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Hemsterhuis and Mediation

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs Hemsterhuis as a thinker of mediation, as a philosopher who concentrates his attention on the organic dimension of existence, on the organs that grant us access to the world, while simultaneously keeping us at a distance from it. Hemsterhuis elaborates this thought of “organic mediation” across his letters and dialogues, and, in this paper, I seek to provide a more detailed reconstruction of how mediation operates throughout his work, responding to commentators who see in his thought an aversion to such a mediated condition and a wish to transcend it in a presumed union with God.

Keywords: organs, unity, division, media, subject, object

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Aufsatz stellt Hemsterhuis als Denker der Vermittlung dar, als ein Philosoph, der seine Aufmerksamkeit auf die organische Dimension der Existenz richtet, d.h. auf die Organe, die uns Zugang zur Welt gewähren und uns gleichzeitig auf Distanz zu ihr halten. Hemsterhuis arbeitet diesen Gedanken der „organischen Vermittlung“ in seinen Briefen und Dialogen aus. Es soll in diesem Aufsatz versucht werden, eine detailliertere Rekonstruktion der Funktionsweise der Vermittlung im Werk von Hemsterhuis zu liefern und auf Kommentatoren zu reagieren, die in seinem Denken eine Abneigung gegen einen solchen vermittelten Zustand und den Wunsch sehen, diesen in einer vermeintlichen Vereinigung mit Gott zu transzendieren.

Schlüsselwörter: Organe, Einheit, Teilung, Medien, Subjekt, Objekt

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1. Introduction

Hemsterhuis is a thinker of mediation. He concentrates his attention on the organic dimension of existence, on the organs that grant us access to the world, while simultaneously keeping us at a distance from it. Hemsterhuis elaborates this thought of “organic mediation” across his letters and dialogues, and in what follows I seek to provide a more detailed reconstruction of how mediation operates throughout his work, responding to commentators who see in his thought an aversion to such a mediated condition and a wish to transcend it in a presumed union with God.

Emphasizing mediation in Hemsterhuis is nothing particularly new, in a sense, mediation has operated in the background of his German reception from its outset, in somewhat latent form with Jacobi, and coming into full fruition with Novalis.¹ A quick sketch of the parameters of this reception will make clear some of the stakes that a thinking of mediation has enjoyed in the ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism alike.

In the *Pantheismusstreit* of the 1780s, Friedrich Jacobi draws on Hemsterhuis the most, treating him as a presumed interpreter of Spinoza and publishing their letters on the matter. The issue rests on whether God is identical with nature, which is to say, with whether God is present (immediately) as nature, or only reachable (mediately) through a transcendence of nature.² At times, Jacobi seems more interested in getting Hemsterhuis’s stamp of approval for his own recasting of Spinoza than for anything the latter would have to say for his own self, or on any topic other than the Spinozism / pantheism / atheism constellation. Indeed, Hemsterhuis himself seems a little perplexed over the effort to shoehorn him into a position on Spinoza, writing to Amalie Gallitzin on 11 April 1786:

I am very glad that Jacobi approves of me in regard to a few articles concerning the Divinity; however, if he believes me to be a Spinozist on any article whatsoever, it does not pain me, but, certainly, one of us is mistaken. Spinoza’s philosophy, and I dare say the same of my poor,

¹ Herder introduces Hemsterhuis to his German readership in 1781 with his translation of Hemsterhuis’s *Letter on Desires* accompanied by his own musings on the topics raised in the parallel-running essay “Love and Selfhood”. As the title suggest, love as the highest mediation between individuals and intersubjectivity are the points of Herder’s interest. See J. G. Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, vol. 15 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1888), 304–26.

² See F. H. Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel “Allwill,”* ed and trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 204–15 (the ‘Letter to Hemsterhuis’). Hemsterhuis’s response (the *Letter on Atheism*) was published by Jacobi as a supplement to the second edition of the *Spinoza-Letters* but is not included in the English translation of the *Spinoza-Letters*.

small one, is a totality, an edifice from which one cannot remove a stone without the whole thing collapsing. Now, if I know Spinoza, it seems to me that there are not two philosophies in the world that are more diametrically opposed. For him the Divinity is identified with the Universe and for me the distance between the two is infinite. (*B* 7.29)³

I hope to show in what follows that this “infinite distance” from immanence is not an embrace of transcendence (the opposite of immanence), but instead of organically mediated relation (something “infinitely” distinct from the immanence / transcendence opposition); for now, it is enough to note that Hemsterhuis rejects the attempt to identify God and nature.

If Jacobi was Hemsterhuis’s champion at the end of the Enlightenment, a decade later among the Romantics it was Novalis who was most inspired by him, and particularly with regard to the organic dimension of his thought.⁴ In 1797, Novalis compiled his *Hemsterhuis Studies*, something of a commonplace book, with extensive quotations from Hemsterhuis, copied from the letters and dialogues (including the *Letter on Atheism*), intermixed with commentary and extrapolations from Novalis.⁵ Throughout the entries there is no greater concern for Novalis than mediation and organicity.⁶ He hypothesizes that our organs could be refined to the point of picking up the most distant stimulus⁷, wonders if every productive finite being would thus

³ Translated by van Sluis and Whistler. For citations of Hemsterhuis’s work, see the explanation in the editor’s introduction to this special issue.

⁴ In his book, *Transplanting the Metaphysical Organ: German Romanticism between Leibniz and Marx* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), Leif Weatherby presents Novalis as a key figure in the history of “organology” that he traces, writing that “Novalis’s Romanticism is organology,” and observing that it is in part derived from “borrowings from Franz Hemsterhuis” (128–9), citing his influence on Novalis’s considerations of systematicity: “The mutable nature of organs – their possibilities of development – meant that the categorical system could not be fixed, and that syntheses of cognition were historical” (28). For his part, Schelling cites Hemsterhuis’s *Alexis* on the causes of the tilting of the earth’s axis—see F. W. J. Schelling, *Werke: Erster Ergänzungsband*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1956), 542–3.

