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Around the Triangle: The Gospel of Hegel Hegel, Christianity and Contemporary Thought

(in: **Scholars of Hegel reply to Michal Segal**)

Conversation with George Di Giovanni

Montréal, 11 May 2016

Question 1

MS: Hegelian philosophy is customarily regarded as an exemplar of thinking which restricts the entire world and all of life as we know it to the confines of identity, unity and uniformity, and thus eliminating any real possibility of freedom, otherness, diversity, or anything that might not conform to the single and uniform diktat of the absolute system. I assume that a scholar of Hegel's system would regard the aforementioned understanding as an incorrect one. On the other hand, I argue that the correct understanding is quite the opposite: In light of its mutating concepts – since what “the system of absolute identity” calls “identity” is the continuous fluctuation between opposing values and determinations which shift incessantly and become one another, and since the only “absolute” for the “absolute system” is the absolute motion, the absolute instability – it seems that the Hegelian system renders any fixed, “absolute” or stable notion of identity impossible, and that the absolute itself loses its absoluteness altogether. How, in your opinion, can one parry the conclusion that this purportedly “absolute” system of absolute identity obliterates any possible absolute and every identity?

GdiG: This is a difficult question to respond to because, while it recognizes that the common understanding of Hegel's thought is mistaken, it nonetheless raises an aporia about it which would only be possible on the assumptions that made the

misunderstanding of Hegel possible in the first place. Let me try to explain by parsing the question conceptually.

1. To think of Hegel's system as one of "identity" is not only wrong, but historically irresponsible. "System of identity" applies to Schelling—to the Schelling, moreover, of the middle period of Jena, when he had unreservedly accepted Spinoza's monism and deliberately used the language of identity to characterize his own thought. He altered his position in later years.

2. That "identity" cannot be the governing category of Hegel's thought is clear from the Logic (I have the Greater Logic especially in mind.) To start with, it is significant that the first, and the dominating category in the Logic of Being is not "being," but "becoming." Hegel rejects Parmenides, the father of identity philosophy, at the very start. In this, he diverges radically from classical metaphysical assumptions. He commits patricide.

Even more to the point, however, is the second book of the Objective Logic, viz. the Logic of Essence. "Identity" is indeed the governing category there, but that's because in this segment of the Logic Hegel is reflecting upon, and developing out of its internal conceptual requirements, the language of common sense, which is also the language of classical metaphysics and of Enlightenment-type science. This language, in Hegel's treatment, logically culminates with the positing of an Absolute which is clearly recognizable the Spinoza's substance. This is not surprising. Spinoza's thought is indeed the culmination of classical metaphysics. But, so far as an understanding of Hegel is concerned (as contrasted with, among other, the Jena Schelling), the significant point is that, for him, such an Absolute entails the relativization of the modal categories, their being relegated to purely subjective status (Hegel is explicit in criticizing both Kant and Spinoza in this): the necessary is just as well the contingent, and the contingent the necessary; and possibility loses meaning. But rationality runs, so to speak, on the modal categories. Classical metaphysics leads to the *Abgrund der Vernunft*, the abyss of reason, to use Kant's expression which Hegel echoes. Hegel could have, at this point, fallen (like Schelling) into intuitionism. But he did not. What he did was to step outside the categories of essence, which he relegated rather to particularized contexts of experience; he left the Absolute behind in order to introduce Spirit, which is simply another word for the realm of discourse. The language of the Absolute disappears in the Logic of the Subject. Hegel speaks indeed of the "absolute idea." But this has nothing to do with the Spinoza's *aseitas* and *perseitas*. It is just another word for the discursiveness of discourse, for its internal logical requirements; or, as Hegel finally puts it, it is *method*.

3. I trust you can now understand why I found your aporia puzzling. Exactly what kind of fixed absolute or identity you are trying to save? If it is anything that could be defined in cosmogonic terms, then, of course, you won't find it in Hegel. Issues of identity have to be, essentially, issues of societal existence. Identity is the product of the language of

a community about itself, where the quality of the language is to be measured by the extent to which it allows the community to contain the internal conflicts which are the inevitable result of its members asserting themselves as individuals; in other words, the extent to which it allows for individual freedom in a communal context. And this can be achieved in a variety of ways (though Hegel, bound to his time and society, would not have appreciated how wide, and even radical, such a variety could be). What absolutes are you looking for? I know of only one absolute norm, and a negative one at that. It's what Kant simply called "the lie," the disruption of the conditions which make for discursiveness in general, such as inevitably leads to the abyss of reason, the absurd that allows no words. Going after the Absolute is, in my opinion, just that.

