimate. The Patriarch speaks of both objective, human justice and a higher form of justice (a justice in the eyes of God); the latter allows him to break with convention and reason and plot against individuals who oppose him. The Patriarch's own divine justice becomes a form of unreasoning violence: «Nur, – meynt der Patriarch, – sey Bubenstück / Vor Menschen, nicht auch Bubenstück vor Gott» (I,5,686–87). In the light of such an irrational and authoritarian position, any individual willing to acknowledge the supremacy of divinity over justice, what is god-loved over what is holy, must blindly submit to the Patriarch's claims of divination or assert with an equally vehement and irrational power politics his own fanaticism.

In contrast, what Plato and ultimately Lessing teach is that holiness can be defined independently of what the gods do, say, or love[12]. That the gods love something is not an essential characteristic of holiness. Thus, talk of the gods or any appeal to the gods becomes superfluous. Because holiness is knowable independent of the gods, man's autonomy and the supremacy of

10 Though a contemporary discourse might consider the specific dichotomy of god-loved and holy obsolete, the basic structure of this opposition pervades other realms. The dichotomy is analogous, for example, to the distinction between law (as enacted by a given state) and justice (absolute goodness independent of conventional considerations). See Versényi's discussion of positive-law definitions of justice, 141–54. Just as something is not holy simply because it pleases the gods, so is a law not just simply because it is enacted. The distinction is not irrelevant to readings of such modern works as Heinrich Mann's *Der Untertan*, Carl Zuckmayer's *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick*, or Peter Weiss' *Die Ermittlung*. Moreover, as we have begun to see, a discussion of holiness is really a discussion of virtue, which – if Socrates is to be believed – necessarily concerns everyone.

11 IV,2,102–14. Cf. Hodge, 170.

12 Leibniz, in whose philosophy Lessing was particularly well versed, argues similarly in his *Discours de métaphysique* that goodness does not depend on God's will. Reason, not despotic power, governs the good. See esp. § 2, where Leibniz argues against those who assert «que les ouvrages de Dieu ne sont bons que par *cette raison formelle* que Dieu les a faits» (26). He continues: «Aussi, disant que les choses ne sont bonnes par aucune regle de bonté, mais par la seule volonté de Dieu, on détruit, ce me semble, sans y penser, tout l'amour de Dieu et toute sa gloire. Car pourquoy le louer de ce qu'il a fait, s'il seroit également louable en faisant tout le contraire? Où sera donc sa justice

reason are kept intact[13]. Lessing's most general argument against the conclusions H. S. Reimarus draws from his philological investigations is unmistakeably similar to the position Sittah adopts in her critique of the Christians[14]. Lessing writes at the beginning of his *Gegensätze:* «Die Religion ist nicht wahr, weil die Evangelisten und Apostel sie lehrten: sondern sie lehrten sie, weil sie wahr ist» (LM 12,429)[15]. After quoting and defending the above statement in his *Axiomata*, Lessing goes so far as to argue: «Auch das, was Gott lehret, ist nicht wahr, weil es Gott lehren *will;* sondern Gott lehrt es, weil es wahr ist» (LM 13,127).

Euthyphro's final definition of piety – doing service to the gods – is actually the first definition that Lessing's play proposes and then undermines[16]. The Templar saves Recha from a fire, but she transforms his deed into an act of divine intervention. She worships him as an angel and thanks God, not the Templar. «Wie wollen wir uns freun, und Gott, / Gott loben! . . . / Ich also, ich hab' einen Engel / Von Angesicht zu Angesicht gesehn; / Und *meinen* Engel» (I,2,186–87,196–98). In viewing her rescue as an act of divine intervention, Recha implies that she herself

et sa sagesse, s'il ne reste qu'un certain pouvoir despotique, si la volonté tient lieu de raison, et si, selon la definition des tyrans, ce qui plaist au plus puissant est juste par là mème?» (27). See also *Monadologie*, § 46. Sorting out Lessing's debts to Leibniz has been the project of studies by, among others, Allison, Arnsperger, Höltermann, Meyer, and Zimmermann. The above passage has not been noted. Lessing by the way suggests – quite rightly – that Leibniz owes much to Socrates (LM 8, 198–99). Mendelssohn, who was considered by Lessing and his friends a contemporary Socrates (LM 19, 271) and who is often viewed as a model for Nathan (most recently by Batley, 10–11), also shares with Lessing the elevation of goodness over divine will. See his *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften*, esp. II, 54–55.

13 The infamous question regarding Lessing's contradictory belief in the autonomy of man's reason (§ 4 of *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*) and the dependence of reason on revelation (§71 of *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts)* is irrelevant in this context. How and when man achieves knowledge of *a priori* truth depends on sundry historical and psychological factors that have nothing to do with the *validity* of a given truth. Even if revelation leads to reason (in man), the *truth* of revelation is itself dependent on reason, as are the gods.

14 The fact that the otherwise unreliable Sittah voices this penetrating criticism underscores Lessing's belief, which he shares by the way with Socrates (e. g., *Charmides*, 161 c), that the content, not the origin, of a statement determines its truth value.

15 In a related passage of *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* Lessing writes that man reaches maturity only when he does the good because it is good: «da er das Gute thun wird, weil es das Gute ist» (LM 13,433). Here, however, the alternative is not doing the good because it pleases the gods but because rewards await the just individual. In each instance Lessing opts for absolute over relative goodness. Note by the way that the Patriarch commits both errors: he believes that God is not bound by justice – the Patriarch speaks of divine «Willkühr» (IV,2,109) – and he awaits heavenly rewards for his «good» deeds (I,5,614–16).

