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SCIENCE OF RELIGION – HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY AND GOD

by

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Hegel presents a Philosophy of Religion, or better yet, a Science of Religion. Today we live in a scientific world – a world in which Science holds a significant place in our culture and the way we understand reality. Science means "a rational system" of knowledge. The parts of a scientific system are related to (or united with) each other by

logical or rational necessity. We observe the world and create an intellectual theory, a conceptual or rational system that explains or corresponds to that reality. In this way Science attempts to establish in a conceptual plane what is found in the sensuous world. The agreement of the theoretical system with practical experience (observation) determines the truth or falsity of our scientific knowledge.

The problem with the approach of modern science is that it leaves us with two types of reality – one in the conceptual plane (of thought) and the other in the sensuous plane (of being). If the two planes perfectly correspond with each other, i.e. if a concept is identical with the object of which it is the concept, then we

conclude that we have understood that object in truth. If there is a discrepancy between the concept and its object, then we understand that we have to think more about the object and try to come up with a better concept (or scientific explanation) that will correct that discrepancy.

This whole process, however, proceeds upon an underlying assumption (or presupposition) that creates the problematic duality we are faced with in this way of doing things. The assumption is this: our knowledge of the object does not change what the object itself is. The object is a fixed thing, and knowledge comes upon it from outside, as it were, and tries to adapt itself to the object in order to comprehend it. All the while the knowledge adds nothing to the object that we attempt to comprehend in this way. This means that the object is assumed to be independent of our knowledge of it.

Kant tries to resolve this duality in what is called his 'Critical' philosophy. Instead of the mind conforming to the fixed object he avers that the object conforms to certain regulative static categories that are constituent of the human mind. Thus the object must conform to the structure of the mind that is conscious of

the object. He called this the ‘Copernican revolution’ in philosophy. His idea is that it is only because the mind is structured in a particular way that the apprehension of objects by consciousness is possible. This is all explained in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.^[1]

Careful scrutiny of Kant’s philosophy, however, shows that he does not really explain how it is possible for the mind to comprehend what is basically other than mind – its object, because the real object, which he calls the thing-in-itself, remains unknown and unknowable for him, and all that mind or consciousness can determine is the way the object appears to the knowing consciousness – i.e. only its appearances are known, and not the thing-in-itself. Thus Kant does not really overcome the duality between knowledge and the things that are known.



Hegel

Hegel comes to the rescue by showing that the object or thing that is known must consist of our knowledge of it. There is no strict separation of knowledge and what is known. In other words, the known is what our knowledge makes of it. Although there is a difference between knowledge and the object of knowledge (the known), they are nonetheless an

inseparable unity. Hegel calls knowledge the “being-for-consciousness” of the object, and the object or thing the “in-itself.” This expresses the difference between knowing and the object. But the being-of-the-object-for-consciousness and the being-of-the-object-in-itself is really one and the same being. It is not that the object shows one being to consciousness and possess another in itself. So it is a mistake to think that the object has two different natures – one apparent and the other real. Yet at the same time they *are* different. The apparent “sweetness” of sugar is not the same as the real sugar cube itself. This paradox is the truth of things – they are identical and different simultaneously. The whole problem then becomes how to grasp (conceive) this paradox.

This difference that is intrinsic to the identity of things that are known, is like the polarity that is found in a single magnet. The magnet is one, but it has two poles, i.e. a difference is found within the magnet as a single unity. In the same way knowledge and the known, or consciousness and its object form a single unity even though a difference is contained within it. This unity may be understood in general as the dynamic unity of concept and being, such a unity being called the Concept (with capital C). The complete exposition of how the Concept is dialectically developed from its constituent moments is given in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.^[2]

From this simple idea we may understand that Hegel conceives reality as having a basic epistemo-ontological nature, i.e. a consciousness-object structure that is a unity or identity-in-difference. Thus Hegel gives us the hint to his philosophy by writing in his Preface to the *Phenomenology*, “everything will turn on grasping the Absolute as Subject as much as Substance.”