Question 2

MS: The first aforementioned perception of the Hegelian system (which sees it as a system in which all existing and possible data are subjected to a predefined, structured and systematic framework), is manifested both in ontological-metaphysical-logical critiques and in socio-political critiques, and results in numerous and varied attempts to escape the hermetic system of absolute identity, by focusing instead on an actual difference (one that is not a function of identity), on an actual other (who is not a function of the one), on an actual individual (who is not a corollary of the state), on plurality and pluralism (which are not a function of the uniformity of the system), and on liberal freedom instead of on sovereign and authoritative hegemony. But since the aforementioned perception of Hegel's system is incorrect, and since I believe that the correct understanding is quite the opposite, I must conclude that the opponents of the Hegelian system, as well as those who wish to escape it, attempt to "replace" it with the very same (misconceived) logic. Hence, they remain utterly faithful to the very same pattern which they intended to criticize. Any attempt to escape the Hegelian system, its identity and absoluteness, by focusing on difference, the other, the non-identity, or the impossibility of determination, does not in effect object to, but rather fully surrenders to the same premises, postulations, and consequences. Would you agree that contemporary, post-modern, liberal thought is essentially a direct and natural continuation of the Hegelian logic – indeed its necessary and inevitable outcome? And if not – how would you portray the relation between Hegel's thought and contemporary thought?

GdiG: You put me again in a difficult position because, while obviously pushing an agenda of your own without however stating it upfront, you ask me at the same time to take position regarding post-modern thought in general. I am afraid that, in expressing antipathy for the latter, I might unwittingly also position myself against pluralism and individualism, whereas these are values which I treasure and on which my Canadian community is based (or at least strives to be based). So, let me again parse your question.

1. I am not at home in contemporary so-called “post-modern” thought. Of course, you must take this confession in journalistic spirit. If pressed on individual authors and specific claims, I would have good reasons to qualify myself. In general, however, I can say that I find contemporary thought long on rhetorical gesture and affectation, but short on conceptual analysis. If your claim, as I glean from your question, is that, in misunderstanding Hegel (in effect, by taking him as the apotheosis of classical metaphysics whereas he actually marks the overcoming of it), post-modern thinkers are battling phantoms of their own making; even worse, in failing to see how Hegel overcame the metaphysics of the Absolute, they still remain hostage to it—if this is what you are saying, then I would tend to agree. Just because there is no Absolute, it does not follow that therefore everything goes. This would be just the inverse of saying that, since evil exists, God must exist. One need not accept either claim, unless one is still caught up in the language of the Absolute. The challenge, rather, is to see how particular human values, despite their finitude and historical frailty, nonetheless deserve infinite respect. And in this, I believe, if accurately yet creatively examined, Hegel can help.

2. I suspect you like me to be more specific regarding how Hegel can help. I am not sure that I can do it without a full treatise. Let me try to make my point by means of a parable. I have in mind an actual human situation, and that it be actual, in the present tense, is essential for the parable’s effectiveness. There is an extended family which, when its members seat round the table to break bread on festive occasions, would describe themselves this way. The *pater familias* is a Christian, non-practising but historically steeped in Catholic liturgical traditions. His two sons would be considered Jewish according to the Torah, and do think of themselves as Jewish, because of their late mother, of a Berlin-Jewish family once imbued with strong *mitteleuropäisch* values. The father’s present wife, and dear step-mother of the sons, is Moslem. Her two daughters, due to the ethnic mix of the West Indies, are Hindu. Then there are the spouses of the sons and daughters, who further complicate the picture. Finally, there is a young woman who has become very much part of the family; she belongs to the Palestinian diaspora, an arctic nurse, and recently married to a Sikh.

