Hegelian Panentheism

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Introduction

Hegel often states that God is the true subject matter of philosophy. In his manuscript for the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1824), Hegel writes that "God is the one and only object of philosophy…" and that "philosophy is theology."[1] In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel states that both philosophy and religion hold that, "God and God alone is the truth."[2] However, Hegel's idea of God is radically different from traditional theological conceptions. Further, the role God plays in his philosophy is both complicated and controversial.

The traditional idea of God – found in all three of the major, monotheist theologies – is that of a being who absolutely transcends the world. He is also complete, perfect, and invulnerable. On this account, one cannot claim that God *had* to create the world, since this would place God under some sort of compulsion, but what could compel God? Further, God could not have satisfied some sort of need through creating, since a perfect being needs nothing. Indeed, according to the traditional conception, God would have lost absolutely nothing had he never created at all. This leads to some major difficulties for theology. First, the act of creation emerges as a complete mystery. The most one can do is to claim that creation was an unnecessitated act of supreme generosity on God's part – or some kind of "overflow" of divine goodness, as Neoplatonism would have it. Further, if God is absolutely invulnerable, needing nothing, then how could he be moved by prayer?

[1] Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (henceforth LPR), 3 vols. (1984, vol. 1, p. 84); *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (henceforth VPR), 3 vols. (1983–1987, vol. 1, pp. 3–4).

[2] Hegel (1991, henceforth Geraets, p. 24). When Hegel's numbered paragraphs are referred to, the abbreviation EL will be used. This is EL § 1.

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(He could not be, in fact.) Ultimately, this traditional conception of God is a development of ideas that can be traced all the way back to the Pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes (fl. 6th Cent. B.C.), but the major figure here is Aristotle.

The key to Hegel's new theology consists in his rejection of God's transcendence. Like Spinoza, Hegel argues that an infinite God cannot be distinct from creation, for such a distinction would limit God and cancel his infinity. However, Hegel is not driven as a result of this to simply identify God with nature, as Spinoza does. (As we will see much later, Hegel rejected the "monism" of Spinoza.) Instead, Hegel argues that God is, in effect, a "process" which unfolds itself in nature, but only reaches true realization or completion in human consciousness. Thus, Hegel's heresy does not consist solely in rejecting the transcendence of God: Hegel also argues that God "develops" over time, and through history. This puts Hegel's theology close to various mystical conceptions that have arisen in the different monotheist faiths – and simultaneously makes his relation to Christianity just as complex and problematic as that of the Christian mystics. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to exploring these ideas in greater detail. Nevertheless, it would be accurate to say that the "argument" for Hegel's theology consists in his entire philosophical system, and all the sometimes baffling twists and turns of the dialectic. Therefore, of necessity what follows is only a very brief and highly compressed account of Hegel's God.

Hegel's Developmental Conception of God

To fully understand how Hegel conceives of God we must begin with the Logic, the first major division of Hegel's philosophical system. Hegel's Logic is an extremely complex and difficult work, elaborated in two versions.[3] However, we can say that it is essentially an attempt to articulate the formal structure of reality itself. Thus, the Logic can be understood as a "formal ontology" (though many Hegelians would object to this way of describing it). It is not a mere catalogue of concepts, however. Instead, the Logic is a systematic whole in which each idea is what it is in relation to all the others, and all are necessary moments (i.e., inseparable parts) of the whole itself.

In a famous passage of *The Science of Logic*, Hegel states that the Logic "is to be understood as the system of pure reason, as the realm of pure thought. This realm is truth as it is without veil and in its own absolute nature. It can therefore be said that this content is the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite Spirit"[4] What Hegel tells us, in short, is that the

[3] When I am referring to the Logic as a division of the system (i.e., as a set of ideas) and not as a specific text, I capitalize but do not italicize it. Hegel elaborated his Logic in two versions. The first is a three-volume work published 1812–1816 and titled *The Science of Logic*. The second consists in the first division of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1817). This is often referred to simply as the *Encyclopedia Logic*.