16 Euthyphro's definition of piety as service to the gods has three variants: attending to the gods *(therapeia theōn);* unquestioning subservience *(hypēretikē theōn);* and the art or knowledge *(epistēmē)* of prayer and sacrifice as a form of commerce *(emporikē)* with the gods. The first subdefinition presupposes superiority on the part of the person performing the therapy; the second clearly marks the servant as inferior; the third either could be said to add content, however vague and abstract, to the second or could be read as an (unsuccessful) attempt on Euthyphro's part to circumvent the idea that the gods benefit at all from our service. Euthyphro would suggest that though our ministry may not be beneficial to the gods, it is certainly dear to them. Euthyphro's distinctions are not essential to my analysis here, for each argument is ultimately refuted by Socrates' claim that any form of religious service presupposes that the gods are not self-sufficient; they profit from the servant's duties. Moreover, what exactly this service Euthyphro mentions in his third definition consists of is no clearer than what it is that the gods love if they are not bound to love the good. (Indeed, Socrates makes it clear that Euthyphro has fallen backwards in his search for a definition: what is dear to the gods *[philon theois]* is precisely what is god-loved [the *theophiles* of his earlier definition].) Finally, if the gods love the good, then reason, rather than obedience to the gods, tells us how to lead the pious life.

is divinely, irrationally privileged, one of a chosen few. Her pious thanks become an elevation of the self at the expense of others. Like Euthyphro she sees herself as a favorite of the gods. Nathan counters:

> Stolz! und nichts als Stolz! Der Topf
> Von Eisen will mit einer silbern Zange
> Gern aus der Gluth gehoben seyn, um selbst
> Ein Topf von Silber sich zu dünken. (I,2,293–96)

Recha's seemingly innocent and unintended pride is not unrelated to the arrogance of those who – with only history as their argument – claim exclusive truth for their own religion. Recha's sense of divine selection implies not only a false view of her own worth but an incorrect reading of divinity. As does Socrates, Nathan argues that angels and other deities are perfect and do not require our service:

> ... dem Wesen, das
> Dich rettete, – es sey ein Engel oder
> Ein Mensch, – dem möchtet ihr, und du besonders,
> Gern wieder viele große Dienste thun? –
> Nicht wahr? – Nun, einem Engel, was für Dienste,
> Für große Dienste könnt ihr dem wohl thun? (I,2,302–07)

He continues:

> ... Er wird
> Nicht fett durch euer Fasten; wird nicht reich
> Durch eure Spenden; wird nicht herrlicher
> Durch eur Entzücken; wird nicht mächtiger
> Durch eur Vertraun. Nicht war [sic]? Allein ein Mensch! (I,2,313–17)

While deities are self-sufficient or «vergnügsam» (I,2,323), humans need other humans. Nathan suggests that Recha's otherworldly orientation serves as a block to ethical behavior. It is useless:

> Ihr könnt ihm danken; zu ihm seufzen, beten;
> Könnt in Entzückung über ihn zerschmelzen;
> Könnt an dem Tage seiner Feyer fasten,
> Almosen spenden. – Alles nichts. (I,2,308–11)

While Recha turns her vision inward, she views herself as privileged, thanks the gods who do not need her thanks, and ignores the man who does. Otherworldly belief is not only misdirected and useless, it would seem to derive from laziness. It demands far less than the rigors of philosophical reasoning or the efforts of human action:

> ... Begreifst du aber,
> Wie viel *andächtig schwärmen* leichter, als
> *Gut handeln* ist? wie gern der schlaffste Mensch
> Andächtig schwärmt, um nur, – ist er zu Zeiten
> Sich schon der Absicht deutlich nicht bewußt –
> Um nur gut handeln nicht zu dürfen? (I,2,359–64)

Lessing himself adopts a similar view in «Das Testament Johannis», where he argues that it is easier to accept Christian dogma than to practice Christian love (LM 13,16), a tension structurally reminiscent of the brothers' dispute in the ring parable.

Nathan's argument against Recha's mistaking the Templar for an angel relates to his belief in daily miracles, the idea that miracles are not inexplicable, irregular events but natural and common, though nonetheless miracles. Nathan does not deny that he stands in awe of the events that led to Recha's miraculous rescue: he calls her rescue, along with Saladin's preliminary act of freeing the Templar, a miracle (I,2,271–72). But he hastens to take away from Recha the illusion that she alone is privileged. Miracles occur «stündlich» and not just for Recha but «für dich, und deinesgleichen» (I,2,211). Nathan's contention with Recha lies not with her view of the events as miracles or her standing in awe of the events but rather with the acknowledged source of each miracle. Daja and Recha find the events unbelievable, miraculous; they therefore project their origin into a transcendent realm. Nathan counters, why can't such acts be explained naturally. He offers immanent reasons for the seemingly unbelievable and asks: «Ey, Daja! Warum wäre denn das so / Unglaublich? Doch wohl nicht – wie's wohl geschieht – / Um lieber etwas noch unglaublichers / Zu glauben?» (I,2,256–59). After providing a list of possible explanations, Nathan concludes mockingly: «Wo steckt hier das Unglaubliche? – / Ey freylich, weise Daja, wär's für dich / Kein Wunder mehr; und *deine* Wunder nur / Bedürf ... verdienen, will ich sagen, Glauben » (I,2,266 –69). Nathan does not relinquish his awe before the miracle, he simply suggests that natural explanations suffice:

> Wie? weil
> Es ganz natürlich, ganz alltäglich klänge,
> Wenn dich ein eigentlicher Tempelherr
> Gerettet hätte: sollt' es darum weniger
> Ein Wunder seyn? – Der Wunder höchstes ist,
> Daß uns die wahren, echten Wunder so
> Alltäglich werden können, werden sollen. (I,2,213–19)

Good deeds are miracles; we should stand in awe of them. Indeed not only should we recognize them as miracles but we should – as the passage suggests and as the ring parable emphasizes – work to make such miracles of goodness everyday events[17]. The idea that humans can direct their own fate – guided by their knowledge of goodness – runs through the play to the unraveling of the comic plot. Not an otherworldly *deus ex machina* or an angel but a human, Nathan, resolves the riddles that stand before the characters and the audience[18]. This has symbolic significance as well: the spirit of Nathan, characterized by wisdom and goodness, leads the various characters to a position of harmony.

