

G.W. F. Hegel

(George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel)

Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*. Rowman and Littlefield: 2001.

I. The Early Theological Writings

a) The Absolute Truth

- i) “Hegel’s frequent insistence that the “Truth is the whole” and that he seeks Absolute Truth simply refers to the epistemological thesis that there is some underlying or unifying Truth which is inadequately expressed by the partial truths of science and previous philosophy” (39).

b) The problem of Christianity

- i) “Christianity is rejected by Hegel because it fails to fulfill the demands of morality, and, in its place, Hegel attempts to formulate a new religion which will satisfy these demands” (40).
- ii) “...Christian ethics provides us with impossible social norms. At most, these norms are workable for a group as small and closely knit as a family, never for an entire society...” (41).

c) Objective and Subjective Religion (Positive and Negative Religion)

i) Objective means theoretical or impractical

ii) Subjective means practical

- (1) “Subjective carries with it no connotation of ‘individual’ or ‘eccentric’, but refers only to the relation of a set of religious doctrines to practice. A religion because it is only defensible only by appeal to practical reason, must therefore be subjective” (40).

d) Criticism of Kant's ethics

- i) Kant separated "reason from inclination and the passions...and Hegel claims that his ethics to be unworkable, for the reason that morality must consist of these two factors working together" (40).

e) Positive Religion and Natural religion

- i) Positive religion is founded upon authority
- ii) Natural religion is founded upon morality and therefore reason
- iii) "Only a natural religion is a justifiable religion" (41).
- iv) Christ taught positive religion
- v) The Christian religion is unnatural and "therefore unjustifiable according to the standards laid down by Kant" (41).

f) Kant's philosophy consist of two disharmonies

- i) The disharmony between God and man "arising from the traditional notion of the divine" (42).
- ii) A "disharmony with man between reason and inclinations, making morality, as conceived by Kant, impossible" (42).

g) Disharmony between God and Man

- i) "The disharmony between God and man is involved in any religious doctrine which teaches of a transcendent God, a God whose existence is somehow independent of men" (42).
- ii) Kant postulated a noumenal God
- iii) "A view of God as a transcendent moral judge takes moral autonomy and responsibility out of the hands of man and places it beyond him" (Ibid).
- iv) "Man is reduced to a 'slave', and his morality is not, as it must be, derived from his own reason, but is instead imposed on him from an outside sources" (Ibid.).

h) Disharmony between Reason and Inclination

- i) “Hegel argues that a morality of practical reason which ignores the importance of the passions effects no right action but rather an internal personal war of one part of the self against another” (43).
- ii) “To make man harmonious... Hegel argues that we must replace this conception of morality...with a ‘higher’ conception” (Ibid.).
- iii) “This more advanced notion of morality he refers to as *Sittlichkeit*, a morality which depends not only on the universal dictates of reason, but on the provincial dictates of custom (*Sitte*) as well” (Ibid.).
- iv) “According to Hegel, a man divided against himself cannot have moral worth. Kant’s ethics only adds ‘rigid conceit’ to this division. According to Kant, an act or a person has moral worth only if the act is performed out of respect for duty alone...” (Ibid.).

(1) But such an act according to Hegel is a contradiction to the inclinations.

- v) “A man cannot be truly free unless he is free not only to obey the law (Kant’s positive notion of freedom), but also free from the necessary frustration of his own passions.>

(1) Thus morality, properly conceived, transcends moralität (duty to the law) and becomes *Sittlichkeit*, passion for the law.>

(2) Law and passion are in agreement, and moral worth is not obedience to reason against the passions, but obedience with the passion to be rational” (44).

- vi) Morality contingent on time, people, and places

(1) “Morality is not universal for all time but is always tied to a people, to a particular stage of ethical development; the universality or morality applies only at particular places at particular times.>

(2) At this stage, Hegel occasionally speaks of ‘absolute morality’ (Absolute *Sittlichkeit*), and regards the manifestation of spirit in ethical community life as the highest realization of spirit.>

(3) Here ‘absolute’ refers not to one single correct morality for all people, but to the correctness of a morality for a given people” (44 – 45).