[4] Hegel (1969, p. 50, 1992, pp. 33–34).

Logic gives us an account God "in himself." This phrase is a variation on "in itself" (*an sich*), which Hegel often uses – and which is not to be confused with the similar, Kantian expression "thing in itself." Hegel's distinction between what is "in itself" and what is "for itself" is more or less identical to Aristotle's distinction between potency (*dunamis*) and act (*energeia*). The "in itself" is what is merely potential, inchoate, and undeveloped. Thus, we can say that the Logic gives us an account of God in inchoate form. This is correct – so long as we keep in mind that the Logic does not describe a God that exists *temporally* prior to creation. The God described in the Logic – God as he is "in himself" – is *logically* prior to creation. This is because he is, in fact, the *idea of the world* itself. (Here, of course, Hegel is drawing on a rich tradition of philosophical, theological, and mystical ideas, and making God essentially the eternal *logos*; hence, *logic*.)

The Logic is divided into three major parts: The Doctrine of Being, Doctrine of Essence, and Doctrine of the Concept. Hegel refers to the first two divisions as "Objective Logic," and the last as "Subjective Logic." Still, though the categories of being and essence deal with "the Objective" they are also categories of thought, or concepts. In the Logic, in fact, the distinction between thought and being is transcended, and its concepts are simultaneously categories of thought *and* of reality. In the Doctrine of the Concept Hegel treats the nature of the concept *as such*. Thought reflects for the first time explicitly on thought itself, and all the earlier categories (of being and essence) are understood to have their significance in being comprehended by a self-aware thought. As a result, the Doctrine of the Concept is devoted to *concepts of concepts*, and culminates in what Hegel calls the Absolute Idea, a purely self-related category: the idea of idea, or concept of concept itself. In it, the distinction between subject and object has been overcome. Absolute Idea is also understood to "contain" all the preceding categories as, in effect, its definition.

Hegel describes Absolute Idea as "the Idea that thinks itself,"[5] and he explicitly likens it to Aristotle's concept of God: "This is the *noésis noéseós* [thought thinking itself] which was already called the highest form of the Idea by Aristotle."[6] The argument of the Logic establishes that Idea is the Absolute: the whole which encompasses all fundamental determinations within itself and is related to nothing else, only to itself. Furthermore, Hegel tries to demonstrate that everything is intelligible as a concretization of this Idea. Hegel believes that his Logic unveils the inner truth latent within the theology of Aristotle (and other philosophers), as well as the understanding of the ordinary person: God (or Idea) is a supreme being, everywhere yet nowhere (immanent and transcendent), from which all other things derive their being.

However, the Idea of the Logic is fundamentally limited: it still *merely idea*. As we have said, it is "God in himself," or God implicit. As Idea it is real or objective, but only in that it is not a subjective creation of human consciousness. In the Philosophy of Nature, the second division of Hegel's system, he argues that nature must be understood just as Idea concretely expressing or "externalizing" itself (and doing so without end). Hegel sees nature as a great chain of being, at the apex

[5] Geraets, 303; *EL* § 236.

[6] Geraets, 303; *EL* § 236, Addition (*Zusatz*).

of which is living things. The organism is a kind of physical approximation of Idea. It is a complex system of parts which can catalyze its own chemical and other processes without the constant intervention of external forces (i.e., it is self-related). Hegel states that "The organic being is totality as found in nature, an individuality which is for itself and which internally develops into its differences."[7] As a genuine whole, the elements of which can have no independent existence, organic being is a simulacrum of the internally-differentiated and self-determining Idea of the Logic.

