

Three Questions about Hegel Today

In April 2016 I received an invitation: “My name is Yehuda Vizan, a Hebrew poet, translator, critic and editor of Israel's largest printed literary magazine 'Dehak' (biblical word meaning both "stress" and "push" or even "emergency") our magazine is devoted to poetry, prose, theater, philosophy, Judaism, Art and criticism. We are publishing our next issue on October 2016 and if you have the time and will, We would like to conduct a short interview with you in which you will be presented with (only) three questions, or better say - assumptions, regarding Hegel's metaphysics, ethics, and philosophy of religion.”

Happy to discuss Hegel, I responded to the questions, posed by Michal Segal, a Hegel scholar from the Bar-Ilan University. In October 2016 the Hebrew translation was published in Israel. Here is my English version. Martin Donougho provided valuable feedback during its composition.

From *Dehak*: (Michal Segal)

1) 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?

2) 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?

3) 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 corpses – 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?

David Kolb's Response:

I am grateful to *Dehak* and to Yehuda Vizan for providing the

opportunity to write to you, and for creating provocative questions. In answering them I will discuss issues that run through all the questions rather than grouping my comments into three answers.

Is Hegel's philosophy based a foundation of Christian dogma?

When I was studying philosophy one of my Hegel teachers (Quentin Lauer) claimed that Hegel offered the best metaphysical analysis of the Christian doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation. A second (John Findlay) read Hegel as a mobile Neoplatonist. A third (Kenley Dove) claimed that Hegel was the first completely atheistic philosopher, because he developed his logic by pure modernist self-determination without any preexisting foundation in God's will or nature. While Hegel talks a great deal about God and Christianity, he illuminates them by a logic that develops on its own.

At least in Hegel's intent, his philosophy is not "based on" anything but its own self-developing method. Hegel does say that Christianity creates a society whose social roles create independent and reflective selves who can develop his type of philosophy. This is a social precondition, allowing individuals to envision the project of self-determining pure thought. But Christian dogmas are not premises that the system starts from. The system is to be guided by a logic that is not developed from any historical set of premises.

For Hegel, any religious tradition provides an entry into thought, but only in images and stories, not yet in concepts. Hegel was not "justifying" Christian doctrines. He was "thinking" them, interpreting them to give them rational structure and necessity, showing that they have a necessary place in the system of the world and history. But none of this justifies their "truth" until he can think through their conceptual content and where that content belongs in

the larger development of spirit.

It is true that his overall system does think the nature of reality through concepts coincident with his reading of the images in the Christian doctrines of Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption (though many sources behind his readings were barely orthodox). Towards the end of his life Hegel was toying with leaving Berlin and moving to Belgium to get away from the interference of “those pastors” in Berlin demanding more Christian orthodoxy. Recall also that Hegel claimed that the modern man’s morning prayer is to read the morning newspaper. Find spirit in the world, not in some given Book. What Hegel’s philosophy leads you to is not a reconciling personal relationship with a forgiving Father but rather to finding the rose in the cross of your present time, being reconciled to the achievements, limitations and, yes, evils, of your current situation. Accepting your finite life as part of a larger movement in a kind of infinity that is not the infinity of the standard image of a personal God.

Hegel’s logical works present a more radical picture than his popular presentations that use Christian imagery. He also expects ordinary citizens, non-philosophers, to understand the conclusions of philosophy mostly by seeing them in the Christian images and stories, not in pure conceptual content. Which gets priority? Hegel's wife was shocked to learn that her husband had not believed in the individual immortality of the soul. I imagine that Hegel was sincere when he said that he was a good Christian but I am also sure that his Christianity and his God were thought through the lens of his logic on identity and non-identity.

Does Hegel’s dialectical process shatter all identities, or does it culminate in one final absolute entity? Even if it did, would the

dialectic shatter its own absolute, leading on to a total fragmentation of identity?

Hegel claims that any identity, any self-identity involves a moment of non-identity, that identity is “the identity of identity and non-identity.” Does that negative moment get swallowed up in a smooth self-relationship? Or does it remain to trouble and complicate the achieved identity? I answer that in all cases the negative moment remains and propels change.