Throughout *Nathan* humanity and reason contrast with the sphere of otherworldly faith and the concrete tenets and prejudices of specific religions. Reason is juxtaposed, first, with

17 Müller, 57.

18 Lessing's belief in providence is met with an equally strong humanism. Among the interpreters of Lessing's theology Bollacher makes one of the strongest cases for Lessing's humanism. Wessell, who focuses on inconsistencies and ambiguities in Lessing's theological writings, summarizes a number of the diverse views.

irrationality and, second, with blind adherence to tradition. Serving mankind is opposed to worshiping the gods and enhancing one's own subjectivity. Modesty contrasts on both sides with pride. Only with reason can one advance to a universal definition of holiness. Even an intuitive, subrational insight into truth – such as Recha's vision of the harmony of all three religions – is limited as a subjective vision. Nathan must dissolve Recha's harmony in order to lead her from «Wahn» to «Wahrheit,» from her otherworldly, irrational orientation to a sense of humanity (I,1,162). One might contrast the realm of rational truth with the irrational leap of faith and with specific religious traditions according to the following table:

Otherworldliness	Reason	Tradition
holiness as service to the gods	holiness as service to mankind (holiness = justice)	holiness as the development of one's own religion
pride: the sense that one's own self has been divinely privileged	modesty: a willingness to consider the validity of diverse religious traditions	pride: belief in the truth of only one's own inherited position
restricted truth: truth as a singular and momentary vision	universal truth: the recognition and evaluation of competing positions	restricted truth: prejudice vis-à-vis competing truths
heteronomy: dependence on the whims of the gods	autonomy: reason as a guide for the acts of men and gods	heteronomy: dependence on the whims of the gods

In Act I Recha and Daja provide us with examples of behavior associated with otherworldliness. Strict adherence to tradition is exemplified by virtually every character – even Nathan is momentarily bound by the traditional, nonrational view of the family – but most prominently of course by the Patriarch. Most of Nathan's actions illustrate the middle column of reason, and Nathan is followed in this direction by Recha, the Templar, Saladin, and Sittah. Recha learns to think critically of competing traditions but nonetheless to recognize their various virtues. The Templar is happy to find in Nathan not a fanatic attached only to his own tradition but an enlightened thinker who respects traditions other than his own. Saladin espouses a principle of tolerance (IV,4,309–10) and finds himself humbled before Nathan's wisdom (III,7,540–41). Finally, Sittah prefers goodness to godliness – at least in her critique of the Christians.

One senses in *Nathan* not only the subordination of religious tradition and otherworldliness to justice and humanity but also an attempt to preserve the value of religious *tradition* (insofar as rational insights are intuitively passed from one generation to the next) and the sense of *awe* associated with religious faith. Nathan's reservations apply only to blind trust in tradition – ancestral tradition can be reliable if it is checked against a universal definition of justice – and to an awe that is falsely directed beyond mankind. As with the Greeks, so for Nathan, *eusebeia* or awe is not restricted to divine excellence[19]. One can freely stand in awe of human accomplishments, revere the daily miracles.

19 Versényi, 1–9.

In every instance – from Recha's worship of an angel to the parable of the rings – Nathan redefines holiness as justice. The Greek *eusebeia*, literally right reverence, is not restricted to what one might otherwise call piety or holiness. It is the knowledge that allows us to venerate what is truly awesome and abhor what is awful. With his identification of holiness and justice Lessing follows Plato in spirit and letter[20].

II

Besides the three common definitions of holiness and the general proximity in each work of holiness and justice, several other Socratic elements support the view that Plato's *Euthyphro* may have influenced Lessing's *Nathan* or that it is at least useful to study the two works together. One might begin by alluding to similarities in the historical circumstances out of which the two works arose: Socrates' search for a clear definition of piety is recorded in the context of his awaiting his trial for denying the gods of Athens and corrupting the young by teaching them his impiety. Lessing, too, was defending a definition of holiness that stood in opposition to virtually all contemporary views of religion[21]. Lessing, like Socrates, was accused by his contemporaries of impiety.

Moreover, numerous general Socratic ideas are found in *Nathan*. As if to express his solidarity with Socrates' precision with language and his continual questioning, Lessing opens his play by presenting Nathan's exactitude vis-à-vis Daja's use of the word «endlich». Throughout the play we see examples of Nathan's precision with language, for example, his use of «müssen» vis-à-vis Al-Hafi or of «sollen» vis-à-vis the Templar. In addition, we as readers are confronted with questions. The first act, rather than offering the reader a traditional exposition, presents more questions than answers: What is Daja's secret? Why should «the wise Nathan» present her with gifts in order to keep her silent? By way of what virtue is Recha Nathan's daughter? These *Leerstellen* are clarified in the course of the extended exposition, but the invitation to and impetus toward a questioning reading have already begun. In the ring parable Nathan invites Saladin, and, one might say, the reader, to draw the conclusions. The ring parable seems to present an *aporia*, much like the *Euthyphro*. What is the precise role of tradition vis-à-vis truth? of family vis-à-vis love? The *aporia*, in true Socratic fashion, is not a suggestion of the impossibility of truth, but an invitation to the reader to seek the solution him or herself. With answers provided, the reader is not forced to search. Without answers, intellectual inquiry becomes futile, arbitrary, and ridiculous[22]. To avoid these extremes Nathan leaves the parable open; the answer is not given, but suggested. It is not as though the answer disappeared – like the original ring – but that the power of the original ring – again as in Nathan's parable – can be reached only through the efforts of its wearer. Given the philosophical stance of Socrates or Lessing it would be coun-

20 Besides the *Euthyphro* see, for example, *Protagoras*, 331b; *Gorgias*, 507a–b; *Theaetetus*, 176b–c; and *Laws*, 663b–d.