Higher still than nature, however, is human Spirit (*Geist*). Spirit is capable of achieving consciousness of the fundamental categories of existence (revealed in the Logic), and of how they are expressed in nature, and in human nature. Human Spirit begins in nature (we are, after all, animals), but raises itself out of the merely natural through reflection on nature and on itself. The highest achievement of Spirit is self-consciousness, the supreme expression of which occurs in art, religion, and philosophy (what Hegel calls, collectively, Absolute Spirit). Spirit constitutes the true embodiment of Absolute Idea, which is, in reality, merely the *idea* of the overcoming of the subject-object distinction. In self-consciousness, this overcoming is made actual: our object is the subject, or, we can say, the subject becomes object. (Animal organisms were merely *self-related* – able, for example, to respond to threats to their survival – but not truly self-conscious.)

Now, if Absolute Idea is God *in himself*, merely inchoate, then Absolute Spirit is God *for himself*: fully realized or actualized. In short, it is only through human consciousness that God is truly born. God, for Hegel, is not really God if considered apart from creation (this is God as mere idea). God requires creation in order to enjoy full, concrete reality. In humanity, Idea truly comes to know itself through our philosophical reflection on the Logic. This is why Hegel says that in the Logic we merely have "God as he is in his eternal essence *before the creation of nature and a finite Spirit*." Again, Hegel's language here must be understood as figurative: he does not believe that *first* comes Idea, *then* nature, *then* Spirit. It is rather the case that Idea is eternally "embodying itself" as nature and Spirit.

Hegel objects to Christian theologians and clergy who claim that mankind cannot know God, or who brand the attempt to know God as impious. Not only is such knowledge possible, Hegel claims, it is our highest duty to obtain it. Knowing God is our highest duty because, for Hegel, God only fully comes into being in the community of worshippers. Hegel holds that "The concept of God is God's idea, [namely,] to become and make himself objective to himself. This is contained in God as Spirit: God is essentially in his community and has a community; he is objective to himself, and is such truly only in self-consciousness [so that] God's very own highest determination is self-consciousness." Beforehand, God is "incomplete," Hegel says.[8]

[7] Hegel (1970, p. 27); Philosophy of Nature (*Encyclopedia of the Philosopical Sciences*) § 252, Addition.

[8] LPR I, 186–187; VPR I, 96.

It is possible to express everything that has been said thus far without recourse to theological language. Many of Hegel's modern interpreters, some of whom adopt what is often called a "non-metaphysical" approach, prefer to do without talk of God. They would object to the account I have given above as sounding too "metaphysical" (and too "mystical"). Doing without all theological (and mystical) language one can simply say of the Hegelian system that the Logic constitutes a formal ontology which can be used to understand the rational order to existence. It culminates in Absolute Idea, the most adequate concrete exemplar of which is Absolute Spirit, or self-knowing humanity.

The trouble with such an account, however, is that Hegel himself employs theological language, and talks of God rather frequently in fact. Further, it is almost irresistible to employ "mystical" language in dealing with his system, since Hegel's account of the Absolute/God really does have a great deal in common with the ideas of the great mystics. (This is a subject I have covered extensively elsewhere.[9]) Hegel himself defined "mysticism" as an older term for "speculation," the very word he uses to describe his philosophy.[10] Like Meister Eckhart, and many other mystics (East and West), Hegel rejects any firm distinction between the infinite and the finite, or God and the world. I alluded to Hegel's argument for this earlier: if the infinite stands opposed to (or distinguished from) the finite, then it is *limited* by the finite and cannot be genuinely infinite. Therefore, the "true infinite" for Hegel can only *contain* the finite. To put this in theological terms, God cannot be understood as entirely separate from the world – or vice versa. Instead, we must understand God as containing the world, in the sense that it is a moment or aspect of God's being.

Thus, Hegel's understanding of God has rightly been described as *panentheism*, which translates literally as all-in-God-ism: the belief that the world is within God. God is not reducible to nature, or to Spirit, for we have seen that God is also Idea, which transcends any finite being. However, nature and Spirit are, in addition to Idea, necessary moments in the being of God.

Spinoza

I referred already to Spinoza, in such a way as to suggest that Hegel's philosophy is quite different from his. Nevertheless, some readers may recognize that the argument given above regarding God's infinity is not original with Hegel: it comes right out of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza also argues that everything must exist within God, since the existence of anything outside of God would cancel his infinity. Thus, Spinoza's system can certainly also be described as panentheism. How, then, are Hegel and Spinoza really different?

