Lessing and the Consequences

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In memoriam
Gisbert Ter-Nedden
(1940–2014)

Contents

Part I

Writings

The Prodigal Son

In December 1747, shocking news reaches Johann Gottfried Lessing, scholar-clergyman and pastor in Kamenz: Gotthold, his highly gifted, promising son, is said to be neglecting his studies in Leipzig, consorting instead with actors and freethinkers. In 1741, after having attended Latin school in town up to the age of twelve, he had left his parental home for scholarly training at the 'Prince's School' of St Afra in Meissen, which was to prepare him for the study of theology. According to the school inspector's verdict, he proved to be "a good boy, though inclined to mockery" (RD, 10), and extraordinarily perceptive, as the Rector of the school remarked to his father: "This is a horse which needs a double ration of fodder. The lessons that are too hard for the others seem child's play for him. We hardly know what to do with him anymore" (KGL 1, 40).

Already during his years at St Afra, where religion and the classical languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew) were the

R. Vellusig, *Lessing and the Consequences*,
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principal subjects taught, the son had pursued his own interests, received private lessons in philosophy and natural sciences from the mathematician Klimm, and made use of the holdings of the library to immerse himself, of his own accord, in ancient literature. He only returned to Kamenz twice during this time. In 1746, he had left the monastic precinct of the Prince's School to enrol at Leipzig University as a student of theology, the pursuit of which, however, he evidently did not take too seriously. To the horror of his pious parents, he had come into contact with Caroline Neuber and her theatre instead.

When the parents are informed by a well-meaning friend that their son has shared his Christmas cake from home "with a number of actors, accompanied by a bottle of wine", the mother tearfully declares her child "lost to this life and to eternity" (KGL 1, 73). The father takes drastic measures. Under the pretext that the mother is on her deathbed, he brings their son home: "On receipt of this, take the mail coach at once and come home. Your mother is mortally ill and wishes to speak to you before she dies" (B 11/1, 10). Half frozen, the prodigal returns home; a confrontation ensues. It does not change Lessing's mind, however: In the autumn of 1748, he will give up his studies for good and follow his step-cousin, journalist and editor Johann Christlob Mylius, to Berlin, there to earn his living as a freelance writer and make a name for himself as a journalist.

The story of the prodigal's return is more than anecdotal; it gives a clear impression of the social and cultural milieu into which Lessing was born. Lessing is one of a number of pastor's sons turned poets. His first biographer, Karl Lessing, recounts that his brother "was instructed to pray as soon as he could babble" (KGL 1, 27). His first religious education was provided by his father: "As early as in his fourth and fifth year, he already knew what, why and how to believe" (KGL 1, 27). In his parental home, Lessing

was faced with the traditional Protestant hostility towards the theatre; his father, far from allowing him to participate in the performances of the Kamenz school theatre, would intervene against them. As a learned man, he would have appreciated it had his son pursued an academic career after dropping theology – what he had no understanding for, in contrast, was his son's preference for the theatre.

When Johann Gottfried Lessing had studied philosophy and theology in Wittenberg, university as an institution had still been the centre of literary culture, and the world of books had been the exclusive domain of academically educated scholars. In Leipzig, however, his son was not only introduced to the theatre and the classics of modern drama, Molière's comedies and Voltaire's tragedies – the Saxon metropolis also offered him an opportunity to escape from the narrow world of academic scholarship and tap into the abundance of modern literary culture. Leipzig was the hotspot of printing in Germany, and therefore of the medium that turned out to be the actual driving force behind the process of cultural revolution in the 18th century already referred to by contemporaries as the Enlightenment.

Leipzig is where Zedler's *Complete Universal Lexicon* (1731–54) was published, a 64-volume compendium of "all the sciences and arts", which turned the idea that scholarship consists simply in knowing what is written down in books into a media-historical anachronism. Leipzig is where the German translation of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam 1695/97) came out, a unique lexicon which, rather than collect established facts, subjected traditional book-learning to a critical review in countless, endless footnotes. None other than the renowned literary reformer Johann Christoph Gottsched was responsible for this translation, although he did feel compelled to soften Bayle's criticism of

scholarly tradition by providing the book "with annotations, especially for offensive passages".