The gist of the matter is that consciousness (knowledge or knowing) is a constituent of reality. It is not something floating outside of or above it in some ghostly plane outside the world. For Hegel, there is no such thing as “world” without the attendant consciousness of it. This is only rational! To think that we can refer to the world as a being, without understanding that consciousness must be involved in referring to it, is a blunder of the worst kind. Yet this is exactly the error of modern physical science – at least since Bacon. Nowadays, a modicum of reason is beginning to show itself in the discussions concerning the meaning of modern quantum mechanics, where science now has to be considered a system that explains our knowledge of the world, as much as the world itself (The Copenhagen interpretation).

It is from these considerations that we may understand that Hegel’s philosophy concerns an Absolute that is therefore Personal, i.e. a reality that is both knowing or conscious – and therefore self-conscious – as well as substantial. The Absolute is not only Substance but Consciousness as well. Whenever there is consciousness, it is not only directed to substance or objectivity, it may also be directed to itself, or conscious of itself. This is self-consciousness. The Absolute Truth is therefore self-conscious. This self-consciousness or self-knowing Absolute is called Spirit.

When we try to specify (determine) precisely what the self-knowing activity of the Absolute is, we will come to comprehend it in and as thinking. “Knowing” means determining or thinking. Thus to know what knowing is means to think about thinking. This thinking about thinking is the same Absolute Aristotle conceived as the *noesis noeseos* – thought thinking itself. Thinking may be considered the activity of the universal, and the immediate identity of thinking with itself is called “I.” There is an “I” that is intrinsic to thinking (in other words there is not just thinking but always the “I think”), an “I,” which in the Absolute sense refers to God.

Here is what Hegel says about this in his *Encyclopedia Logic* (§ 63):^[3]

“If we are speaking of faith in the True and Eternal, and saying that God is given and revealed to us in immediate knowledge or intuition, we are concerned not with the things of sense, but with objects special to our thinking mind, with truths of inherently universal significance. And when the individual ‘I,’ or in other

words personality, is under discussion — not the ‘I’ of experience, or a single private person — and above all, when the personality of God is before us, we are speaking of personality unalloyed, i.e. of a personality in its own nature universal. Such personality is a thought, and falls within the province of thought only. More than this, pure and simple intuition is completely the same as pure and simple thought. Intuition and belief, in the first instance, denote the definite conceptions we attach to these words in our ordinary employment of them: and to this extent they differ from thought in certain points which nearly every one can understand. But here they are taken in a higher sense, and must be interpreted to mean a belief in God, or an intellectual intuition of God; in short, we must put aside all that especially distinguishes thought on the one side from belief and intuition on the other. How belief and intuition, when transferred to these higher regions, differ from thought, it is impossible for any one to say. And yet, such are the barren distinctions of words, with which men fancy that they assert an important truth; even while the formulae they maintain are identical with those which they impugn.”

When we speak of God, it is to be understood that we mean the “I” that is the immediate identity of Infinite Absolute thinking with itself. This is how philosophical science understands what God is. Because God, the identity of thinking with itself, is self-conscious, or self-knowing, then a content must be present for God. That content is non-different from God’s own Self, and yet is absolutely Other. In other words, we have a Subject confronting what is absolutely other than Subject, viz. Substance. Substance is the content of Subject. Because we are dealing with Truth, or Absolute Truth, Substance and Subject must be identical while yet retaining their difference – since consciousness and its object are congruent or identical when we have the truth. This identity of Subject in what is other than itself is called Personality, where the inner content or potentiality of Person is manifest externally or in a medium that is other than the inner being.

This is the God of Philosophy, the Absolute “I” Who must *be* if the Absolute is the thinking of thinking. Is this the same God of religion and of personal experience? The answer here will depend on the way we know God from a personal experiential perspective. In other words, God as pure thought thinking itself, may not be the way we experientially relate to God. Our particular relationship will depend on the development of our own consciousness (knowledge) of, or way of knowing God. Thus there will be differences according to the differences of the individual doing the relating.

The first point is that Hegel does acknowledge the Personality of God as the Absolute Truth. This is all part of Science or the Philosophy of Religion. In order to understand the Personality of God, however, we must understand what is the “otherness”

of God. Hegel covers the whole gamut of categories from Logic to Nature to Mind. Included among them are feelings, will, morality, etc. If the Personality of God is determined by what is Other, then we have to conclude that these various categories do express that Personality. Most importantly is the Rationality or Reason that runs through and connects all of them under the Necessity that belongs to Reason. At the same time Freedom also belongs to God. Evil, which is defined as the obstinate being-for-self of the finite being, is also found in that Otherness in which the Personality of God is manifest.