[9] See Magee (2001; revised paperback edition, 2008); and Magee (2008).

[10] Geraets, 133; EL § 82, Addition.

Spinoza's philosophy was certainly important for Hegel, as well as his schoolmates Hölderlin and Schelling. Hölderlin inscribed the Greek "pantheist" motto, *hen kai pan* ("one and all" – i.e., the many is one), in Hegel's yearbook of 1791. The phrase *hen kai pan* was taken from *On the Teaching of Spinoza in Letters to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819). Jacobi reports Lessing as having said, "The orthodox concepts of the deity are no longer for me. *Hen kai pan*, I know no other." This book was mainly responsible for the Spinoza revival of the late eighteenth century, which exercised a great influence on many thinkers of the time. According to Hegel's biographer Karl Rosenkranz, Hegel, Schelling, and others at the Tübingen seminary, all read *On the Teaching of Spinoza*. Schelling in particular developed an enthusiasm for Spinoza which would last for a number of years.

Hegel's major criticisms of Spinoza are aimed at what he regards as Spinoza's monism: his claim that there is really only one substance (or being), and that everything is in this substance. On the surface, it might seem that Hegel and Spinoza agree here, but Hegel charges that Spinoza's God (or nature) is simply a "block universe" in which everything is actual at once, without any development. Hegel sees Spinoza's God/Nature as "static," while Hegel makes his God "dynamic": God unfolds himself in the world and in history (the development of human self-consciousness) through a constant process of determinate negation (dialectic). Further, in Spinoza's universe the human (what Hegel calls Spirit) is merely one finite being among others within God. Hegel, of course, claims that it is through Spirit that God is truly actualized. In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel states that "God is certainly necessity or, as we can also say, he is the absolute matter [*Sache*], but at the same time he is the absolute *person*, too. This is the point that Spinoza never reached."[11] Spinoza's view is that God requires nature in order to be God. Hegel's claim is that God requires nature *and* Spirit, and achieves true embodiment when Spirit "returns to the source" in its understanding of the systematic structure of the Idea.

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* of 1805, Hegel makes the following remarks about Spinoza, and strangely enough compares him unfavorably to the German mystic Jacob Boehme: "His [Spinoza's] philosophy is only fixed substance, not yet Spirit; in it we do not confront ourselves. God is not Spirit here because he is not the triune. Substance remains rigid and petrified, without Boehme's sources. The particular determinations in the form of thought-determinations are not Boehme's source-spirits which unfold in one another."[12] Hegel's claim here is that while Boehme gives a quasi-dialectical account of the attributes of God, Spinoza simply asserts that God is somehow differentiated into attributes, without giving a genuine account of that differentiation and how it unfolds.

[11] Geraets, 226; EL § 151, Addition.

[12] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 3 vols. (1892, vol. 3, p. 288); not present in *Hegels Werke*, see *Sämtliche Werke* (1928, p. 377).

Philosophy and Religion

Hegel tells us that the content of both religion and philosophy is identical. Both concern themselves with God, though philosophy calls God "the Absolute." Religion understands its subject matter in terms of images, metaphors and stories (what Hegel calls 'picture thinking'), whereas philosophy understands God in purely conceptual, rational terms. (Nevertheless, Hegel continually slides back and forth between philosophical and theological language.)