At Leipzig University, everyday life was very different. The scholars Lessing encountered were traditional: Their means of knowledge – their proficiency in classical languages, mastery of rhetorical techniques, knowing all about things written in books – dominated over the purpose of knowledge. Lessing found this practice of academic scholarship problematic, which explains the paradox of the most learned among the 18th-century German poets rejecting his own erudition with such vehemence: "I am not learned – I have never intended to be learned – I would not want to be learned, even if a dream would make this possible" (B 10, 240), as he put it in an often-quoted note from his unpublished writings.

At St Afra, Lessing had found a mentor in Klimm, who made fun of his colleagues' pedantry and showed him a way out of the narrowness of traditional book-learning. In Leipzig, it was the mathematician Abraham Gottlieb Kästner who made a profound impression on him. Lessing attended his colloquium on philosophical disputation, and Kästner proffered advice and assistance during his work on the comedy *The Young Scholar* (*Der junge Gelehrte*). It was performed with great success on Caroline Neuber's stage in January 1748 – just before Lessing's father tricked his prodigal son, who had already seemed lost, into returning home.

The Young Scholar

Lessing gave his parents an account of the reasons that drew him to the theatre. The letters he writes from Berlin in the first half of 1749 are impressive in the candour with which he judges himself and the determination with which he stands up for himself. In the letter to his mother, he portrays himself as a young scholar who had tried to find "his happiness in books", but whose eyes were opened in Leipzig:

> Shall I say fortunately for me, or unfortunately? The future will show. I came to realise that, while books might well make me learned, they would never make me a human being. I ventured out of my chamber to mingle with my peers. Good God! what a disparity was brought home to me, between me and the others. A boorish diffidence, uncouth and undeveloped physique, total ignorance of manners and social life, and a truculent expression which others interpreted as contemptuous: those were the good

R. Vellusig, *Lessing and the Consequences*,
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> qualities that remained after honest self-judgement. I felt a shame I had never felt before. And the effect of it was a firm resolution to improve myself in this regard, whatever the cost. (Jan 20, 1749; B 11/1, 15)

The figure of Faust in his study – "I've studied now, alas!" – is, as it were, already prefigured here: The young scholar, who knows nothing but the world of books, is forced to realise how awkwardly and clumsily he moves among actual people – a nuisance to himself and others, who interpret his uncouthness as contempt. Lessing learns "how to dance, to fence, to vault", and goes on to set himself the task of "also learning how to live" (B 11/1, 15–16). This he learns in social intercourse and with the help of the mirror the dramatic stage holds up to him: "I got to know myself, and ever since, I have certainly ridiculed and mocked no one more than myself" (B 11/1, 16).

Ridicule and self-mockery – the comedy which caused a stir in Leipzig and made Lessing the talk of the town in Kamenz may be regarded as following this motto. It reveals something of the bitterness not unfamiliar to Lessing, which is personified throughout his literary oeuvre in the character of the misanthrope. Traces of this misanthropy are also evident in the preface to the third volume of his *Writings* (*Schrifften*) from 1754, in which Lessing's comedy is first published. In it, he says:

> I must confess, regardless of the danger of being laughed at, that among all the works of wit, comedy is the first I ventured on. Already during the years when I only knew people from books – enviable who never gets to know them more closely! –, I was occupied by the imitations of fools whose existence meant nothing to me. Theophrastus, Plautus and Terence were my world, which I studied at leisure in the narrow confines of

> a monastic school. – How I wish I could have these years back; the only ones during which I have had a happy life. (B 3, 154)

"Vermin" is what he calls the "fools" amongst whom he has grown up and against whom he now aims his "satirical weapons" in *The Young Scholar* (B 3, 156). Not excluding himself: In his first comedy, the experience of his socialisation into literary culture serves as a substrate for laughter and mockery, not least about himself.

Like many a conventional comedy, *The Young Scholar* is about the comic complications that a young couple, Valer and Juliane, have to brave before they can finally get together. And just like in every romantic comedy, they have to assert themselves against parents and rivals. However, the focus of Lessing's play is peculiarly shifted: It is on the comic figure of the young scholar Damis, who only becomes the lovers' antagonist because his father, the merchant Chrysander, wants to marry him to his ward Juliane in order to get his hands on her fortune, which a lawsuit is promising her, and because the young scholar gets it into his head to suffer an exemplary scholar's fate and make himself deliberately unhappy by way of marriage to "a perfect devil of a wife" (I/6; B 1, 159).