The peoples of Babel are reassembling, in this particular case in Canada. Only an armchair philosopher would think that Hegel’s thought is responsible for this happening. The industrial revolution, technology, and the power-plays motivated by greed, by delusions of superior identity, in brief, all that went on in the past three odd centuries, have unwittingly done the job, with much slaughter in the process. Hegel simply drew up a philosophical brief, not unlike a legal verdict, regarding his universe—how one got there, and what its achievement was. That brief is not what helps now. But the conception of reason, and of personality, on which it was based, and which was the achievement of his universe, does. Why is it that that family can break bread together round its table despite such diverse historical traditions pressing on them, so to speak, from behind? The answer is because they find that it is good to be together;

that thus to be together is a value on which to base a new humanity. All this entails the modification, serious albeit respectful, of old beliefs and attitudes. It's something new which is being created.

Note the frailty of the whole process, the sheer historical accidentality of the coming together round a table; the adverse pressure of past and current social/political forces; the fortuitously happy circumstance of an extant legal social arrangement which makes the creativity of the situation possible. To return to Hegel, my point is that his metaphysics is one of becoming: it privileges achievement over absolute identity. Of course it did nothing to make the situation possible, but it does provide now the conceptual fund for understanding, and valuing, its creativity.

Question 3

MS: I accept – and please do tell me if you do not – Hegel's claim that his system is the philosophic formulation of the truth of Christianity, so that the fundamental commitments of Christian faith serve as the foundations of the Hegelian system, and their justification is, as Hegel claims, the purpose of the system. Although I am well aware of Hegel's claim that all of history manifests one and the same truth and proceeding towards its realization, I nonetheless believe that this "truth" and this "history" is a Christian one. I believe that a detailed examination reveals the Hegelian system to be Christian, neck and crop, in its metaphysical premises, its concepts, and the real and ideal possibilities it enables. The *Aufhebung* formulates accurately the Christian logic or theology of substitution which enables Christianity to become *Verus Israel*: the logic of fulfillment via cancellation which is articulated, for example, in the word 'Telos' (as in Romans 10:4 – Christ is both the end and the fulfillment of the Jewish law/Torah/ testament).

A) Would it be correct, in your opinion, to conclude that this very same logic of fulfillment via cancellation leads inevitably to the logic according to which "infidelity is the true fidelity" (one of Derrida's formulations of the logic of Deconstruction)? And hence that Christianity itself (via Paul, Luther, Kant, Hegel) leads inevitably to its secularization, as well as to post modernism? Isn't it possible and even necessary to draw a direct and continuous line – on which Hegelian thought is only a single point – between the emergence and establishment of Christianity and contemporary, post-modern, liberal and secular thought, as its true form and fulfillment?

B) Given both corpuses – that of the Christian thought and that of the Hegelian thought – are based on the same metaphysical premises (i.e., the "Dogmas" of Christianity), and constitute the same logic: Both Christianity and the Hegelian system strive towards the same goal (reconciliation), rely on the same foundation to achieve their goal (the trinity, the identity of the man and God), require the same means (conversion, transgression, the crossing of boundaries, e.g. the boundary between God and man – not as the last

boundary left to cross but as the first boundary which its crossing is the system's condition of possibility) – don't they both lead to the same outcome: to the loss of the absolute, the non-identity of any and every identity, and hence to the zeitgeist of our time – in which any conclusive judgment is condemned, and in which ideology, hegemony, sovereignty, authority, and conservatism are obscene words?

C) Since the Hegelian system cannot be formed nor can it function without the fundamental Christian Dogmas that underlie it (and which it aims to formulate philosophically), an inevitable conclusion is that one cannot embrace Hegel's dialectic, or attempt to develop, modify, or perfect its insights, without embracing the Christian understanding of divinity and, in fact, the entire Christian dogma. This conclusion also applies to any philosophy that explicitly opposes religion (e.g. the allegedly "secular" Marxism): any philosophy that embraces Hegel's dialectic argumentation, but fails to take into account the way in which Christian thought serves as the lynchpin of the entire dialectic system, is in fact relying on the very premises of Christian theology, albeit unconsciously or unwittingly. Would you accept this conclusion?

GdiG: I was afraid you would bring up the issue of Hegel and Christianity and the attendant issue of Israel. Indeed, how could one avoid it? My problem is that your statement of the issue is based on a number of premises which I either reject completely or accept only as qualified. So, let me again proceed in point form.