II. The Purpose of Hegel's System

a) To find the Absolute Truth

- i) Hegel states that 'truth' is "the goal of not only every intellectual discipline, but of every human activity" (45).
- ii) The purpose is to find the Absolute Truth
- iii) "For Hegel, the truth is the goal of ethics, politics, and religion as well as for science and mathematics" (Ibid.).
- iv) Christianity leads to the highest philosophical truth, and is the focal point of Hegel's philosophy.

b) Refutation of Kant's noumenal world of the things-in-themselves

- i) "Hegel argues that we cannot know that the world has an ultimate purpose, that is, is rational, and that there is an unconditioned Supreme Being responsible for this purpose, and that the human soul can survive its earthly body to share the rewards of the Kingdom of God, then it makes no sense to speak of the rationality of religion" (48).
- ii) Therefore, Hegel must disprove of Kant's Critique and prove that we can know of things-in-themselves.

III. The Phenomenology of Spirit

- a) This is the system of his philosophy, and *the system* of philosophy
- b) “The stated goal of philosophy is Absolute Truth, the attainment of absolute knowledge.>
- c) The philosophies of the past, Hegel complains, have given us only partial truths.>
- d) However, philosophy is not conceived as an isolated intellectual effort but as spiritual development made explicit” (49).
- e) “Philosophy is the attempt to derive meaning from material, and because philosophy is the most general quest of knowledge and value, its function is to find meaning in or attempt to understand the whole of human intellectual and cultural development” (49).
- f) “It does not formulate hypotheses about why something happens or try to subsume one even under a general class of events.>
- g) It rather reinterprets a past series of phenomena in such a way that it can be demonstrated that this series led up to some end” (49).
- h) “...the sequence of events or ‘stages’ in the various forms of the dialectic are often not in proper historical order at all” (Ibid.).

IV. Knowledge of Things-In-Themselves

- a) Kant claims that we can only have partial knowledge – knowledge of the phenomenal world, not of the noumenal world.
- b) But to have any sort of knowledge, it must correspond to actual reality.
 - i) “This limited truth is indeed truth only if it is in accordance with reality – with the way things really are – in other words, with Absolute Truth” (51).
- c) For Hegel, knowledge of objects and transcendental self-knowledge are but two stages in the attainment of further kinds of knowledge, knowledge of oneself as Spirit, and knowledge of objects as they are in-themselves” (52).

V. Spirit

- a) Translations of *Geist* or Spirit
 - i) Mind
 - ii) Spirit, the 'subject' of the Phenomenology
 - iii) Spirit as the Divine
 - iv) "It is also clear that Spirit is something very human, for the development of Spirit we find in the Phenomenology is clearly the development of human thought" (52).
 - v) The Truth
 - vi) The Absolute Truth
 - vii) The Idea
 - viii) The Notion
- b) Spirit or Truth is sometimes used as conditional – that it is in a process of becoming rather than in a state of being.
- c) Transcendental Ego
 - i) Kant's transcendental ego corresponds to the person – two different realms
 - ii) "For Hegel, the transcendental ego is literally a general or universal consciousness, as it ought to have been for Kant. Hegel's Spirit is Kant's transcendental ego without commitment concerning its number or individuation" (55).
 - iii) "Because Spirit is simply subject, Hegel can speak of its subject without ever committing himself to any sort of differentiation" (Ibid.).