The dramatic plot develops from the colliding interests of the characters involved. The merchant is all out for the money, the young scholar for glory and fame; the naïve foster daughter, out of obedience and loyalty to her foster father, is prepared to sacrifice her own happiness; Valer, who loves her, is collaborating with the maid Lisette on a letter intrigue to make the girl appear penniless and therefore unattractive as a bride. While the father is waiting for news about the lawsuit he intends to bring on behalf of his ward, to see whether it promises success, the son is waiting for news from Berlin: He has participated in

a competition at the Prussian Academy of Sciences and has submitted a treatise on the Monadology, which, he hopes, is to bring him honour and recognition.

Damis mimics the lifestyle of a scholar: He lives according to the examples he reads about (cf. I/6; B 1, 156), making a show of being pensive, absent-minded and removed from the ordinary hustle and bustle (cf. III/7; B 1, 213), flaunting his Latinity and his comprehensive erudition, being rude when interacting with others, and showing nothing but contempt for the uneducated – who, in their turn, see nothing in him but a scholarly fool.

The play bears all the hallmarks of a satirical comedy, and yet it already hints at the path Lessing will take in his dramas. Damis does not merely embody a certain social defect which, being part of the game, does not warrant an explanation; his uncouth behaviour and foolishness do have a reason: Damis is a *young* scholar. His friend Valer, who has "laid his books aside", having "had the notion put into his head that one must give oneself the last finish by social intercourse and knowledge of the world" (II/12; B 1, 193), predicts that, "when you have more sense, you will repent of your follies":

> With your years, your body cannot yet be full-grown, and you think, nevertheless, that your mind has already attained its highest possible perfection? I should consider him my enemy who would deny me the privilege of increasing my intelligence day by day. (III/7; B 1, 214)

This is the central motif of the play in a nutshell. The Young Scholar's soul has not yet "attained its highest possible perfection", as the 1767 version will put it (B 1, 1074). Therefore, as Valer points out, it "takes some cruelty to make fun of such a pitiful fool" (III/7; B 1, 215). Valer defends the man against his own uncouthness,

thus proving himself a true friend to the eponymous hero – just like another well-meaning friend in Berlin, who has held back Damis' treatise in order to protect him from making a fool of himself with it.

Damis and Valer are the first instance of a constellation that will turn up again as a blueprint for Lessing's comedies: the friendship between the misanthrope Alceste and the philanthropist Philinte from Molière's *Misanthrope*. Molière's comedy ends with Alceste's exile from society; Lessing's misanthrope Damis flees into the world with a curse: "Oh, ye stupid Germans! [. . .] I will leave my thankless fatherland" (III/15; B 1, 232) – which gives him the chance to acquire the worldliness that is expressed in Lessing's own wish of "learning how to live".

"Years know more than books," says an English proverb that Lessing once noted down (B 10, 658). It could also be a preface to the play about the Young Scholar, which bids farewell to a form of book-learning that has become obsolete in the age of periodicals and encyclopaedias, and which serves Lessing as a medium for reflecting on his personal liberation.

Prudent Doubt

In the great letter of justification Lessing sends to his father in late May 1749, he strikes religio-philosophical tones. To his mother, he had described the acknowledgement of his own shortcomings as an experience of existential crisis that would eventually turn out for the better or worse; in his letter to the learned theologian, he now defends his chosen way of life as the path of 'prudent doubt':

> Time will show whether I have respect for my parents, firmness in faith, and morals guiding my way of life. Time will show whether he is a better Christian who memorises and regurgitates the principles of Christian doctrine, who goes to church and participates in all the customs because they are the conventional thing to do; or he who has had prudent doubts (*klüglich gezweifelt*) and who, by the path of investigation, has arrived at conviction, or at least strives to do so. The Christian religion is not something one should simply accept from one's parents in good

R. Vellusig, *Lessing and the Consequences*,
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> faith. [. . .] As long as I do not see that one of the foremost commandments of Christianity, to *love thy enemy*, is better observed, I shall doubt whether those really are Christians who claim to be. (May 30, 1749; B 11/1, 26)

The letters to his parents formulate a resolution that Lessing will also rephrase shortly afterwards as a good wish for his younger brother Theophilus: that he may follow his "inner calling" and live the way he will eventually "wish that he had lived" (Feb 8, 1751; B 11/1, 34). Lessing scholarship has expressed doubts about Lessing having really pursued such an idea, arguing that his career paths are too erratic, his intellectual interests too diverse and disparate, and his life choices too much left to chance (cf. FV, 15). The concept of a continuous personal development, in the way that the 'Goethe generation' will pursue it, does not seem to figure in Lessing's biography (cf. HBN, 3–4) – but appearances are deceptive: The questions and issues that were to occupy him throughout his life, and to shape not only his way of thinking, are already clearly expressed in his letters to his parents. The question about the truth of religious tradition and a way of life accordant with this truth was to become the leitmotif of Lessing's life.