⁵ See “Hemsterhuis Studien,” in Novalis, *Schriften*, vol. 2, eds. Richard Samuel with Hans-Joachim Mähl and Gerhard Schulz (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1981), 360–78.

⁶ Dalia Nassar elegantly highlights the important and transformative role of Hemsterhuis in Novalis’s thinking, in *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795–1804* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 39–44. Hemsterhuis provided Novalis with “a way to think of the relational character of the self” (40), through him Novalis “begins to develop a communal consciousness” (41), and these ideas, Nassar claims, become central to Novalis’s “understanding of the absolute as inherently relational and developmental” (43). Hemsterhuis provides Novalis with the keys to what we might term a relational ontology: “It was in his studies of Hemsterhuis that he [Novalis] began to think of being in terms of relations and to emphasize the relational character of the self, both on the moral and the epistemological levels” (77).

⁷ Novalis, *Schriften*, 2.377.

be a “tool” or “organ” themselves⁸, and whether such organs would not actually work reciprocally⁹, connecting us to the world as much as the world to us (implicitly raising the question of who owns an organ?). While scholars have convincingly traced the transformation in Novalis effected by his encounter with Hemsterhuis’s ideas of organicity, I am aiming for something of the converse, and seek to sketch the idea of mediation operating in Hemsterhuis that would have attracted Novalis’s attention in the first place.¹⁰ What Jacobi and Novalis show is that mediation must be understood ontologically as constitutive of both world and individual.

To speak of an organic mediation of existence thus means: we do not receive the world “in itself” but as it appears to us through our organs, we do not engage the world immediately, but are always deferring, due to our organs. Because organs are apertures of relation, organic mediation means nothing exists independently, but is always found in relation. Mediation operates throughout Hemsterhuis’s thinking, through its every aspect. But a consequence of such mediation is that we are always at a remove from things, even when we wish to be united. Mediation means there is no chance for an utter union with the universe or the divine. Commentators have noted moments of seeming longing for such union in Hemsterhuis and I am not denying that these exist.¹¹ But it is my contention here that Hemsterhuis’s thinking of mediation runs so deep as to require us to rethink union in the first place. In what follows I sketch four areas of mediation in Hemsterhuis’s thinking: (i) the mediation of our organs, such that we never receive the world

⁸ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 372-3.

¹⁰ Most recently, Nassar and Weatherby have shown Hemsterhuis’s importance for Novalis, and Novalis’s importance for thinking the organ, respectively, in the works cited above. I believe what I propose here complements both of their approaches (granting the import that Hemsterhuis places on the discipline and training of organs makes them more than merely passive, which Nassar seems to suggest [*Romantic Absolute*, 42–3], and that, as I hope to show, Hemsterhuis’s general demeanor towards organically mediated existence is not a “pessimistic attitude – ultimately Pauline,” as Weatherby seems to accept [*Transplanting*, 241]).

¹¹ See, for example, Jason Gaiger, who finds in moments of Hemsterhuis’s position “a deepening hostility or aversion towards the temporal dimension of experience.” “The Temporality of Sculptural Viewing in Hemsterhuis’s ‘Lettre sur la sculpture,’” in *Sculpture Journal* 27: 2 (2018), 246. Daniel Whistler, editor and translator of Hemsterhuis’s writings in English, also observes that “an objection to mediation” would be “something of a constant in Hemsterhuis’s philosophy.” “Forms of Philosophical Creativity: An Introduction to Hemsterhuis’s Dialogues” in François Hemsterhuis, *Early Writings, 1762–1773*, ed. and trans. Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 11. I do not take myself necessarily to be disagreeing with either of these positions, so much as hoping to show a different facet or a different tone, one more accepting, in Hemsterhuis’s thinking of mediation.

“in itself,” (ii) the mediation of time, such that we never get the world all at once, (iii) the mediation of morality, whereby the self is always understood through others, and (iv) the mediation of world, such that what we call our own world is just a few facets of an infinitely grander universe and nothing independently existing on its own. I conclude by taking up this question of a longing for union in Hemsterhuis’s thought and argue that Hemsterhuis remains undeterredly in allegiance with our organic, mediated condition.

2. The Mediation of Organs

Sense organs are typically conceived of as mediators between a subject equipped with them and an object to be engaged: subject – organ – object. An organ is a “means,” as Hemsterhuis defines it, “that which can get something done in some way” (*EE* 2.74). Usually, for such models, the object perceived remains the same across whatever organ is used to perceive it. The organ is viewed as interchangeable and detached from both the subject who employs it and the object it would relay. In such a scheme, the subject and the object are disconnected from and indifferent to each other and thus stand in need of a mediating third party. Hemsterhuis avoids the subject-object dualism lingering in such a conception of mediation, along with the idea that media would be a separate third term between these two. Media is nothing that intervenes between two otherwise self-enclosed entities (subject / object). Mediation transforms those entities themselves.

From the beginning, then, our knowledge of the world is composed of ideas conveyed to us by our sense organs: “I wish it were the case that the ideas we have of things were the things themselves, then, at least, we would never fall into error. But this is impossible, because the things that are outside us cannot get into our heads; and therefore, media and organs are necessary for us to have some sensation of their existence” (*EE* 2.49). The outer world could not otherwise matter to us or be experienced by us than through these organs. But organs alone are not enough, they also require their respective media, as Hemsterhuis here notes, further complicating the typical, triune model of subject – organ – object.