21 For an overview of Lessing's disagreements with orthodoxy, neology, pietism, and deism see Oelmüller, 43–68.

22 Cf. Versényi's illuminating comments on critics who embroil themselves in contradictions by reading the *aporia* in the *Euthyphro* as final, 13–16.

terproductive for either author to provide the reader with ready answers and positive solutions. The goal is not to offer merely another opinion, one that the reader might well abandon as soon as he or she is confronted with a rhetorically persuasive opposing view. The goal, rather, is to have the reader recognize his current opinion as opinion by having him doubt his uncritically accepted stance. This negation should eventually pass over into the adoption of a stance – be it the same or different in terms of content – that is philosophically grounded. Opinion would thus give way to knowledge. What bothers Lessing, as it did Plato, is the contemporary's *unquestioning* reliance on tradition. The reader, if he or she is to attain knowledge, as opposed to right opinion, must provide the answers to the doubts and insecurities him/herself.

In his monologue, before he encounters Saladin, Nathan contrasts truth that is merely stamped with the truth that is weighed[23]. Nathan's distinction follows the well-known Socratic division between right opinion and knowledge. To Nathan, Saladin appears not to want to learn how to think. Saladin seems merely to want the right answer to his question. He wants to drop it into his pocket like a wad of cash – much the way the Sophists proclaimed that truth was for sale[24]. The reader knows that Saladin seeks not truth but Nathan's embarrassment. He wants to place Nathan in a position where he can extract money from him. It speaks for Nathan's parable and the intelligence immanent in Saladin that Saladin soon finds himself less interested in Nathan's wealth than his wisdom. And it speaks for Nathan's friendship and Lessing's harmonic spirit that Saladin will eventually receive both wisdom and wealth.

Prominent in *Nathan* along with the rhetoric of finance and equally related to Lessing's adoption of the Socratic method is the rhetoric of health. Socrates likens irrationality and injustice to forms of sickness[25]. In trying to heal Recha («So wirst du doch auf mich, auf mich nicht zürnen, / Die Engelsschwärmerin geheilt zu sehn?» I,1,165–66), Nathan offers her a form of therapy, whose main ingredient is rational reflection. Nathan asks Recha a barrage of questions. Daja fears that this interrogation will destroy her. Nathan counters that he is healing Recha: «Es ist Arzney, nicht Gift, was ich dir reiche» (I,2,355). To make Recha perplexed is not to harm her but to demand from her either a justification of her stance or a change in her position. Nathan's Socratic therapy serves Recha well. Never having learned to read books, she does not passively adopt authoritative positions. She continually engages in dialogue and, as a result, learns not simply answers but reasons (V,6,387–89). She accepts a position not on the basis of someone else's authority but only as filtered through her own critical reflection.

When Recha, falling under Daja's influence, exhibits ignorance, Nathan rightfully condemns her thoughts and actions and seeks to educate her more fully. As soon as Recha *knows* the good, Nathan can expect that she will *do* the good. It is one of Socrates' most famous sayings

23 I agree with Göbel, 188, and Schlütter, 73, who adopt a position opposed to Demetz, 146–47, and argue that the «uralte Münze» represents not tradition but truth. The «neue Münze» introduces a split between essence and appearance, as in the break between knowledge and right opinion.

24 Socrates in contrast did not charge for his services; he lived in poverty. See, for example, *Euthyphro*, 3d, and *Apology*, 23b–c and 31b–c. Claiming ignorance, Socrates had his listeners earn their wisdom with the use of their own intellects.

25 See *Republic*, 351c–d, and *Gorgias*, 447–80.

that knowledge is virtue[26]. Though Nathan is called the wise, Daja states: «Vor allen aber / Hätt's [sein Volk] ihn den Guten nennen müssen» (I,6,742–43). In a sketch for the play's final scene Lessing has Saladin state: «Du sollst nicht mehr Nathan der Weise, du sollst nicht mehr Nathan der Kluge – du sollst Nathan der Gute heißen» (LM 22/1,113). For Socrates, as for Nathan – here specifically where he agrees with Al Hafi's reasoning, to know the good is to be compelled to do the good: «Warum [sic] man ihn recht bittet, / Und er für gut erkennt: das muß ein Derwisch» (I,3,386–87). Lessing himself by the way embraces such rational necessity when he writes: «Ich danke dem Schöpfer, daß ich *muß;* das *Beste* muß» (LM 12,298).

Recha and Al-Hafi are not Nathan's only interlocutors. Two prominent goals of the Socratic elenchus are confession of ignorance and knowledge of self. Saladin's unwillingness to assume the role of judge fits the first of these two, while Recha's and the Templar's eventual recognition of their familial ties symbolizes not only knowledge of their relationship to the world but also knowledge of themselves. Nathan, like Socrates, leads his partners to such positions of recognition.