Therefore, we can say that all these things are contained in God, but may not necessarily be *for* God. So what is *in* God may not be for God, but for its own finite self, and that is evil. In this sense Evil does exist in God, but only as the turning away from the universal being-for-self of God toward one’s own selfishness. In other words, one may live or be for God, but due to free will one may also turn away from the being-for-God (or service of God) and fall under the category of Evil.

All of this is explicable under the knowledge of the Absolute found in Hegel’s system of philosophy.

How does this Scientific knowledge of Religion, or Philosophy of Religion differ from Religion itself?

Religion is basically a consciousness or awareness of God. This means that Religion depends upon a difference between the finite subject or consciousness and the infinite object or God. This difference is maintained because of the way Man relates to God in religion, i.e. through feeling, love, etc.

Philosophy is the scientific comprehension of Truth, in which an identity-in-difference is sought between the subject and object or concept and object. This is attained through thinking, and not through feeling.

Religion and Philosophy often seem to be at odds in the beginning. This opposition is, however, reconciled by absolute knowledge. The love that is found in Religion is represented by the identity-in-difference principle that is found in Philosophy. The urge that the philosopher feels in the necessity to come to truth or oneness with truth, is the same urge that religion expresses in the feeling of love of God. It is merely a difference in the way they each proceed in fulfilling that need or necessity – one through thinking the other through feeling. The identity and difference of thinking and feeling is another topic that is dealt with by Hegel in his system.

In Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion[4] we find the following:

“The object of religion as well as of philosophy is eternal truth in its objectivity, God and nothing but God, and the explication of

God. Philosophy is not a wisdom of the world, but is knowledge of what is not of the world; it is not knowledge which concerns external mass, or empirical existence and life, but is knowledge of that which is eternal, of what God is, and what flows out of His nature. For this His nature must reveal and develop itself. Philosophy, therefore, only unfolds itself when it unfolds religion, and in unfolding itself it unfolds religion. As thus occupied with eternal truth which exists on its own account, or is in and for itself, and, as in fact, a dealing on the part of the thinking spirit, and not of individual caprice and particular interest, with this object, it is the same kind of activity as religion is. The mind in so far as it thinks philosophically immerses itself with like living interest in this object, and renounces its particularity in that it permeates its object, in the same way, as Religious consciousness does, for the latter also does not seek to have anything of its own, but desires only to immerse itself in this content.

Thus religion and philosophy come to be one. Philosophy is itself, in fact, worship; it is religion, for in the same way it renounces subjective notions and opinions in order to occupy itself with God. Philosophy is thus identical with religion, but the distinction is that it is so in a peculiar manner, distinct from the manner of looking at things which is commonly called religion as such. What they have in common is, that they are religion; what distinguishes them from each other is merely the kind and manner of religion we find in each. It is in the peculiar way in which they both occupy themselves with God that the distinction comes out. It is just here, however, that the difficulties which appear so great, that it is even regarded as an impossibility that philosophy should be one with religion. Hence comes the suspicion with which philosophy is looked upon by theology, and the antagonistic attitude of religion and philosophy. In accordance with this antagonistic attitude (as theology considers it to be) philosophy seems to act injuriously, destructively, upon religion, robbing it of its sacred character, and the way in which it occupies itself with God seems to be absolutely different from religion. Here, then, is the same old opposition and contradiction which had already made its appearance among the Greeks. Among that free democratic people, the Athenians, philosophical writings were burnt, and Socrates was condemned to death; now, however, this opposition is held to be an acknowledged fact, more so than that unity of religion and philosophy just asserted.”

The point is that we may not always take either difference or identity as complete in themselves. Still less should we attempt to reduce one to the other. Difference as much as identity remain abstractions unless they are continually reconciled and again divided in and as the eternal pulse beat of the life of the Absolute. The ability to comprehend this dynamic movement is absolute knowledge.