Such a model is untenable for understanding how inherently organic and organized existence is. On Hemsterhuis’s model, an entity or “essence” operates through a medium (or “vehicle”) in order to reach us by means of our sense organs. We see as much in the myth Diotima tells of the creation of the human by Prometheus as recounted by Socrates in the dialogue *Simon*:

Prometheus made an infinite number of openings or apertures through which actions, perceptions, sensations or ideas of infinitely different

kinds were to enter, and for each opening he made a kind of tube which was analogous to the kind of perception or sensation that it was to receive and transmit [...]. To receive the actions of essences as visible, he made the tube whose end is the organ that we call the eye which is analogous to light – the only vehicle which can communicate the actions of an essence as visible. To receive the actions of essences as audible, he made the tube whose end is the organ that we call the ear, which is analogous to the air – the only vehicle that can communicate the actions of an essence as audible; and so on to infinity. (*EE* 2.114)

Organs are thus conduits for transmitting sensations. Each organ is keyed to a specific kind of object and operates by means of a particular medium or “vehicle” for the transmission of sensation to that organ (the eye to the visible by means of light, for example). Infinite kinds of sensations and ideas enter each organ. Prometheus equipped the human with an infinite number of such organs.

Each of these organs brings a particular infinitude of “sensation” to the individual, they are avenues for the approach of a particular facet of the world (visual, audible, etc.). But organs do not operate on their own, they also need a “vehicle” or medium for the transmission of its content. If there is no light (the medium for vision), then we cannot see the objects around us. Indeed, the medium is so necessary to organs that Hemsterhuis basically identifies them, as here in the *Letter on Man and his Relations*, where he writes, “I dub organ not only the eye that sees, but also the light reflected from the object; not only the ear that hears, but also the air set in oscillation by the movement of the object” (*EE* 1.89). The medium that enables the organ is actually a part of, or an extension of, the organ itself. What this means is that our bodies do not stop at our skin. If the organs indissociably bring with them their respective media, and if my body is composed of those organs, then my body is likewise to be understood as those media. Not just the eye is a part of my body, but the light by which I see is likewise an “organ” of my body. Organs and media are thus so many funnels of worldly sensation. The organ and the medium drag me out of my skin and expose me to the world.

The medium extends the organ, and there is something about organs that welcomes such extension. If the organ brings world, then whatever assists with that is likewise serving an organic function. There is a kind of extensibility by prosthesis here. Hemsterhuis seems to affirm as much in a discussion of the soul’s relation to the body, where he notes that “everything that is homogeneous to these organs becomes an organ for it” (*EE* 1.96). Whatever appears to the organ within the medium that surrounds it can be appropriated for use as an extension of the organ or as prosthesis. We see this

in a comment he makes regarding the soul's "velleity" (its directedness, its existence understood as intentional, as a willing): "when taking up a stick, the effect of the soul's velleity is manifested just as much at the end of the stick as at the end of one's fingers" (*EE* 1.81). The body does not end at the finger here, perhaps not even at the stick, if the stick is now understood to open up a whole extended range of the organ, a world that announces itself to the stick and which the stick helps articulate in taps and thrusts of meaning.

But the medium is not to be understood as intervening between two fully present entities, a subject and an object, for example. The medium as "between" them does not need to wait for them to arrange themselves for it to then subsequently arise from their midst. The between of mediation is not an effect of presence. The reverse is more likely the case here, that what we think of as a fully present object is really an abstraction from mediation. The medium is prior to the object and not something simply added to two otherwise intact entities, indifferent to its arrival. Hemsterhuis rebuffs such a conception from both sides, that of the subject and the object.

Regarding the subject, a key point to bear in mind is that we arrive at our sense of self through the organs. Speaking of the soul, Hemsterhuis writes: "Everything that is outside of it and of which it has ideas is the starting point from which it departs to arrive at the conviction of its own existence. If this starting point were removed, that is, if the organs by which it could have ideas of external things were annihilated, it could have no sensation of its own existence" (*EE* 1.96). Even basic cogitation is organic, "In order to have ideas, to think, to act, [the soul] needs organs" (*EE* 1.96). The soul does not have some immediate knowledge of itself, is not transparent to itself, but requires the use of organs to distinguish itself from the world around it.

Regarding the object, all we know of it is likewise due to our organs. In his discussion of beauty in the *Letter on Sculpture*, Hemsterhuis notes that what we call beautiful cannot be defined by extrinsic, objective criteria alone. There is no objective beauty as such, but instead (pace Hogarth's "line of beauty" and presaging Kant), the beautiful is understood as always relative to us. The beautiful, Hemsterhuis observes,

is analogous – not to the essence of things – but to the effect of the relation that holds between things and the construction of my organs. Change things, [and] the nature of our ideas of the beautiful will remain the same, but if you change the essence of our organs, or the nature of their construction, all of our current ideas of beauty will immediately fall back into nothing. (*EE* 1.66)

Simply put, “beauty has no reality in itself” (*EE* 1.66), but is always determined by our organs (we will explore the mechanism of this in the next section). Our world is not independent of our organs. Rather, our organs bring us the world analogous to or homogeneous with (to use Hemsterhuis’s favored locutions) those organs themselves.¹² We always encounter the worlds of our organs, not the world as such. The world is always already organized and interpreted, we might say.

The point is reiterated more strongly in regard to another main theme of Hemsterhuis’s, matter. Matter is typically construed as the objective par excellence. But Hemsterhuis again will not allow such a naïve realist conception to invade his thinking. Instead, matter, too, like beauty, must be understood relative to our organic constitution. As the dialogue *Sophylus* puts it: “the word matter is only a sign to express essences insofar as they have some analogy to our current organs” (*EE* 2.54). The point is somewhat broadened in *Simon* during Diotima’s telling of Prometheus’s construction of the human with an infinitude of tubes qua organs. When Socrates interrupts her to say that he only knows of three or four organs, not the infinitude of them that Prometheus has made, Socrates reports her reply: “My dear Socrates, she said to me, a day will come when you will receive ideas and sensations through all these tubes and ends, and then they will all seem equally material to you, because you call matter all that gives you ideas by means of the organs that you know yourself” (*EE* 2.114).