Family relations are central to *Nathan*. In the parable religion is handed down through the family, and reverence toward one's father is very much an element of piety. More significantly, the comic plot revolves around mistaken family relationships. Finally, even figures removed from family life such as the Patriarch (or arch-father) and the Friar (or brother) are defined through the rhetoric of family relations. Family plays a prominent role in the *Euthyphro* as well. Euthyphro is on his way to court to try his father for murder. Socrates expresses shock at this news, challenging Euthyphro that he must have quite a secure definition of *hosion* if he is to risk the impiety of charging his father with a crime. In Lessing's work a father is tried as well – at least symbolically – namely the false original father or Patriarch[27]. From the *Gorgias* – and from veiled suggestions in the *Euthyphro* itself – we know that for Socrates family members or blood relations are indeed subject to justice[28]. Despite offering a model example of filial piety, Lessing does satirize the impostor father; moreover, Nathan's parable demonstrates that family members do not always act justly toward one another. Though family members will in most cases naturally show love to other family members, subjectivity and arrogance can interfere. When intuitive family goodness breaks down, reason must take over. As with Plato, family may inspire, but is nonetheless subservient to, goodness. Nathan's own development as a hero consists in his overcoming a false emphasis on ancestry and mere blood relations, and with this an overcoming of his dishonesty, however well-intended, vis-à-vis Recha and the Templar[29]. Here, as in the ring parable, reason and love supersede nature and family.

When Nathan recounts his personal suffering to the Friar, the reader automatically registers an allusion to Job's unwarranted anguish. But rather than awakening from this suffering to the fear of God and a recognition of his omniscience and transcendent power, Nathan turns to the

26 To cite a few sources: *Charmides*, 164d–176b; *Laches*, 194d–199d; *Gorgias*, 460b–c; *Protagoras*, 352b–c; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145b23–27.

27 Cf. Neumann, 69–71.

28 See *Gorgias*, 480c–d, and *Euthyphro*, 4a–b, 9a–b.

29 See Schweitzer.

God of reason[30]. Socratic wisdom looms larger than the Biblical tradition. Moreover, in fulfillment of the ideas inherent in the ring parable, Nathan focuses his thoughts not on history, tradition, or even the claims of his own subjectivity, but on the question how might he act more justly. Rather than bowing to an arbitrary God of power, Nathan bows to a god-father who is himself obedient to reason. Nathan's will is not subservient to God's; it is identical with his[31]. In transforming his hatred into love, Nathan adheres to the central Socratic insight that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice[32]. Like Socrates in the one prayer he publicly offers in a Platonic dialogue, Nathan prays for wisdom and self-improvement[33]. In viewing the strength of Nathan's wisdom vis-à-vis evil, one is even reminded of Lessing's laconic statement on Socrates' trial and death: «Allein was vermag die Bosheit gegen einen Weisen?» (LM 14,156).

The *Euthyphro* is as much a drama as *Nathan* is a dialogue. Not designating his work as either a tragedy or a comedy, Lessing chose as his subtitle «Ein dramatisches Gedicht.» In truth *Nathan* contains both comic and tragic elements, very much like Plato's *Euthyphro* and very much in the spirit of Socrates' veiled statement at the end of the *Symposium* concerning the ultimate unity of the two genres. *Nathan* is obviously comic in its appeal to the intellect and its happy end, as critics from Schiller to Hofmannsthal have noted[34]. Additional comic elements surface whenever Nathan plays with the shallowness of his protagonists' opinions or their uses of language. Moreover, characters such as Daja and the Patriarch are, like Euthyphro, alazons such as one finds in Old Comedy: they are paradigmatic examples of the shortcomings of tradition even as they view themselves as special and separate. Daja sees herself as a missionary; the Patriarch sees himself as an angel of God. They are certain of their positions, like the brothers who are sure they possess the true ring, but their knowledge is pretended, their self-confidence unwarranted; they are impostors. To use a Socratic formulation: «They think themselves superior in virtue, when they are not»[35]. The brothers who battle with one another before the court in an attempt to prove their claims to the one ring represent, of course, the warring religions. Their claims to exclusivity might be viewed not only as comic posturing but as examples of *hamartia* or tragic weakness. *Peripeteia* is at work here as well. The actions of the brothers, like those of the warring nations, recoil back on themselves. Insofar as the brothers refuse to love one another, the rings work backwards, an indication, first, of self-love, and second, of the self-cancellation of their own claims to owning the true ring (or religion). The brothers are in need of *anagnorisis*, recognition of the original power of the ring, but this insight is blocked by their self-righteousness and confining claims. The absurdity of their positions is revealed to Saladin and to the reflective reader, bringing with it *catharsis* or a purification of right ideas and a therapy of right conduct[36]. While *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and *catharsis* are tragic

30 See Rohrmoser, 123, and Demetz, 144–45. Cf. Strohschneider-Kohrs, who presents an unorthodox reading of not *Nathan* but *Job*, esp. 283–85.

31 Leisegang, 120.

32 See, for example, *Crito*, 47d–54d; *Gorgias*, 472d–e, 475c–e, 479c–e, 508d–509d; and *Republic*, 445a–b.

33 *Phaedrus*, 279b–c.

34 Schiller, 20: 445–46; Hofmannsthal, 483.

35 *Philebus*, 48e–49a.

36 König appropriately reads Nathan's discussion with Recha in Act I, Scene 2 as a form of *catharsis*, in Lessing's words, «die Verwandlung der Leidenschaften in tugendhafte Fertigkeiten» (LM 10, 117). See König, 45.

concepts, they make their way into Lessing's drama not primarily as part of the action but, more importantly, as elements of the path to truth. Not surprisingly these same tragic elements belong to the Socratic method: an interrogation of views, specifically those of the impostor, leads to the interlocutor's confusion and the recognition of inner contradiction; the self-cancellation of the interlocutor's position eventually gives way to an awareness (on the part of the interlocutor or reader) of the need for purification or to purification itself[37].