1. It is essential that one be clear regarding how Hegel understands religion, because, in this, he marks a radical departure from the Enlightenment and from Kant as well, even though the latter had himself already left the Enlightenment behind. (But I must leave Kant out of all this; he would make the argument much too complex). Religion is for Hegel the language of the community about its own identity. It entails an existential commitment to what counts as truly human: an existential *parti pris* regarding the vocation of humankind as finds expression in community rituals, values, and, inevitably, in a narrative about the origin of the universe (the *in illo tempore* narrative). This narrative is of course mythological, but it is distinctive (so far as I know) of both Judaism and Christianity that there be a point of historical truth to it. The more existential aspects of Hegel's concept of religion can be documented in his *Phenomenology*; the more doctrinal, in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. Let this be my premise, which I am stating upfront as clearly as I can.

2. On this understanding of religion, which I take to be typically Hegelian, religion is essentially a product of reason—not of ignorance or the skullduggery of priests and potentates (even though, like all human institutions, it is prey to both). In this, Hegel's attitude towards religion is quite different from the Enlightenment's. (The same could be said of German Idealism in general.) Being rational means to be confronted by the issue of *who* we are, even if the confrontation historically occurs unaware and under natural conditions over which the historical individual has no control.

When you say, therefore, that “a detailed examination reveals the Hegelian system to be Christian, neck and crop,” if you mean that Hegel’s thought is the product of a protracted reflection on the religious beliefs and practices that had shaped his universe, then, of course, you are right. But so was also the case for Plato, Aristotle, Maimonides, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and whoever have you. What else? Can one start anywhere but where one happens to be born? Hegel, moreover, was also retrieving in those beliefs and practices contributions already made by a whole tradition of reflective (philosophical) thinking. But the point in all this, the essential point, is that Hegel was extracting in the medium of the concept (i.e., in theoretical mode) the *truth* of those beliefs and practices—I mean, what they implied about the meaning and the consequence of being rational. The problematic feature of being rational is that, while requiring commitment to universal values, the commitment can only be done in contexts, and with results, which are necessarily highly particularized. Nature makes sure of that. For this reason at the origin of every community there is a decision which might well be inevitable to those involved in it, yet, when seen *ex post facto*, or by an outsider, could have been otherwise. Philosophical reflection, as understood by Hegel, is intended to extract the universal value of any such decision, a value all the more effective in religious beliefs and practices just because, while transcending *per se* their particularities, nonetheless carries immediate presence in their historical medium.

In this sense, rather than a retrenchment into the particularities of an age or culture, I read Hegel’s thought as an invitation to all who have the courage to reflect upon their own *parti pris* to come and look, and see what decisions we can take together. But this is dialogue—discourse, which is another and, in my view, more correct word for the usual “dialectics.” If you deny that possibility, or, worse still, if you think that thought would carry universal meaning only if, *per impossibile*, excogitated out of thin air, then you fate the course of human events to the mechanical logic of power-play. I suspect that contemporary philosophy, especially in the French idiom, does precisely this: hence my antipathy for it. But isn’t any kind of religious orthodoxy also an exercise in power-play?

3. Here is the place to bring up the name of Emil Fackenheim, my respected teacher to whom I owe a great intellectual debt, but who also ended up disappointing me in many ways. (We all have to commit patricide, sooner or later.) He was the one to direct me to the issue of contingency in Hegel’s system. At one point of his career, Emil left Hegel behind, because of Hegel’s obviously Christian heritage, and decided to dedicate his reflections rather to the possible foundations of a renewed typically Jewish thought. Good thing he did, because, in my view, his later excursion on the Jewish return into history and on mending the world are exceptionally brilliant products of committed philosophical reflection. How accurate his understanding of Hegel had been is another story. But the point is that, in posing the question of how is a Jew to face the future after the Holocaust, while naturally addressing himself to his own Jewish community, he was nonetheless raising issues about what it is to be human, most of all, what reason

and rationality are all about, which have universal significance. I have learned from Emil's reflections. Indeed, even my reading of Hegel is coloured by them. Are you excluding me from the privilege of thus learning, just because I am a historical outsider? Hegel wrote his best work in 1807, and inhabited Christendom. Nobody in his right mind would want to be a "Hegelian" in the sense of still wanting to live in his particular world. But there is much to be learned from his reflection on that world, and one need not be a committed Christian (as indeed I am not) to learn from it. I put it to you that Emil was at his most Hegelian—intellectually, of course—precisely as he was trying to leave Hegel behind.