Returning to our traditional model of mediation, subject – organ – object, we see that Hemsterhuis has unmade the seemingly unified middle term of “organ.” There is no solitary isolatable organ to be positioned between two already extant parties. The organ always brings its medium with it, it is also infinitely extensible via prosthesis. The triune model cannot stand on these grounds alone, an organ is nothing isolatable. But that non-isolatability of the organ also calls into question the very integrity of the subject and object alike. The subject only knows itself through the world of objects and the object is only known through our organs, not in itself. The organ is not something that the entity can remain indifferent to, it does not

¹² Despite Hemsterhuis’s own usage here, I have avoided the term “reality” for the universe Hemsterhuis describes, because reality seems a term too easily aligned modally with both the possible and the necessary. Hemsterhuis rethinks modality in his work and seems to reject both the possible and the necessary in favor of a more multi-faceted universe. On the possible, see the *Letter on Man and His Relations* where “the existent and the possible are but one and the same thing before God” (*EE* 1.125). On the necessary, see *Aristaeus* where “we clearly see that the word *necessary* is only an epithet added to what is; and that to be, to act, to produce, to persist necessarily, says nothing other than to be, to act, to produce, or to persist” (*EE* 2.72).

exist apart from it. The organ serves as an opening to relation, it compromises any presumption of integrity in advance. Organs give us over to a world not of independence, but of relation. Hemsterhuis emphasizes the point in *Sophylus*:

EUTHYPHRO: All essences that coexist necessarily relate to each other somehow.

SOPHYLUS: That's true.

EUTHYPHRO: Therefore, every essence that coexists with us relates to us somehow.

SOPHYLUS: Yes. (*EE* 2.54)

Thanks to organs, nothing exists independently and alone, not even the subject and object of metaphysical thought.

3. Temporal Mediation

Temporal mediation is intimately tied to organic mediation. While the mediation of organs meant that we only know our world and ourselves through them, temporal mediation is a matter of deferral. We see this most clearly in a central tenet of the *Letter on Sculpture*, where Hemsterhuis avers, “the soul judges as the most beautiful what it can form an idea of in the smallest space of time” or, more precisely put, “the soul wants naturally to have a large number of ideas in the smallest possible space of time” (*EE* 1.63). This aspect of the soul is not only the key to Hemsterhuis's aesthetics, but to the temporal mediation that we are interested in as well.

In the *Letter on Sculpture*, Hemsterhuis reports of an informal experiment he conducted, showing people two drawings of different vases, each with the same number of points along its outline or contour, one a bit more jagged and ornate, the other a little simpler and smoother, and asking the people which vase they found more beautiful. He discovers that the vase with the smoother contour was unanimously voted the more beautiful. His explanation for this is again at the level of the organ (the eye) and has to do with a certain temporal lag:

You are aware, Sir, from applying the laws of optics to the structure of our eye, that in a single movement, we obtain a distinct idea of almost one single visible point alone, which is painted clearly on the retina; thus, if I want to have a distinct idea of an entire object, I must move the axis of the eye along the contours of this object, so that all the points that compose this contour are painted successively at the back of the eye with all the requisite clarity; and then the soul links together all these elementary points and ultimately acquires the idea of the contour as a

whole. Now it is certain that this linking is an action in which the soul employs time, and more time if the eye is less exercised in traversing the objects. (*EE* 1.62)

Since the eye sees one point at a time, to see a whole object clearly it must skim across every point of its contour. All of these individual, punctuated moments are then synthesized or combined by the soul to yield an idea of the object as a whole. Hemsterhuis's claim for aesthetics is that the smoother the contour of a figure, the easier it is for the eye to gather its points and deliver them to the soul for synthesis. Smoother figures, visually easier to glean, are represented by us more quickly than more halting or jaggedly contoured figures.

The process of going point by point along the contours is what costs us time; the need to do so is on account of our organs. The organs take time to give the soul the idea. And not all organs operate at the same rate of transmission. Recalling the myth of Prometheus' construction of the human as a figure equipped with an infinitude of "tubes" as organs, Diotima says:

Remember, Socrates, that the human soul does not enjoy omnipresence like Jupiter's soul does, therefore the actions of external essences on it must be transported by means of some vehicle. The action of a visible essence is communicated by light; that of an audible essence is transported by means of vibrations of air. Know, Socrates, that the movements of all these vehicles do not have the same velocities. The movement of air is less rapid than that of light, and there are thousands of vehicles whose vibrations have not yet arrived at the tubes that are made to receive them. (*EE* 2.114)

The organs differ among themselves at a temporal level as well, they are subject to delays and slow speeds of transmission. The work of collation performed by the soul assembles the temporally distinct facets of sensation into a unified, trans-facetal objective world.

This means that the soul receives its sense of the object only after a process of assembly. It must wait before it can enjoy or take satisfaction in the object. The soul cannot have its object all at once, cannot enjoy a "perfect" union with it. As Hemsterhuis explains regarding the soul, "what prevents it from being satisfied in this respect lies in the necessity by which it is compelled to use organs and media, and to act by way of a succession of time and parts" (*EE* 1.79). It is the organs that are keeping us from this perfected enjoyment, this fusion, they force us to gather things point by point, not all at a glance, and thereby they cost us time: "If the soul could be affected by an object without the means of organs, the time it would take for it to form

the idea would be reduced to precisely nothing” (*EE* 1.79). That state of undelayed, instantaneous enjoyment and consummation, however, is not ours, for “in the current state in which the soul is found, it is almost impossible to reach this union except by means of organs, [then] it is equally impossible to obtain that perfect enjoyment in anything at all” (*EE* 1.80). Because of our organic condition, nothing can be perfectly enjoyed.