III

The fact that Lessing shares much in spirit with Socrates has not escaped previous interpreters of Lessing. Helmut Thielicke, in a phrase later applied by Klaus Heydemann to Nathan, calls Lessing a «Socrates redivivus.» Peter Heller opens his reading of *Nathan* by calling Lessing a «spiritual kinsman of Socrates»[38]. This association of Lessing with Socrates is not pure chance. Lessing had a thorough knowledge of Greek literature and philosophy. His knowledge of Aristotle is apparent even to the novice student of Lessing, but Lessing had also read widely in Plato, a philosopher who was undergoing a renaissance toward the end of the eighteenth century[39]. Plato plays a role in many of Lessing's writings – from Lessing's praise of the Socratic method in his *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (11. Brief) to the obvious connection, first noted by Friedrich Schlegel, between the Socratic dialogues and *Ernst und Falk*[40]. In his writings Lessing mentions the following dialogues of Plato: the *Apology*[41], *Phaedo*[42], *Menexenus*[43], *Gorgias*[44], *Protagoras*[45], *Symposium*[46], *Republic*[47], and *Laws*[48]. Though Lessing never cites the *Euthyphro* by name, this dialogue would certainly have been of interest, first and foremost, for its discussion of holiness, and second, as part of the tetralogy of the last days of Socrates. Lessing would probably have read the tetralogy given his interest in Socrates' trial and death[49]. Moreover, Lessing did read the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*, which together with the *Euthyphro*

37 Versényi, 39.

38 Thielicke, 171. Heydemann, 101. Heller, 3. Though Thielicke writes of Lessing's theology and Heydemann and Heller of *Nathan*, none of the critics mentions the obvious parallels to the *Euthyphro*. The only references to the *Euthyphro* date back to the beginning of this century. See the short pedagogical studies by Kohl and Schneider. These, however, cannot be said to overlap with my investigation in any significant way.

39 See Wundt. On the popularity of Socrates in the eighteenth century see Böhm.

40 Schlegel, 195.

41 LM 15, 436 = *Anmerkungen über alte Schriftsteller.*

42 LM 8, 168, 177 = *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, nos. 63 and 64.

43 LM 8, 310–11 = *Sophokles.*

44 LM 11, 486 = *Leibniz von den ewigen Strafen*, and elsewhere.

45 LM 8, 314 = *Sophokles.*

46 LM 15, 134 = *Collectanea*

47 LM 10, 181 = *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, no. 94, and elsewhere.

48 LM 10, 170 = *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, no. 91.

49 See his *Gedanken über die Herrnhuter* (LM 14: 155–56, 160–61) and the ninth of his *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*. Note also his discussion of Diderot's *Der Tod des Sokrates* in *Das Theater des Herrn Diderot*, which can be found in volume 11 of the Petersen/Olshausen edition. See esp. 258–60, 325–29.

and *Crito* constitute the tetralogy, as Lessing himself well knew[50]. Since part of the tetralogy had been read, it is not too bold to assume that Lessing might have read the entire work. That the *Euthyphro* would never have passed through Lessing's hands is highly unlikely also given the fact that Lessing was a remarkable reader and made extensive use of literary and philosophical sources[51]. That the influence of the *Euthyphro* on *Nathan* can be argued for with only circumstantial evidence does not of course diminish the value of a parallel analysis of the structures and arguments of the two works[52].

IV

What consequences does this connection have beyond the recognition of a possible influence? By reading Lessing in the light of Plato we have certainly become more attentive to the proximity of holiness and justice. Holiness or piety is not the specific virtue of carrying out acts that please the gods, nor does it consist in adherence to ancestral tradition; holiness is virtue or goodness as such. The ring parable teaches us the Socratic lesson that the just man is by definition pious. If the gods are, as Plato and Lessing believe, necessarily good, we can rest assured – whatever attributes specific traditions may assign to the gods – that good acts will be pleasing to them. Recha cites Nathan's position «daß Ergebenheit / In Gott von unserm Wähnen über Gott / So ganz und gar nicht abhängt» (III,1,74–76). Plato's *Euthyphro* passes over into a discussion of not holiness but justice; so, too, Nathan's ring parable turns our attention away from theology and toward ethics. What is god-centered and divine gives way to humanistic considerations. Euthyphro fails to define holiness as a relationship to ancestral tradition or to the gods. Nathan avoids as much. For Nathan, like Socrates, holiness is human, not divine, therapy[53]. The first scenes of *Nathan* with Nathan's discussion of miracles, awe, and angels – sometimes considered unwieldy and superfluous – are shown to be intrinsically connected to the play's attempt to redefine the holy as what is venerable and good in human relations[54].

50 See LM 14, 254. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, III, 57–58.

51 On Lessing's voracious reading habits see Heller, 5–6. Lessing's use of sources is documented – if in the most bizarre and often trivial way – in Albrecht, who – save a handful of initial references – never got as far as *Nathan* in his attempt to show that «das Lebenselement Leszing's ist . . . der literarische Diebstahl» (Bd. 1,76).

52 If one were to find unconvincing the claim that Lessing probably read the *Euthyphro*, one would want to know how Socrates and Lessing could have arrived at such similar positions. Here I would refer the reader to Hösle's insightful analysis of cyclical structures in the history of philosophy. Socrates and Lessing occupy similar positions in the two cycles that culminate in Plato and Hegel.

53 By reading the *aporia* at the conclusion of Plato's dialogue as genuine, one might place a disclaimer on the above statement. None of Euthyphro's definitions sufficiently explains man's relationship to the gods. The *Euthyphro* could thus be said to anticipate an Aristotelean structure that becomes self-evident in the Hellenistic era: the separation of religion from ethics and the transference of the *peri theōn* doctrine to physics. One might, however, read the *aporia* in a different manner: because the gods are subordinate to holiness, i.e., to justice, ethics subsumes religion. Versényi's analysis moves in this direction.

54 See Demetz, 141 and 154. Note by the way that the discussion of miracles in *Nathan* does *not* focus on the obscure theological-historical debate (see *Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*) regarding actual miracles vis-à-vis reports of miracles in establishing faith.