VI. Consciousness and the Dialectic

a) Sense certainty (56)

- i) “The state of consciousness referred to as ‘sense-certainty,’ the very beginning of consciousness or knowledge, is ‘knowledge of the immediate.’”
- ii) “It is ‘what is presented before us,’ ‘what is given.’”
- iii) “It pure ‘apprehension’ without yet any ‘conceptual comprehension.’”
- iv) “It is raw experience, without any trace of understanding of this experience, the experience of a passive sensitive receptacle.”

b) Knowledge is a product of understanding (57)

- i) “...Hegel essentially agreed with Kant...that there can be no unconceptualized knowledge, that knowledge is essentially a product of the understanding.”
- ii) “...knowledge is essentially an *active* process, that mere experience can never give us knowledge, that synthesis of experience by rules or concepts is necessary.”
- iii) “To use the frequent Hegelian-Kantian term, knowledge is necessarily universal, it comes about by use of concepts in language that always apply to not on particular case but to an indefinitely large number of cases.”

iv) Perception (58)

- (1) “Perception is the first appearance of knowledge, for this stage is the beginning of comprehension of our experiences.”
- (2) “We now interpret experiences by applying concepts.”
- (3) “In Hegel’s short description, the object of consciousness is now the *thing*. As a thing, this object is characterizable and characterized by ascription of properties, in other words, by the application of universally applicable concepts to this particular thing.”

v) Understanding (58)

- (1) “The salutation to the problem of unity is provided by the level of consciousness which is the understanding.”
- (2) “However, like Kant’s use there is the reference here not to just any concepts... but rather those special sets of concepts to which Kant refers as the Categories.”
- (3) “Among these categories is the category of substance which is the solution to the problem of unity.”

VII. Self-consciousness: Master and Slave

- a) “Consciousness becomes self-consciousness when it realizes itself as the source of the forces and the laws of understanding” (60).
- b) “Hegel tell us that ‘self consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness’...(60).
- c) In other words, self consciousness exists only when it is acknowledge or recognized.
- d) “First there is the suggestion that the concept of ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘self-identity’ can only arise in confrontation with others.>
- e) Hegel’s thesis might thus be construed as the claim that a person has no concept of ‘self’, cannot refer to himself, and cannot say things about himself... until he is *taught* by someone else” (60).
- f) “Secondly, there is a more moderate thesis that one can only develop self-consciousness, that is, a *particular* concept of himself, through confrontation with other people” (Ibid.).
- g) “The first part of the parable is quiet simple and straightforward: two self-consciousnesses encounter each other and struggle to ‘cancel’ each other in order to ‘prove their certainty of themselves’ (prove their independence and freedom) against the other, who appears as an independent (and therefore limiting) being” (Ibid.).

h) Master and slave relationship

- i) “In fighting for recognition, each tries to save his own life, but each tries also, if possible, to preserve the life of his opponent.>
- ii) If one consciousness is victor, and neither loses his life, then one becomes consciousness ‘for-itself,’ independent, a master, while the other becomes a consciousness ‘for-another,’ a slave (whose essence, Hegel mysteriously comments, is ‘life,’ indicating that it is perhaps he who arranged this relationship to save his life)” (61).
- iii) “The master is ‘self-existence,’ but he too is being-for-itself existing only through another.>
- iv) The master, although self-sufficient in the sense of having the slave dependent on him, is also dependent on this dependence” (61).

VIII. Reason

- a) “Rational consciousness is the end of the Phenomenology, a final ‘unification of the diverse elements in its process.’>
- b) Reason resolves by harmonizing... the ‘disharmonies’ between God and Man, and between morality (Practical Reason) and personal inclination.>
- c) The Spirit of Absolute Knowledge is both Immanent God and human society” (63).
- d) “Reason ...also marks the synthesis of a number of disharmonies that have been introduced in the dialectic...: the inadequacies of traditional epistemological thought (the ‘opposition of subject and object’); the resolution of the master-slave relationship and interpersonal conflict (including the internalized conflict of the ‘unhappy’ consciousness); and... to ‘harmonize’ all human efforts and, in an Aristotelian way, find the proper conceptual place for each of them” (Ibid.)
- e) “The ‘harmony of morality and objective nature’ Hegel refers to as the ‘final purpose of the world’” (Ibid.).