That is not necessarily a bad thing, in that “perfect” enjoyment would simultaneously mean the elimination of both subject and object at once; indeed, the point of perfection rushes past mere union and headlong into their very eradication. Perfect enjoyment is non-being.¹³ Hemsterhuis’s statement is not a lament that we can never enjoy perfectly, but more a realization that we have no world but this world and its imperfect enjoyments.

In all these discussions about temporal delays and transmissions, we must bear in mind that the time we experience is itself an organic construct. Hemsterhuis certainly implies as much in the “General Remark” to the *Letter on Desires*: “Duration is measured by the time that the organ employs in giving to the soul the idea of the whole object, or the modification of that object, inasmuch as it is analogous to the construction of the organ” (*EE* 1.86). Given this, there would be no time “in itself.”

For this reason, our organs could be said to be necessary for time. The delay of the organs keeps everything from happening all at once. The organs and the media allocate our moments of exposure into a coherent assemblage. We need our organs in order that there not be a One, much less a Nothingness. Organs buffer us from these. Organic time defers oblivion. The temporal deferral of our organs is constitutive of our experience as finite beings.

4. Morality as Mediation

Part of the thinking of mediation treats of non-independence. Nothing stands “outside” of mediation. Mediation does not fall “between” two otherwise present entities as an intervening middle-space. Nothing stands outside this middle zone, nothing is independent, everything organic billows out through the media of the organs in so many apertures of experience and routes of contact. To be independent would be to stand outside of mediation, self-

¹³ Consider the striking language used to describe this union in the dialogue *Aristaeus*, where Aristaeus is asked about this union whether it is a matter of theoretical contemplation. He replies, “To contemplate it? – to possess it, to be absolutely master of it, to admire it, to embrace it, to smother it with my caresses, to devour it” (*EE* 2.79). Such love does not bode well for its recipient.

contained and complete, but also trapped within oneself, straitjacketed in a body that would have to be, in a certain sense, without organs. To be independent would be to be non-relational and we have already seen a central claim of Hemsterhuis's that: "every essence that coexists with us relates to us somehow" (*EE* 2.54). The fact of this relationality undoes any presumption of independence on the part of a subject or anything else that might essence.

The relationality that connects all that is provides a condition for morality; our actions are tied to others. It should come as no surprise that, for Hemsterhuis, this morality is likewise a matter of organs – this time of the "moral organ." Morality as organic is nothing incompatible with our other more traditionally regarded organs: "There is no more incommensurability between the moral face of the universe and the visible face than between the visible face and the audible face, or between the audible face and the tangible face, etc." (*EE* 1.103). Morality too requires a medium in which to appear; what appears to us as moral can only do so based on our ability to receive it as such. Otherwise put, and recalling our earlier discussion of organs, there is no morality in itself.

Hemsterhuis believes the organic basis of morality has long been overlooked and he intends to examine "more closely this organ, which until now has no proper name and which is commonly referred to as heart, sentiment, conscience" (*EE* 1.104). The names he mentions point to different capacities of the moral organ, each central to his conception of morality more broadly: sympathizing (heart and sentiment) and introspection (conscience).

Making morality a matter of organs (mediators between soul and world) means that morality has a medium as well. Things appear moral in the medium of the moral organ. That medium is human sociability. Morality requires a medium of intersubjective society. Hemsterhuis explains, "just as the organs of hearing and of sight would not be manifest to any man endowed with them, if there were no air and light, so too the heart, conscience, is manifest in man only when he is to be found among other animate beings, among other velleities acting opposed to or in conformity with his velleity" (*EE* 1.104). Morality for Hemsterhuis names our being with others, both in terms of community and communication (written signs, for example, are part of the moral medium): "Just as the eye would be totally useless without light or visible things, the organ that I call the heart is perfectly useless to man without active velleities or society with such velleities through communicative signs" (*EE* 1.105).

The moral organ puts me in community with others and Hemsterhuis refers to this as an act of multiplication, "when, by means of the moral organ,

he communicates with other individuals of the same species, his *I* is multiplied by the number of individuals he knows and which compose society” (*EE* 1.112). The multiplication results from the push and pull of relationality. Because everything that exists relates, because it is of my essence to relate, then I am always ineradicably in a relation with other *Is*. I am so ineradicably related to these other *Is* that I cannot be myself without them. Thus, there is a sense in which, through necessarily relating to them, I *am* them. Hemsterhuis himself discusses this strange fact of relationality (that I can only be affected by what can affect me and thus only by what is “homologous,” “homogeneous,” or “analogous” to me, to use three of Hemsterhuis’s preferred terms for this conformity), in a note to *Aristaeus*:

Identified with the other, the good that it does to the other is a good that, in fact, it does to itself; it enjoys the fruits of its own generosity.... [M]an would do good to the other, since he makes himself the other: he does what is good so as to do good to himself. It must be admitted that Diocles’ reasoning nicely establishes the precept: Love your neighbour as yourself. (*EE* 2.82n)

This connection through relationality, a connection that can never be an identity, is what enables the “heart” and its “sentiment.” The moral organ is the condition for shared feeling, in a perfected state of which, we would relate to others as we do ourselves. Hemsterhuis states this in imagining a primitive society of purely equal parties, explaining that “their moral organ was absolutely perfect, in such a way that each individual had sensations of the joys and sufferings of other individuals that were as strong as those of his own condition” (*EE* 1.112). Morality overcomes egoism.