Lessing is one of the founders of the modern religion of intellectuals, poets and philosophers, who have detached themselves from the dogmas and rituals of an institutionalised church, claiming for themselves the right to interpret human life in an authentic and wholesome way. In the context of the controversy surrounding Lessing's edition of the biblical-critical fragments of the Hebraist Hermann Samuel Reimarus, Lessing will reject the idea of having to commit to a specific dogma as an intellectual imposition, asserting himself against his rival Goeze, head pastor

of Hamburg, both confidently and polemically as a "lover of theology":

> I am a lover of theology and not a theologian. I am not committed to any one dogma. Nothing obliges me to speak any language other than my own. I pity all honest men who are not so fortunate as to be able to say this about themselves. But such honest men should not try to tie the same noose around the horns of other honest men with which *they* are tied to the manger. If they do, my pity will cease; and I can do nothing but despise them. (B 9, 57–58)

The insistence on his own language is Lessing's answer to the thoughtlessness with which "nominal Christians" (B 9, 196) keep regurgitating the "statutes and formulas" of their religion. This corresponds to the courage to use reason publicly in religious matters, which Kant will declare as the "motto of Enlightenment" (IK 2, 53–54).

Lessing means it. It is one of his early certainties that the truth of religion not only proves its worth in lived practice, but that "firmness in faith" can only be considered true religious conviction if it prompts the right 'moral conduct'. "What good is it to believe rightly if you live wrongly?" (B 1, 941), he asks in the fragment *Thoughts on the Moravian Brethren* (*Gedanken über die Herrnhuter*, 1750). The question culminates in the insight that we are "angels, judging by our knowledge", but "devils, judging by our life" (B 1, 942). The pastor's son, who has fallen among actors and playwrights, claims for himself nothing more nor less than the right and duty to decide on his religion himself, and to take the path of 'prudent doubt', which Descartes had characterised in his *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641) as the willingness to methodically question all certainties.

A didactic poem entitled *On Religion* (*Die Religion*), which was probably written around the same time as the letter to his father, spells this out. The title indicates that Lessing is not talking about the "one and only true religion" (i.e., Christianity), but that it is "religion as such" (B 2, 264) he has in view. The unfinished poem imitates a soliloquy "on a lonely day of discontent" (B 2, 264). It methodically traverses the "labyrinths of self-knowledge", following the idea that self-knowledge has "always been the nearest", as well as the "safest", path to religion (B 2, 264).

The first (and only) canto is dedicated to the doubts "that can be raised against everything divine from seeing the inner and outer misery of mankind" (B 2, 264). The conclusion is sobering: We are created neither for truth nor for virtue. Human knowledge is finite, our ability to tell the future is limited; we do know what is good but are unable to act accordingly because, barely awakened to consciousness, we are guided by egocentric impulses.

Lessing translates the question about the truth of religion into a question about the right way of life, the success or failure of which is accessible to individual, subjective experience. Religion responds to an existential need for orientation by interpreting the individual human life from an absolute point of view, but it does not have the status of knowledge, neither in a historical nor in a metaphysical sense. Taking the Bible literally and believing to hear God in its wording (cf. B 2, 268), is naïve and self-deceived.

The young poet makes himself the spokesman of radical religious criticism, but he does so in the service of the religion's self-enlightenment. In what way the "misery depicted [in the first canto] must itself become the guide to religion" (B 2, 265), as announced in the introductory note, is left open by the poem – though it does already hint at the direction in which the solution is to be sought.

Lessing will find it in his treatise on *The Education of the Human Race* (*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*): It is founded on the acknowledgement that the human heart is "black" and that it would be "blasphemy" to see the divinity of creation realised in it (B 2, 276). The "selfishness of the human heart" (§ 80; B 10, 95) is the anthropological legacy that stands in the way of its own happiness; it is therefore in need of "purification" (B 2, 45) in order to be able to "love virtue for its own sake" (§ 80; B 10, 95). This is the conclusion Lessing will draw at the end of his life.