4. There is then the belief in Christianity as *verus* Israel which you attribute to Hegel. Of course, the belief is historically intimately connected with Christendom, and if your syllogism runs like this: Christendom believes in x, but Hegel is Christendom, therefore Hegel believes in x, then you would be justified in your contention. But Hegel was reflecting on his otherwise historical beliefs; he was by that very fact reforming them. There cannot be any simple identification of Hegel and the beliefs in question. His attitude toward Judaism is a case in point. For one thing, his early only posthumously published writings apart, such as were composed at a time when Hegel, in Schelling's words, was still "an intimate of Lessing," Hegel says remarkably little about Judaism. There are several incidental comments, some positive (the ones Glockner elided in the *Jubiläum* edition of his works), other negative — indeed, Hegel's typical attitude towards anything particular. But if one examines the *Phenomenology* closely, one might indeed be surprised to find out that Hegel (Schelling also, incidentally) considers Christianity the culmination, i.e. the upshot and the creative renewal, of classical paganism. I cannot go into details here. The main point is that "alienation," or the feeling of rightfully belonging to a world which is however not tangibly present, is for Hegel the product of the existential conditions under which the peoples found themselves under the Roman law and the arbitrary jurisdiction of the Roman Emperor. These conditions spawned a new self-awareness which, as it happened, found its overt language and associated mythology in the medium of what was originally a squabble within the communities of the Jewish diaspora. On Hegel's account, however, the same self-awareness could have found expression otherwise. To be sure, things happened as they did, and, historically speaking, that's what counts. This does not however alter the fact that, conceptually speaking, Christianity could not have been for Hegel the culmination of Judaism simply because the two are spiritually asymmetrical. I am speaking of Hegel, of course, as the philosopher intent on defining the essence of spiritual entities, for whom, therefore, counterfactuals count. "Alienation" defines Christianity. It surely cannot define a people who believes to be God's chosen one. Hegel's spiritual genealogy of his own beliefs and intellectual culture runs directly from classical antiquity, without any detour into Judaism. It is significant that he attributes the birth of conscience as an inner voice to Antigone, not to the prophets of Israel.

A) I am not sure that I want, or for that matter, even can, answer such a barrage of questions. It is too diffused. Let me try, but only minimally so. If by “fulfillment/cancellation” you mean that, in reflecting on the truth of a historical position, and thereby exposing also its limitation or even outright wrong-headedness, one is thereby irrevocably altering the given cultural/intellectual landscape, then you are right. That’s philosophical common sense. There is no need of rhetorical affectation to make the point. If you mean that our present liberal values which I, for one, greatly value, were spawned out of Christian beliefs, then I would certainly agree. Many bad things were also spawned, I should add. As for secularism being a Christian product, unfortunately I am not one who thinks that Charles Taylor’s hefty tome on the subject does much to clarify the meaning of “secularism.” It is very likely an obfuscating concept. At any rate, you tell me what it means, and I shall try to answer.

B) Again, I cannot respond to this. I cannot follow you in your connecting leaps. Let me just pick up on a few points, but in abstraction from what might be the general intent of your question.

– Reconciliation requires acknowledgement of one’s evil, and trust in the capacity to start anew together with others. What do you have against that?

– Identity is an achievement, and it can mean many things, all to be valued within their limits. Absolute identity is a delusion. Noteworthy for the sake of a “close examination” is what I have already said earlier. Hegel abandons the Absolute at the end of the second book of the Greater Logic; he abandons it as the culmination of classical metaphysics, notably Spinoza’s, and also as the “abyss of reason”—the ultimate source of irrationality. His metaphysics is one of Spirit, of creative becoming.

– Yes, ideology and hegemony have become obscene words: good thing that they have. As for sovereignty, authority, and conservatism, it all depends on what one means by them. It is the mark of wisdom that one knows how to distinguish.

C) No, I would not.