The moral organ does this by making the *I* an object for itself. This is where the “conscience” function comes in. This distinguishes the moral organ from our other current sense organs:

But this organ, this heart, which gives me sensations of this face of the universe, differs from our other organs principally in that it gives us a sensation of a face of which our soul, our *I*, forms a part; thus, for this organ, the *I* itself becomes an object of contemplation and therefore this organ does not give us merely, like our other organs, sensations of the relations which external things have to us, but also those of the relations that we have to these things. And from this the first sensation of duty results. (*EE* 1.104–5)

The moral organ effects a kind of reversal, whereby we sense how things affect us, it gives us to understand how we receive the world, how we are at

stake in it. Our attention shifts from an external quality of the object to a more personal feeling or mood of engagement.

The I is able to take itself for an object of contemplation due to the relational nature of existence. Hemsterhuis sees in the human the ability to adopt the standpoint of another human and to judge oneself from that newly transposed position. “The active being,” he writes, “is endowed with the moral principle, which transports it, so to speak, into other beings and makes it sense, suffer and enjoy on their behalf” (*EE* 2.85). This transport is understood as a kind of identification:

It is this moral principle, by which an individual identifies himself with another essence in some way, by which he senses what she senses, and [by which] he can contemplate himself from the centre of another individual, so to speak, and it is from this that sensations of commiseration, justice, duty, virtues [and] vices arise. (*EE* 2.82)

Morality for Hemsterhuis is not a matter of transcending our situation or even of understanding it formally or objectively. Instead, it is a matter of more fully examining ourselves within our situation, but now from the perspective of others. The hermeneutic situation established by our organs cannot be transcended or escaped.

The connectedness of what exists invests us in the being of others. Through it we are able to sympathize with them. It also allows us an outside purchase on our own behaviors, a standard or expectation by which to judge them. A certain humility accompanies the moral organ in that allowing myself to be regarded as an object deprives me of the arrogance of unrestrained subjectivity. The moral organ undermines the independence of the subject. It cannot be said to exist apart from others. It is so much with others that it cannot be understood as only itself, but is likewise also these others. And the self itself is only known by going through these others. Morality requires the spacing of organs; morality mediates selfhood.

5. The Mediated World and the Multifaceted Universe

The next form of mediation I wish to consider concerns the multifaceted nature of the universe itself. Just as the subject must be understood as always in relation with others, as possessing a moral organ, so too must the world. That is to say, the world as we know it is always in relation with other worlds. Hemsterhuis terms the world of sensations that an organ brings us a “face” of the universe, which we might understand, drawing on his own lapidary

interests, as a “facet” of reality.¹⁴ Our organs bring us various faces of what is (or of what exists as essence). But there are more faces of the world than those for which we have organs.

Hemsterhuis repeatedly argues for the infinite faces of the world on the basis of our limited organic constitution. Much hinges on the fact that our particular set of sense organs are not all that we can imagine or even already know. As Euthyphro summarizes in the *Sophylus* dialogue, “An essence can have a hundred thousand sides, all pertaining equally to its nature, and among which only three or four are analogues to our current organs. An essence can have a hundred thousand faces which pertain equally to its nature, and none of which is turned toward our organs” (*EE* 2.51–52). There are faces of the world that are not turned toward us and of which we know nothing. There is more to the world than what touches our organs; or, the essences that touch our organs can touch others in different ways as well.

More than this, Hemsterhuis is not settled on the number of organs that we do have. The organs are quite plastic. He repeatedly emphasizes the need to train, exercise, and discipline our organs so as to perfect them. But entirely new organs seem a possibility for him as well. We see mention of this in *Simon*, where the purpose of art, according to the speech of a Scythian stranger reported by Socrates, is “to enrich the body by adding to the organs and perfecting them” (*EE* 2.110). This idea that there could be even more organs than we currently possess (beyond even our “moral organ” and what Hemsterhuis calls the “organ” of the intellect), proves entrancing to Socrates, who pleads with Diotima, “Divine Diotima, I said to her, you for whom the future is present, you who have commerce with the Gods, please teach me whether our souls enjoy more organs than those we already know” (*EE* 2.113). It is here where Diotima recounts Prometheus’ fashioning of the human with an infinite number of organ tubes, telling Socrates that “a day will come when you will receive ideas and sensations through all these tubes and ends” (*EE* 2.114).¹⁵

¹⁴ Hemsterhuis demonstrates the use of the term in a note to *Sophylus*: “All that composes or can compose the All, or the entire universe, is necessarily essence. Insofar as essences relate to the organ of sight, these essences are called visible essences or things; insofar as essences relate to the organ of hearing, these essences are called audible essences or things. Thus, such a modification, such a way of being, by which some essences relate to the organ of sight, is called the visible face of the universe; and such a modification, such a way of being, by which some essences relate to the organ of hearing, is called the audible face of the universe” (*EE* 2.52n).

¹⁵ The point returns at the close of the “Letter on Atheism,” where we are advised to keep in mind that “matter is but a word which designates all real essences as they relate to our current organs; that matter cannot have more attributes than we have organs; and that if it is given to man’s nature to acquire more organs in his future existence, or if other organs

But along with this faith in future organs, there is also the worry that we may well have lost some of our earlier organs and with them their respective faces of the universe. This is a recurrent theme in the dialogue *Alexis, or on the Golden Age*. The speech of the priest Hypsicles, as reported by Diocles, asserts that if we reflect on the gaps and lacunae in our systems of science and knowledge, then it is impossible

to not sense the large probability that it is the case that we have lost senses or rather vehicles of action which were analogous to them, by means of which intermediary ideas and sensations previously made a whole or a sum of our limited knowledge, of which there no longer remains any vestige except in the more or less altered traditions of our ancient condition? (*EE* 2.138)¹⁶

So the organs that we do have are plastic, there are infinite organs we do not have, there are organs we do not yet know we have, and there are organs we have lost. Each of these organs is coded to a particular face of the universe.