Both here, in this early didactic poem, and there, in the *Education* treatise, the question at stake is the question of theodicy, i.e. the vindication of God in light of the evident evils in the world, a term coined by Leibniz. The thorn in the young scholar's flesh is not physical but moral evil: the realisation of being a sinner while despising sin (cf. B 2, 276): "Such forceful desire, and yet such utter impotence, / Can a God imbue one soul with both at the same time?" (B 2, 270). This bitter question, however, does not mark the end of his path of reflection but its turning point. The young poet restrains himself, realising that his curious gaze into the abyss of the soul only increases the evil he seeks to control: "I am turning too black for me to regard myself any longer, / And curiosity gives way to melancholy horror" (B 2, 275). Methodical doubt must not lose its way in the labyrinth of self-knowledge if it is to point the way to religion. In a review written in 1753, Lessing delineates this problem very clearly:

> Man's noblest occupation is man. However, one can deal with this subject in a twofold way: Either one considers man individually, or generally. In the first case, the statement that it is the noblest occupation can hardly be made. Knowing man individually, what do we know? Fools and

> villains. And what use is this knowledge? Either to strengthen us in folly and villainy, or to make us melancholy about the worthlessness of our fellow creatures. In the case of the consideration of man in general, it is quite different. Regarded in general, he reveals greatness and his divine origin. (B 2, 474–75)

The "consideration of man in general" places individual human life in the horizon of the species, and the species within an absolute horizon. In his *Theodicy*, Leibniz had attempted to consider creation from such a standpoint; Lessing follows him in this: Humans are "moral beings", capable of perceiving perfections and acting in accordance with them. This is a conviction we already find formulated in the early fragment *The Christianity of Reason* (*Das Christentum der Vernunft*, 1752/53), from which Lessing derives the maxim individual human life has to follow if it wants to fulfil its destiny. It reads: "*Act in accordance with your individual perfections*" (B 2, 407) – become the best version of yourself.

The person himself is regarded as a process, with adolescence being a necessary phase of this process. Education takes time. Even as a twenty-year-old, Lessing already knows this: "the future will show", "time will show". This conviction gives him the confidence to entrust himself to this process.

Theology of Laughter

Methodically doubting all certainties, questioning the truth of religion, searching for his own vocation, and turning to the theatre – all that is part of Lessing's resolution to learn how to live and act in accordance with his own perfections.

One of these perfections is an unbounded curiosity that will not be limited to any particular science. In a preface to one of his unfinished projects, he describes himself as a "learned vagabond" who, "unable to give a fixed direction to his intellect", roams "through all fields of scholarship" without settling down permanently in any one of them. And in doing so, he comes across "treasures" which "a happy accident along the way, more often the byway than the highway, allows him to find" (B 5/1, 449). To his father, he admits openly that he has "not the slightest desire" to become "the slave of an office" (Apr 3, 1760; B 11/1, 346); the fact that "being professorial" is not

R. Vellusig, *Lessing and the Consequences*,
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Lessing's cup of tea is equally obvious to his brother Karl (Mar 18, 1775; B 11/2, 706).

Financial worries soon manifest themselves as a downside of this refusal to pursue an academic career. In Leipzig, Lessing stands surety for the Neuber troupe and is left with their debts when some actors make off; in Wittenberg, where he obtains his master's degree in 1752 with a thesis on the Spanish physician Juan Huarte (1529–88), he has to use his scholarships to clear his debts.

In Berlin, the world of modern periodicals becomes his intellectual and professional habitat. Lessing writes reviews, mainly for the *Privileged Berlin Newspaper* (*Berlinische Privilegierte Zeitung*), whose editorial office had been taken over by his cousin Mylius, and quickly establishes himself as a critic. "A new critic has arisen here," the philosopher Johann Georg Sulzer reports to Zurich in 1751, writing to his Swiss mentor, Johann Jakob Bodmer (RD, 42). Lessing is intent on making a name for himself. In retrospect, his Berlin years will appear to him as a time "in which curiosity and ambition had every power over me" (May 7, 1780; B 12, 326).

In October 1749, he and Mylius jointly launched their *Contributions to the History and Improvement of the Theatre* (*Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*), an attempt to survey the entire spectrum of European dramatic literature and make it accessible to the public via translations. The *Contributions* are not only the first German theatrical periodical, but also Lessing's first project in which he addresses the topic of "the right and wrong ways of imitation" (B 1, 728). He does this programmatically in a treatise on the Roman comic playwright Plautus, whose *Captivi* are translated and praised by Lessing as "the most beautiful play" that "has ever been seen on a stage" (B 1, 766). This treatise gives Lessing the opportunity to draft a moral philosophy of laughter, which understands