But is not that negativity that propels the development of the system finally tamed in the final systematic totality? Many interpreted Hegel as seeking a static complete identity. In the English-speaking world this interpretation was amplified by the British idealists at the close of the 19th century. The shapes of spirit we see distributed in space in the philosophy of nature and distributed in time are located in a static space-time totality, albeit one with a peculiar internal topology.

Here we face the dispute about “the end of history” in Hegel. My view is that Hegel intended the Logic to be complete, though he knew he had not yet perfected it. But he expected empirical history to continue, nations to rise and fall, art to continue innovating within its limits, nature to be further revealed by science — but all of this happening on a stage that was now fully furnished with all the concepts and tools for us to understand the development of spirit within these new happenings. The final systematic totality was not static, not wholly positive, still on the move, but it did reach a stage of fully understanding the essential structure of its movements.

Any interpretation of Hegel as a philosopher of a final pure identity presumes that there is a step (by intellect or intuition, a la Schelling) to a place *outside* opposition and dialectic. But Hegel’s logic is trying to achieve thought’s pure comprehension of its own motion *from inside that motion*,

relying on the reflectivity or doubling inherent in consciousness. The triple syllogism at the end of the Encyclopedia offers no place to stand that is not always already in motion being constituted by the other aspects of the system. There is no watchtower from which you can watch the system gyrating below you. Given the dialectic nature of identity, there is no quiescent total vision on any level. Some of Hegel's rhetoric and imagery suggest otherwise, but I insist on the priority of the logical analysis to reinterpret those images in terms of an identity which is always internally divided and never quiescent.

However this does not automatically imply that Hegel deconstructs himself into postmodernism. The issue there is whether or not Hegel's pure self-grasp of spirit's internal motions undermines its own purity and completion. Hegel would argue that it does not. I think there are indeed problems with Hegel's position, but they have a different origin than the three questions suggest.

Do attempts to stand aside from Hegel by finding some non-identity that escapes the dialectic succeed in blocking Hegel's strategy, or have they already succumbed to it?

Hegel's ambitions for his system are so total that many fear that if they let the dialectical machine begin to operate it will advance inexorably toward them, swallowing up thinkers and ideas, pinning them in some niche in the giant System-Museum. So his opponents try to find something that the system cannot digest: subjectivity, individuality, otherness, multiplicity, difference, something that will escape the system's onrushing dialectical monster and its operating principle of double negation.

I agree with the question that in so far as thinkers draw an opposition between identity and non-identity they remain in the vicinity of Hegel's logic,

but I'm not sure that they are embracing exactly the same premises as Hegel. That would depend on what kind of non-identity is meant when we talk about postmodernism fragmentation and deconstruction. I agree also that the common day-to-day postmodern scholasticism that spreads and simplifies notions such as endless Derridian dissemination or Deleuzian multiplicity do face the dialectic directly in its path and can be mowed down by the machine. But the original postmodern notions swerve aside rather than directly oppose him. It is possible to avoid being processed by the dialectical machine, but not by putting supposedly indigestible obstacles in its path.

We can criticize the details of this or that dialectical move in Hegel, but he admitted that his elaboration of the system was imperfect. In his courses over the years he changed the details of the logic and the philosophy of spirit many times. But on a deeper level, what stayed constant throughout the revisions was Hegel's goal. That is where criticism should lodge.

Heidegger mounts many attacks on Hegel based upon misreadings of his texts. The one that sticks is the claim that the goal of the dialectic expresses a particular historical interpretation of the meaning of being. The way to avoid Hegel is not to play the game on his terms, but to deny his game its claimed purity and necessity. The goal of pure self-determined thought is dependent on one meaning of being. It has an outside. Seeing Hegel as offering one historically important method of understanding allows us to avoid the "all or nothing" choice that makes people avoid even trying to deal with his complex analyses. His analyses have much to teach us, and we should not approach them fearing to be swallowed up. (The questions I was asked may be suggesting something like this in their remark that the logic of the system is "misconceived.")

What makes Hegel's analysis of culture different from postmodernism is

that he does assert a moment of immediacy that can seem to be simple self-identity. Hegel is more forgiving than the postmodernists of those who would accept simple identities in art or religion or common sense, for he sees them as emphasizing one moment of the complex movement. But they are not the whole story and their simple immediate identity is constituted as a moment within a larger movement, a moment that undermines itself. Hegel would be aghast at the degree of fragmentation in our world today, and he might point to the spread of new fundamentalisms as proving his claim that culture and society need a moment of immediate identity.