Hemsterhuis does not argue too strongly for his claim; simply put, the argument seems to be: we have a finite number of sense organs, some animals have sense organs we do not, therefore it must be possible that there is an infinite number of sense organs and facets of reality corresponding to them. The dialogue *Sophylus*, gives the argument directly:

the number of times that I may have a different idea of matter, or rather of essence, depends on the number of my organs and on my media; and since I am able to suppose an indefinite number of organs and media, matter, or rather essence, can be perceived in different ways an indefinite number of times; and therefore matter, or rather essence, has an infinite number of attributes. (*EE* 2.52)

A lot of work is done in the arguments by the word “indefinite” or its seeming synonym “infinite,” which, through its sheer magnitude, is able to shift the slightest of possibilities into the realm of probability for Hemsterhuis. An infinitely small chance over an infinite amount of time would seem to necessarily come through, or, for Hemsterhuis, at least attain the probability of doing so. Already in the *Letter on Man and his Relations*, he had observed,

thus develop, [then] matter (if we want to keep hold of this word as a sign for essences as known) will increase its attributes proportionately” (“Letter on Atheism,” vol. 3: 115–16, draft).

¹⁶ The point is restated by Alexis with a slight shift in emphasis: “man is not here everything which the nature of a complete being demands and that, therefore, the human species could well have lost in a prior revolution either some organ (which is less probable) or some vehicle of sensation” (*EE* 2.142).

“there is not only the possibility, but the probability of an infinite progression of organs which would make known an infinite progression of faces of the universe” (*EE* 1.103).

Hemsterhuis’s thinking of mediation is so thoroughgoing as to deprive us of even the thought of a single reality to which we would have some semblance of oversight. An infinity of shimmering facets of the world shine apart from us, unbeknownst to us and unremarked by us beyond this mere place holding. In *Alexis*, Hemsterhuis writes that “a limited being cannot exist by itself” (*EE* 2.127). We can say the same for each of the infinite faces of the universe.

6. The Immediate Temptation of Union

Given this repeated emphasis on mediation, Hemsterhuis would seem quite at ease with and accepting of the idea of relational distance. Mediation may connect us and put us in contact, but it also precludes utter union. Some have detected a longing for the latter in Hemsterhuis, and with it a renunciation of mediation. Mediation would be acknowledged by Hemsterhuis, in all its variety of forms and as a basic principle, but he would simultaneously advocate that we strive to transcend it. Mediation would be a mark of our fallen condition and we would overcome this by some form of prescribed union with God. We are even told in seeming confirmation of this view that our “material husk must be shaken off” and that “death is necessary” (*EE* 2.98). I wish to examine this tension as it appears in two contrasting moments of the *Letter on Sculpture*. Ultimately my contention is that Hemsterhuis’s notion of mediation is so robust as to require us even to rethink what we mean by divine union in the first place.

In the *Letter on Sculpture*, in a peculiar discussion of the disgust that arises from becoming too familiar with a work of art, Hemsterhuis avers that “owing to this property, it seems incontestable that there is something in our soul that loathes all relation to what we call succession or duration” (*EE* 1.67). The point would be a complaint against our organic condition that requires we proceed stepwise in this way. The eye must fall upon each individual point of the vase’s contour and present these successively to the soul, which seems to wait about in the meantime growing increasingly frustrated with the process. Here it is described as a loathing. The soul would rather skip the process and have the result all at once.

Hemsterhuis elaborates his position in the *Letter on Desires*, a kind of sequel to the letter on sculpture, the two connected on just this crucial point.

The loathing of succession is now cast from another perspective as a desire for utter union, though one that can never be achieved. He writes:

When I contemplate some beautiful thing, e.g. a beautiful statue, I actually search solely to unite my being, my essence, with this being so heterogeneous [to me]; but after numerous contemplations I feel myself disgusted with the statue, and this disgust arises solely from the tacit reflection I make on the impossibility of a perfect union. (*EE* 1.80)

Our appreciation of the beauty of the statue seeks to have the greatest number of ideas presented to us in the shortest period of time. The time it takes to glean the object can be reduced as far as possible, but it never achieves instantaneity; there is always separation. Mediation precludes a kind of fulfillment in consummation (the smothering, mortal love relation detailed by *Aristaeus*). As such, if one continues to long for immediacy, there is only never-ending frustration to be found. The disgust at the impossibility of a perfect union would again be disgust at mediation.

But this loathing and disgust at succession, duration, imperfect unions does not lead to asceticism or renunciation on the part of Hemsterhuis. He does not try to minimize our time in this world, nor does he cajole us to transcend it or depart from it. Instead, the impossibility of utter union can be understood to have a transformative effect, at the very least in terms of where we orient our desires and what we train them to want. We cannot have utter union, we should instead focus on what we can have, or as *Diocles* puts it in *Aristaeus*, “it is necessary to look for relationships that you can change” (*EE* 2.95).