Hegel holds that true philosophy is not antagonistic to religious belief. In fact, he argues that religion is in and of itself absolute truth. He states that "religion is precisely the true content but in the form of picture-thinking, and philosophy is not the first to offer the substantive truth. Humanity has not had to await philosophy in order to receive for the first time the consciousness or cognition of truth."[13] Also, in a certain way philosophy depends upon religion, because the philosopher first encounters the content of absolute truth in religion. Notoriously, Hegel claims that before the advent of Christianity philosophy could not have presented absolute truth in a fully adequate form. In a famous passage from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel remarks that "philosophy *is* theology, and [one's] occupation with philosophy – or rather *in* philosophy – is of itself the service of God."[14]

Still, because it is only philosophy that can understand the *meaning* of religious myth and dogma, it can also be maintained that philosophy stands on a higher level than religion. Philosophy is able to state the truth in a way religion never can, because of religion's reliance upon picture-thinking. However, Hegel believes that human beings need to encounter the truth in "sensuous form" as well, not just through philosophy alone. Therefore, religion is intrinsically valuable and necessary. Religious belief and religious practice will never be displaced by philosophy, and will remain constants of human existence.

All religions approach the truth, but Hegel believes that some come closer to finding it than others do. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,* Hegel presents a kind of "natural history" of religions past and present, which he revised a great deal over the years. This material is grouped by Hegel under the heading "Determinate Religion" (i.e., determinate forms taken by Absolute Spirit in the mode of religion). This section is followed by "Absolute Religion," which refers to Christianity alone. Hegel states elsewhere that "God has revealed himself through the Christian religion; i.e., he has granted mankind the possibility of recognizing his nature, so that he is no longer an impenetrable mystery."[15]

In essence, all religions are ways of relating humanity to the divine – but Hegel claims that in Christianity this essence of religion becomes the religion itself. In other words, in Christianity the relation of the human to the divine becomes the central

[13] LPR I, 251; VPR I, 159.

[14] LPR I, 84; VPR I, 4.

[15] Hegel (1975, p. 40), (1966, p. 45).

feature of the religion. This occurs through the person of Jesus Christ, man become one with God. Hegel sees in Christianity a kind of allegory depicting the central tenets of his own philosophy. God, the eternal *logos* (Idea), creates an other, nature. He then creates humanity, whom he exalts above all else in nature. Men are creatures of nature, but they are capable of understanding creation itself, and of attempting to commune with its source through religious devotion. At the appropriate juncture in history, once human beings have become ready to receive the ultimate revelation, God appears among men as Jesus Christ. Finite and infinite are brought together in one individual. Philosophy is required, however, to disclose the true meaning of this revelation: that the *telos* of creation, and the actualization of the being of God, lies in Spirit. Philosophy (as philosophy of religion or theology) is required to explain that "the word [*logos*] made flesh" is Idea come to concrete embodiment. And philosophy is needed to make explicit the real message of Christianity: that what is true of Christ is true of everyone; that we are all Absolute Spirit.

In the "Revealed Religion" section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and in other writings, Hegel presents his speculative understanding of Christianity and Christian dogmas. His treatment of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the most famous of these. In truth, Hegel's understanding of the Trinity is central to why he regards Christianity as the Absolute Religion. For Hegel, the Trinity is a kind of mythic representation of the three "sciences" of speculative philosophy: Logic, Philosophy of Nature, and Philosophy of Spirit. According to Christian teaching, the Father is the "godhead," and the Son is Jesus Christ, God become flesh. The Holy Spirit dwells within the community of believers, uniting them and guiding them to true faith in God. However, the three "persons" of the Trinity are understood as mysteriously one, or consubstantial. This doctrine has been understood in many different ways, and has been the source of many schisms within Christianity.

Hegel's speculative interpretation of the Trinity holds that the Father represents Idea "in-itself," unmanifest, "prior to creation." The Father or Idea must "freely release" himself/itself as an other. This moment of otherness, God "for-himself" (or Idea "for-itself") is the Son, the second person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit, of course, represents Absolute Spirit (self-conscious humanity): God's "other" come to consciousness of itself just as an expression of Idea (thus, Idea "in-and-for itself"). In Absolute Spirit, consequently, we "return to the Father."