The role of tradition vis-à-vis truth, of family vis-à-vis reason, is also viewed under a new light when the encounter with Socratic practices and wisdom is taken into account. Tradition in Lessing's play has often been viewed as standing in opposition to reason[55], but Nathan's various arguments imply, first, that the rational critique of tradition makes tradition itself safe to follow, and second, that family tradition has a place precisely because it is a focus of love[56]. Because tradition often contains the seeds of truth, it can be subjected to fruitful analysis and when corrected by reason can itself be left as a motivating force and a guide to human action. The critique of tradition not only makes tradition safe to follow, it allows us to tolerate diverse and seemingly competing religious traditions.

Nathan suggests that family nurtures love. Socrates, too, implies that it is natural to find love within the family. Nonetheless *Nathan der Weise* makes the clear statement that one's religious and familial origins are natural, unreflective, and must, wherever conflict arises, succumb to the primacy of reason. Nathan finally overcomes his emotional desire to appear to be Recha's natural or blood father when he recognizes that Recha's choice to view him as father in the sense of a rational guide and love-worthy model is far superior to anything he might have automatically enjoyed as a natural father. The blood thirst of the Patriarch and Nathan's desire to appear as Recha's blood father are both undercut[57]. The family is important as a center of love, a place where love is natural, but the quarreling brothers illustrate that family does not guarantee love. Nor does religion guarantee love; the rings no longer appear genuine. Only with reason is love secure. Nathan's reason, not his emotion, motivates his initial decision to adopt Recha. The other «good deeds» in *Nathan*, Saladin's freeing the Templar and the Templar's rescuing Recha, which originate from instinct and passion, are unique as well as restrictive; Saladin murders the nineteen other Crusaders, and the Templar's passions and lack of autonomy lead him quickly back into evil[58]. Characters who base their actions on instinct are unreliable, as we see again in the dispute among the brothers. One assumes that the brothers' hate, like Nathan's, could have been transformed into love had they learned from their father not just blind obedience but also reason (III,7,415–17). The dispute among the brothers must be resolved by the judge, who shares with Nathan the quality of wisdom[59]. In the light of this it is not surprising that the family situation that is *a priori* highest is not one's natural ties to one's blood relatives or to tradition in general but the rational act of establishing a family. While parent-child relations are natural, marriage is an act of freedom and consciousness[60]. The Templar, like Assad, contemplates

55 See, for example, Angress.

56 In the spirit of the Socratic dialogues and in tune with the conclusion of *Nathan* I view love and reason as interrelated. Cf. Pütz, 276.

57 Politzer, 174.

58 See Waniek, 143–50.

59 On similarities between Nathan and the judge see Atkins, 264.

60 Hegel writes insightfully: «Das Verhältnis von Kindern zu Eltern nämlich beruht auf der Einheit im Natürlichen, das Bündnis des Ehegatten und der Ehefrau dagegen muß als Ehe genommen werden, welche nicht nur aus bloß natürlicher Liebe, aus Bluts- und Naturverwandtschaft herkommt, sondern aus bewußter Neigung entspringt und dadurch der freien Sittlichkeit des selbstbewußten Willens angehört . . . Der Begriff und das Wissen von der Substantialität des ehelichen Lebens ist etwas Späteres und Tieferes als der natürliche Zusammenhang von Sohn und Mutter und macht den Beginn des Staats als der Realisation des freien, vernünftigen Wollens aus» (14:59). In *Nathan* the passage from conscious to natural bonds via the relationship of Recha and the Templar is a deepening of the

choosing to move beyond tradition by creating his own family (III,8,627–36). Nathan's adoption of Recha functions at a level of consciousness equal to his earlier marriage. Recha herself is neither compelled nor deceived into thinking of Nathan as her father; nature and the appearance of blood eventually give way to freedom and consciousness. Though *Nathan* shows us that emotions can act as catalysts for good deeds and for moments of insight, reason still has priority[61].

Nathan's struggle toward reason in his relationship with Recha is a form of holiness, a *therapeia* aimed not at divine but at human improvement. And it is holy, too, in the sense of being a kind of *hypēretikē*, the subservience of one part of the self to another, the subordination of the subrational and arbitrary to rationality and thus at one and the same time mastery of self and service to the self. Nathan's *therapeia* and *hypēretikē* are very much in line with Socrates' implicit humanization of the concept of holiness proposed by Euthyphro. Rather than denying the subrational or arguing for a split, Lessing's reason operates with regard for the demands of our desires, inclinations, and emotions, without denying them or giving way to them[62]. The ring parable does not deny the value of religion or tradition but solidifies it in its harmony with justice. Nathan's natural inclination to be a father finds genuine fulfillment in his rational fatherhood. Lessing does not underscore the dualism of natural and rational motivation. He does not sever the two parts of man; rather, he subordinates one to the other and in this way harmonizes them.

V

Beyond the detailed analysis and the questions of influence and consequence lies the final topic of the differences between the *Euthyphro* and *Nathan der Weise*. These can be broken down into three areas: those relating to differences between philosophy and literature; those that hinge on Lessing's integration of contemporary concerns; and those that underlie Lessing's change in the sequence of definitions originally presented by Euthyphro.