The impossibility of utter union becomes a welcoming of proliferation. The same *Letter on Sculpture* that spoke of a loathing of succession, also includes this thought experiment following on from the discussion of the ratio of the beautiful (to have the most ideas in the least time):

Does it not follow, Sir, in a rather geometrical manner, that the soul judges as the most beautiful what it can form an idea of in the smallest space of time? But this being so, the soul should therefore prefer a single black dot on a white background to the most beautiful and richest of compositions; and, indeed, if you give a choice between the two to a man enfeebled by long illnesses, he will not hesitate in preferring the point to the composition; but it is the indolence of his organs which causes this judgement. A healthy, tranquil soul, in a well-constituted body, will choose the composition, because it gives him a larger number of ideas at the same time. (*EE* 1.63)

The single black dot would indeed give us an idea of it in a very short period of time. But the soul does not want this. Its goal is not to receive things as quickly as possible (not unless there is an organic malfunction), but to receive as much as possible in as short a time as possible. Minimizing the content to reduce the delivery is counter-productive for Hemsterhuis, because the soul wants the world, wants this proliferation beyond the mere dot.

Hemsterhuis concludes from this in passing something that likewise betrays his allegiances to this world, an embrace of ornamentation. We read on the same page of the sculpture letter Hemsterhuis's conclusion from this situation: "Therefore, the soul wants naturally to have a large number of ideas in the smallest possible space of time, and it is from this we have ornaments: otherwise, all ornamentation would be a useless trifle [*hors d'oeuvre*] that insults practice, common sense and nature" (*EE* 1.63). The soul does not want the black dot, it wants world, and that means not just monumentally meaningful art that challenges our existential commitments, but ornamentation, trifles, proliferation. Hemsterhuis's aesthetic position is ultimately a justification of ornamentation, the same ornament that is too often aligned with the detritus of modernity, ornament as clutter, especially when compared with the idealized simple contours of classical sculpture. Hemsterhuis does not agree with such regressive views, he embraces proliferation.

If the latter case (Hemsterhuis opting for proliferation) trumps the former case (a loathing of mediation), then we would expect to see this reflected in the very sense of union, whether with the universe or the divine, and we do. The *Letter on Desires* takes as its central concern issues of union, physical and otherwise. The penultimate paragraph of the concluding "general remark" speaks directly to our worry:

let us suppose, I say, the actuality of this perfect union, or rather of this identification, to be impossible or absurd. It will, however, be clear that the soul in its desires tends by its nature towards this union, or it desires a continual approximation. This is the hyperbola with its asymptote: and such is all I wished to demonstrate in this investigation of the nature of desires. (*EE* 1.87)

We see here that utter union is impossible as an achievement, though operative at a kind of regulative level. We can only approximate this union and approach it asymptotically. But the fact that we can never achieve utter union also means we can always further develop our union.

The cultivation and perfection of our organs that Hemsterhuis continually advocates is part of this asymptotic approximation. In *Simon*, Diotima explains the process to Socrates:

It is with such wings that some fortunate souls raise themselves. They devote themselves entirely to the charge of perfecting themselves. They disengage themselves from all that is earthly and perishable around them. They accelerate their development, and new organs manifest themselves. It is then that our relations to the Gods become more immediate, and that the universe manifests itself to us from several sides which are yet naught to you and other men. (*EE* 2.121)

The trajectory that Diotima lays out includes a disengagement from the world, which at first seems to confirm previously raised suspicions of asceticism. This disengagement, though, is not in order to leave the world, but to configure new relations to it, to develop new organs for it. The relation to the gods becomes more “immediate,” Diotima says, but this immediacy is no longer something opposed to mediation, but only attainable through it. That is to say, the relation is to become more immediate and it does so not by casting off organic mediation, but through a proliferation of organs, the discovery, cultivation, and training of new organs. To have more avenues of mediation, more apertures opening the world, is to enjoy a more perfected, organic existence.

Nowhere is this more evident than at the close of Diotima’s speech at the end of *Simon*:

The most beautiful work of man, Socrates, is to imitate the sun and to cast off its outer layers in as few centuries as possible. And when the soul is completely freed, it becomes all organ. The gap which separates the visible from the audible is filled with other sensations. All sensations are linked and together form one body, and the soul sees the universe not in God, but in the manner of the Gods. (*EE* 2.121)

Hemsterhuis’s goal for the human, our state of perfection, would never be the loss of our self in utter or immediate union. Again, the principle is one of proliferation, more organs. The goal is to become “all organ” such that a continuous panorama of sensation is achieved. To be all organ, to activate the infinitude of tubes and apertures, is to perceive “in the manner of the Gods.” The gods themselves perceive this way, i.e., through organs, and this means always at a distance. Immediacy becomes in-mediacy.

Mediation disrupts the presumed integrity of both subject and object, placing them in an essential relationship with one another by interweaving

them through world. Organic mediation opens the entity to worlds of sensation, mingling it out beyond itself, distributing it throughout its world. Because mediation undermines integrity and independence, it is inherently ambiguous as nothing is any longer simply what it is. Mediation is thus always threatened with falling into immediacy. A philosophy such as Hemsterhuis's, which articulates a thinking of mediation, must likewise run across the temptation of immediacy. Indeed, if this temptation were absent, the idea of mediation would be incomplete, it would be able to set itself up as a world in itself, a new world independent of all else (and thus refute and destroy itself qua mediated in the process). Mediation is nothing other than this tension, which Hemsterhuis knows so well, "I conclude that everything visible or sensible is currently in a forced state, since, tending eternally to union, while remaining always composed of isolated individuals, the nature of the all exists eternally in a manifest contradiction with itself" (*EE* 1.85). The "contradiction" of mediacy and immediacy is precisely what keeps mediacy from being a pole in an opposition between mediacy and immediacy in the first place; mediacy never opposes immediacy, but includes it, even if only as the threat of its own foreclosure. Which is to say that, as organic, existence is always opened, and this means, as Novalis would perhaps have it, existence is always stimulated. In the end, to exist means to be stimulated; an "eternal stimulus" holds us in existence, "this stimulus can never cease to be a stimulus – without we ourselves thereby ceasing."¹⁷

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¹⁷ Novalis, *Schriften*, 2.361-2.

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