This account may suggest that Hegel claims a straightforward correspondence between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and Logic-Nature-Spirit – but matters are actually more complex than this. Of course, nature is certainly an "other" to Idea, and there are passages where Hegel does seem to equate nature with "the Son." For instance, in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel states that "God reveals himself in two different ways: as nature and as Spirit. Both manifestations are temples of God which he fills, and in which he is present. God, as an abstraction, is not true God, but only as the living process of positing his other, the world, which comprehended in its divine form is his Son; and it is only in unity with his other, in

Spirit, that God is subject."[16] However, Hegel does not identify Christ with nature *simpliciter*, or understand him merely as a symbol for nature. Rather, Christ represents the transcendence of the dichotomy between man and God: Christ is God, yet also a man. Hegel holds that Christianity is the first religion to conceive of the idea of God realizing himself through humanity (though this is an implication of the Christian religion which must be brought out by philosophy). In Hegel's philosophy, of course, Absolute Idea is only "actualized" via Absolute Spirit.

Hegel states in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that "God [the Father] makes himself an object for himself [the Son]; then, in this object, God remains the undivided essence within this differentiation of himself within himself, and in this differentiation of himself loves himself, i.e., remains identical with himself – this is God as Spirit."[17] In other words, God/Idea embodies himself/itself as nature but pre-eminently as man, who recognizes that he is one with Idea, or is Idea's concrete expression. We can therefore say that through man God comes to know himself (Idea knows itself), and that this constitutes the self-completion or perfection of God. Again, it is hard not to see this interpretation of Christian doctrine as somehow "mystical," and Hegel does not really dispute this. At one point in the *Lectures*, in fact, he quotes the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (*c*. 1260–*c*. 1328): "The eye with which God sees me is the eye with which I see him; my eye and his eye are one and the same. In righteousness I am weighed in God and he in me. If God did not exist nor would I; if I did not exist nor would he."[18]

Christianity comes close, in Hegel's view, to realizing the truths of speculative philosophy. However, because it is religion and not philosophy of religion it cannot grasp the full import of its teachings.

Conclusion

Because Spirit is one of the moments of the being of God, and because it is only in Spirit that Idea as self-thinking thought is truly "embodied," readers of Hegel often wonder if he has not really made man into God. This is precisely what was claimed by Feuerbach, who insisted that if Hegel had truly understood himself he would have realized that his philosophy leads necessarily to this conclusion.

However, Feuerbach misunderstood Hegel's theology. As noted earlier, Hegel rejects any rigid distinction between God and the world. The world is understood as a necessary moment in the being of God, with God/Idea portrayed essentially as a "process," rather than something fixed and complete. God (or the Idea) perpetually expresses itself as the universe. One moment in this process is its coming to

[16] Hegel (1970, p. 13); Philosophy of Nature § 246, Addition.

[17] LPR I, 126; VPR I, 43.

[18] LPR I, 347–348; VPR I, 248. This is actually a "quilt quotation" made up of portions of several lines in Eckhart.

consciousness of itself through human Spirit. Just like everything else, we are an embodiment of Idea – but because we are self-knowing, Idea achieves consciousness of itself through us. Humanity is thus a necessary moment in the being of God, and the *consummating* moment – but it is still only one moment. God as Absolute Idea, "God in himself," exists quite independently of finite human beings. Minus the consummating moment of Absolute Spirit, Idea would be incomplete – but Idea would still express itself in the form of nature.

Hegel's account of God remains one of the strangest, most complex, and thought-provoking theologies ever developed. Despite its off-putting peculiarities it is also, once understood, one of the most intellectually satisfying. What is missing from most theologies is any coherent, plausible explanation of why God would create beings like ourselves in the first place – beings who seek to know God and the universe. (Sunday school explanations such as "God wanted someone to acknowledge and worship him" simply won't do, as they imply that God is needy.) Hegel's philosophy argues, in fact, that the purpose of existence is its achievement of self-consciousness through humanity – that through us, the world finally knows itself, and achieves a kind of closure. This achievement of the self-consciousness of existence *just is God*, for Hegel. This conception, whatever one chooses to make of it, possesses an undeniable grandeur, and an allure that is hard to resist.

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