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**Theodor Lessing – Philosophy as Action  
Philosophy on the Internet**

**Philosophy doesn't belong on the internet.** But if we still want to briefly describe Theodor Lessing's philosophy, here are the two main components: He understood how to transform his life story into a philosophy and use it in the fight against world hardship. He also detailed the many routes and emergency exits that people use to escape the world theater of history.

This website (<https://theodorlessingedition.de/>) introduces the life and work of the Hanoverian philosopher Theodor Lessing. It doesn't replace reading his books, but it should encourage you to read them. For him, hardship, pain, and suffering are the basic truths of human existence. His ›philosophy of need‹ is inexorably tied to the daily experience of reality. For philosophy there is no matter, no topic, that is in and of itself more important than any other. So he also wrote for newspapers and thereby made philosophy a public concern.

His ›philosophy of need‹ reaches beyond pure intellectual history, since the basic terms ›necessity, pain, suffering‹ are not concepts but derive from the historical human condition itself. He didn't think up a metaphysical system at his desk; he was a philosophical wanderer in matters of philosophy and want.

The enticing thing about his philosophy is that no one can exceed his concept of need through another, because the everyday necessities and longings of human society themselves are expressed in it. Be it the economic hardship of an unemployed person (and the attendant soul-searching), be it the physical suffering of the sick, be it overall hardship in all imaginable forms; all of these circumstances can be traced back to the frailty of the human species. In order to avoid such privations and tormenting worry, the tribulations of being, our world theater was conceived. It is where people discover and construct, live and moralize, where virtue and terror are formed, as well as art, religion, politics, and language. These are the emergency exits from misery and want, they sustain daily life with its appeasements and promises, triumphs, and hypocrisies.

Lessing applied his grandmother's saying that ›everything can only happen once in life‹ to the repeated events of world history: once (and never again) you experience the theater of vivid improvisation with its changing uniforms, togas and gowns, wherein the golden words of the great historic actors are just the script of poorly written plays. While behind them lies the same desire for power and unscrupulousness of all rulers.

**World Need and World Theater**

Most people only realize the purpose of world theater towards the end of the performance. Since they are never tired of watching and enduring whatever was presented to them (including the occasional catcall), they missed their purpose in life and entrance to the stage. They step away misused and abused, the violence of the imposing costumes, masks, and symbols having paralyzed their will to resist.

World distress and world theater have been intertwined themes throughout history. For German history, this meant that under Wilhelm II, the Empire looked like an overcrowded theater with political dilettantes in bloated, ornamental wardrobes. The Weimar Republic was unable to agree on a fixed ensemble and waffled between comedy and tragedy until ›democracy‹ (never a particularly valued way of life and manners) was removed from the repertoire. Then the coup d'état of January 30, 1933, provided the Germans a most gruesome stain that no theater critic can now accurately review without trivializing the terror.

The farce of National Socialism, wood disguised as iron as Lessing stressed, was successful because it managed to appeal to the mass imagination with courage-building mirages and narratives. In the struggle for power, the rational mind, logic, and reason are not enough, though these are the most important tools the powerless have. Instead, those who have the power of images amass all the power. He who rules is he who controls the meaning of the narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> From the author's website. Translated from the original by George A. Phocas

Political education should make it easier for an audience to understand underlying meaning, but it also makes it more difficult for them, because the images can speak an ambiguous language. Theodor Lessing's own philosophy of historical symbols shows that in the theater of history, human hopes latch on to the vivid and rapturous, to characters who conjure illusions and ultimately disappoint expectations. From the bliss of momentary salvation, of an enchanting face, horror sometimes suddenly emerges.

One must remain suspicious of the solemn and the pompous, as things always turn out differently than the anointed slogans promise. As an antidote, the universal formula that encapsulates Lessing's entire philosophy applies: »There is nothing true and credible in this comedy of history but the misery, the suffering, and the pain!« Anyone who takes this principle to heart is less likely to be taken for a fool.

### **A Thousand Concrete Little Things**

Necessity becomes history, and the historical role players toy with the theatricality of power. But this does not mean that everything is just fraud, sham, illusion, and a monkey circus for which Lessing recommends the reclining position of the theater critic. By observing the political stage and its actors from some distance, one can gain a new relationship with reality. Because world theater is a terrible reality, not an evening's pleasure. And the entrance fee is high, the loges are ever-occupied, and sometimes it can be deadly.

**So philosophy belongs on the internet.** Although Theodor Lessing did not explain the precise meaning of theater and history, myth and reality consistently, he did not disdain general comprehensibility. For philosophy there is no matter or topic that is inherently more important than any other. From any point of experience one can descend into the depths of life. Meaningful experiences and the thousand recurring, concrete little things are worth recording in rich images.

Lessing wrote that if he were to write a longer treatise, he would at best get three professors to give him a patronizing pat on the back (or not). But if he says something in an accessible, understandable form, in a concise philosophical column, translating higher thought into common situations, then maybe pretty Alma next door would cut it out of the newspaper and put it, his feature article, in her stocking. And wouldn't he be warmer there than in the cold vault of the state library?

### **Money for the edition**

Alma's stockings won't last forever, and she too will eventually fade. Whether it's a stocking or a library: Theodor Lessing's work belongs in the hands of today's readers. To do this, more would have to happen than the occasional high-toned ceremonials honoring his memory, a morally self-evident but nevertheless free undertaking. As long as the city of Hanover, the university, and private patrons and sponsors are not prepared to finance a scientific edition of Theodor Lessing's collected writings, the reparation for the injustice committed against him, which has been invoked in ceremonial speeches, will remain a hollow gesture.

**If you would like to financially support my (Rainer Marwedel's) editorial work on Theodor Lessing's work, please contact [me](#) by email.**