Although *Nathan* is clearly a drama of ideas, it includes an element of action lacking in Plato's dialogue. The focus of *Nathan* is not ideas as such but the relationship of ideas, specifically of definitions of holiness, to the ways in which humans interact. Analogous to this distinction is Socrates' rigorous demand for an enlightened definition of holiness vis-à-vis Lessing's

natural and a demonstration of Lessing's respect for it; Nathan's passage meanwhile from seemingly natural fatherhood to a conscious and freely chosen fatherhood (along with Recha's act of choosing Nathan as her father) displays the power of rationality and freedom in a form independent of marriage. This respect for the natural together with the desire to extend consciousness and freedom to other spheres should be seen in the context of the play's final portrait, in which family ties are symbolically extended into the social sphere. Family will pass over into the state either with the disruption of the family (the judge decides the dispute among the brothers) or with the elevation of the family (the mutual embraces at the end of *Nathan* could be said to symbolize the passage from irrational bonds to rational agreements). Family bonds are constituted by natural love; the unity of the state on the other hand is formed through rational laws that are known. Only through freedom and consciousness are familial, traditional, national, and religious boundaries superseded *(aufgehoben)*. *Nathan*, with its account of the passage from nature to reason, points toward such a synthesis.

61 See Whiton.

62 It is in this context that I would like to assert agreement with Angress. See also Scott-Prelorentzos.

benevolent acknowledgment that those who follow right opinion are also good. The Friar is not greatly ironized. Tradition, where it does not stand in conflict with reason and love, is quickly upheld. Although Lessing recognizes in his theoretical essays the supremacy of reason and the absolute nature of goodness, he tends in *Nathan* to finitize reason and ethics and move toward a humanism void of any metaphysical background. The stress in *Nathan* on humanity and autonomy respresents an advance over the heteronomous positions the play undercuts, but to establish the correct criteria for autonomy, one still needs *a priori* principles. It is not possible to found morals only on model human relations, one needs an idea of human relations, i.e., a philosophical structure. Lessing's embrace of humanism not only serves as an impetus to a specific dramatic action and a counterforce to otherworldliness, it can also undermine the need for philosophical structure. Plato, who exhibits in his works, including the *Euthyphro*, a fine feeling for Socratic humanism, takes the stress on good actions a step further and reflects on the grounds of goodness and the metaphysical structures of intersubjectivity. Both the *Euthyphro* and *Nathan* adopt circular structures. The circularity of *Euthyphro* upholds the need for continued reflection. The movement in *Nathan* takes us from Recha's vision of unity to its reality; this reality within the fiction is of course itself an aesthetic projection. The final scene invites the reader to make this utopia a reality beyond the fictive world[63]. On a more literal level the play's first lines introduce the themes of separation and reunion[64]; the play then ends with the silence and symbolism of physical embrace. In sum, Lessing's work is more aesthetic and less philosophical than the *Euthyphro* in the following threefold sense: it represents ideas through action; it is less rigorous in its demands for conceptual clarity, argumentation, and first principles; and it offers a symbolic illustration of the good society.

Related to Lessing's focus on human behavior is his concern with tolerance, an issue of singular importance in eighteenth-century Germany[65]. While there is much at stake for Socrates personally in his trial, from the inadequately self-conscious perspective of the Athenians very little is at stake. This of course is the irony of the *Euthyphro* and the *Apology*. From the perspective of Socrates (and Plato) it is not Socrates who is on trial but the Athenians and their religious and moral tradition. Lessing and his contemporaries were aware of religious tension and conflict within a single city or state in a way that the Athenians were not. The *Euthyphro* discusses conflicting deities within one tradition; *Nathan* focuses on conflicting traditions as a whole. Supplementing Lessing's awareness of direct religious conflict and the resulting stress in his writings on tolerance is his enlightenment vision of harmony. The final scene presents us with a unity beyond religious and national boundaries. The only disquieting element is the background knowledge that the religious wars are resuming (V,2,71–73). Socrates' conflict is more tragic. Though the *Euthyphro* does not portray Socrates' tragedy, it points toward the irreconcilable conflict between the traditional, conflict-ridden, and self-cancelling religion of Athens and Socrates' strict moral consciousness. While Lessing's play is directly optimistic, Socrates' tragedy is optimistic only when one recognizes that though the good man does not survive, he continues to do the good – even when he knows that he will suffer for it. It is an optimism deeply

63 See Pütz, 251.

64 See Fowler, 262–63.

65 See Schultze, esp. 11–23.

shaded by tragedy. Even Nathan's Job experience is not tragic in this way: not only does Nathan survive but his suffering can hardly be seen as the necessary consequence of his virtue[66].

Finally, Euthyphro's last definition of holiness as service to the gods is the first definition introduced in *Nathan*. By privileging Nathan's critique of a concept of holiness that would have us direct our ministry beyond the present, Lessing emphasizes – even more than Socrates – the importance of humanity vis-à-vis transcendence. Plato tells us that the *gods* are perfect and do not need our service. Lessing stresses that *man* is imperfect and does need our service. In the parable, too, Nathan stresses human relations. The brothers, not the gods, stand in conflict, and the solution to their quarrels has little to do with accepted notions of piety. The focus on humanity also applies to the play as a whole. Where Socrates speaks of conflicting deities, Lessing portrays armies that fight one another in the name of tradition. Socrates arrives at conclusions similar to Nathan's but by way of a discussion of the gods; Lessing's play and the questions it raises have less to do with religion as such than with humanity, and in this spirit the play has justly been considered the prologue to German *Klassik*.

VI

My essay has tried to shed new light on *Nathan* and the questions it raises by way of a comparison with Plato's *Euthyphro*. The play's didactic elements, the role of familial relations, the association of education with dialogue, the relationship between what is god-loved and what holy, the apparent tension between tradition and reason, the synthesis of comic and tragic structures, and above all the suggestion that an inquiry into the nature of divinity becomes a study of (human) virtue, all take on new dimensions in the context of the comparison with Plato. Plato's and Lessing's views on holiness or right reverence, on what is awesome and venerable, wholesome and prerequisite for the excellent life, share much in common. The common essence allowed us to explicate the nature of holiness, in particular its relation to justice; the differences allowed us to show how Lessing reformulated Plato's definitions to create his own unique literary work.

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66 See Fittbogen, 168.

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