The issue then becomes what goes beyond or undermines that moment of immediacy. Hegel thought that European culture was in danger of evaporating into the endless ironic self-doublings of romantic theorists such as the Schlegels, or ironic art as in the novels of Jean-Paul. He tried to contain that destructive motion by insisting on substantive content in art. His attempt failed, because he could not imagine how successfully art itself can make conceptual maneuvers and transgress any proposed self-definition or boundary.

So, yes, identities have become fragmented and broken, but this is not quite because the power of the Hegelian negative explodes out of its systematic straightjacket. Rather it is because as a limited method with a historical provenance, the dialectic never dominated all the forces of multiplicity and change.

Is secularization and nonidentity the inevitable result of Christianity, through Hegel?

Secularization brings the disenchantment of nature, removing traces of the magical and spiritual and finding mechanical rather than purposive

causal agents. It removes ethics from any divine command backing, freeing social roles from any divine or “natural” justification, relying on individual and social creativity rather than “given” doctrines and roles. And yes, this came through Christianity and through movements in philosophy that Hegel forwarded. But no, neither Christianity nor philosophy did this alone; social and economic and technological trends cooperated, and without them a sacralized world might have continued on and on, just as Christianity and other religions are working to restore a sacralized world now. And no, this conjunction of trends and movements does not seem to have been inevitable. We face here the problem of replaying history, where necessity or inevitability is very hard to prove. We can show that certain happenings provided sufficient conditions for others, but we cannot show they were necessary conditions.

If I am right that we can show that Hegel’s analyses lack the guaranteed necessity he claimed for them, then the most we can say is that he has found a set of convincing connections, but these do not exclude other paths to the same goal, or paths that diverge in unexpected directions.

Furthermore, that Christianity leads to secularization can be maintained independently of any reference to Hegel. Also, it is difficult to maintain that Christianity is the only religion that could lead to secularization. A secularizing Buddhism may be developing before our eyes. The history of modernization in Japan and China suggests still other possibilities. We are currently living through an attempt to find alternative routes to a secular world through other religious or cultural traditions. T

These multiple paths in culture and philosophy cause me to wonder if the three questions, with their repeated invocations of necessity, inevitability, and continuity may have surrendered too much to Hegel's rhetoric of universal

necessity.

What is Hegel's relation to contemporary philosophy?

The answer to this depends on which parts of contemporary philosophy are being considered. To simplify geography, in Europe Hegel is the rejected parent whose children constantly try to forget him, and that keeps him always in the back of their minds. In England and America he is the crazy uncle no one wants to talk about...until recently, and now philosophers and social scientists are mining his texts for gems of moral argument or concepts of self and society that can be accepted into contemporary debates without setting off his totalizing machine (and, unfortunately, often without using his insights to question the presuppositions of those current debates).

As someone who has moved between the so-called "analytic" and "continental" philosophical schools, I have found Hegel a valuable companion. He encourages me to think about methods and conceptual frameworks as changeable and having their own internal dynamics rather than simply being tools we assemble as we wish. Though I reject his claims for the purity of his methods and the necessity of his results, I still find him questioning both narrow scholastic questions and grandiose pronouncements (including some from him) about the end of this or the completion of that. For someone who writes as obscurely as Hegel does, it may seem strange to talk about his insistence on rationality and precision, but he does want both.

The questions speak about a zeitgeist in which "any conclusive judgment is condemned, and ... ideology, hegemony, sovereignty, authority, and conservatism are obscene words." I've argued above that such development is neither a necessary nor an inevitable result of Christianity or Hegel, but it is fueled in part by both. I would add, though, that if we give up

claims to inevitability and necessity we also give up claims to universality and totality, so we can become more flexible dealing with the mixtures of "ideology, hegemony, sovereignty, authority," of identity and non-identity around us.

Hegel encourages us to see phenomena in tension with one another, with none totally negative or totally positive. Much of contemporary philosophy could well learn caution with proclamations of the end of this or the domination of that. Everything is in tension, neither completely given and immediate, nor finally total, and Hegel can provide tools for understanding the internal oppositions and differences within our concepts and ideals, and within our selves and our societies.

David Kolb, May 2016