Hegel takes at face value the religious teaching of Christianity that Jesus is the incarnation of God, or the Son of God. This means that he is a unique individual, since God is a unique individual, and does not refer to every individual. In other words, it is not that everyone is Jesus or can become Jesus or an incarnation of God. God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are all supposed to be Persons – the three Persons of the Trinity, which is also One Person. Hegel considers this brazenly contradictory notion of the Trinity a wholly *Spekulative* Idea. What it says in Philosophy is that the Concept is Person, and in each of its three aspects of Universality, Particularity and Individuality it is also Person. Here, the single atomic impenetrability of Personality in each of the three Persons is overcome in their also being One Person.

Jesus is one of the persons of the Trinity, therefore He is not an ordinary finite being or person. We may become like Jesus but not that we may become Jesus. No one can accomplish what Jesus did. Hegel does not consider himself Jesus, but only a philosopher who comprehends what God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost are. Hegel comprehends the Whole, but not in all its infinite and infinitesimal detail. Therefore, he is not God, nor is he Jesus, nor does he consider himself as such.

As an incarnation of God, Jesus is much more than a philosopher like Hegel, Socrates, or Aristotle. Jesus is essential to Christian religion and Religion in general because the Absolute Person becomes actually known in Jesus to all of humanity and not just in thought or concept. This actualization of the Concept, even once in history, is essential to the actuality of the Concept.

There are many religions that deal with the incarnation of God, and the Personality of God – some even more explicitly than Christianity. For example, the Holy Ghost and God the Father are not dealt with explicitly as Personalities with human form – and only the human form has the most highly developed spiritual personality. However, we do find a high development of deities with human-like forms in some of the religions of India, especially in the *vaishnava* traditions and philosophy.

Hegel regarded the development of religions according to the degree of personism found in them. He states in this regard §151 [3]:

“It is true that God is necessity, or, as we may also put it, that he is the absolute Thing: he is however no less the absolute Person. That he is the absolute Person however is a point which the philosophy of Spinoza never reached: and on that side it falls short of the true notion of God which forms the content of religious consciousness in Christianity. Spinoza was by descent a Jew; and it is upon the whole the Oriental way of seeing things,

according to which the nature of the finite world seems frail and transient, that has found its intellectual expression in his system. This Oriental view of the unity of substance certainly gives the basis for all real further development. Still it is not the final idea.”

The Sufis within Islamic religion, and certain texts of the old testament of the Judaic scriptures also imply the existence of the personality of God and even the human form of God. However, the expression of these personal features may not be as explicit in the general teachings of Islam or Judaism, where the only religious symbol that we find in their temples, for instance, is the holy books. This may be a practice as much to prevent misunderstanding God in any anthropomorphic sense, or worshipping God in any finite creature, as it is to encourage a conception of God in a more impersonal form. The other reason is that too much emphasis on God detracts from the performance of good work that may be conceived as necessary in the material world as that through which one may attain any proper qualification for reaching God.

I think that careful study of all the major religions will show that they are personalistic, including Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, but there are sects and tendencies within each that favor worldly piety, humanism and impersonalism. On the other hand, it is because of the explicit doctrine of the fully personal and purely *Spekulative* nature of the Trinity (three Persons in One Person) that Hegel considers Christianity to be the “consummate” religion, although there are similar and numerous highly developed forms of Trinity found, for instance, within Indian religious traditions.

Those who have had a genuine spiritual relationship with God or any spiritual experience, have no need of philosophy or any rational explanation for how that is or is not possible. For those who have not had such experience, philosophy cannot supply them with such, nor is it the duty of philosophy to give spiritual conviction to anyone. By following the principles of religion, on the other hand, one may become qualified for spiritual experience or a personal relation with God. One’s own transcendental experiences, or the numerous accounts throughout history of such experiences offer enough evidence of their reality. But those who have never had such experiences may either skeptically consider them to be merely imagination or, if they possess simple piety, a matter to be decided by faith.

Here is what Hegel has to say about this [5]:

“We must first of all, however, definitely understand, in reference to the end we have in view, that it is not the concern of philosophy to produce religion in any individual. Its existence is, on the contrary, presupposed as forming what is fundamental in every

one. So far as man’s essential nature is concerned, nothing new is to be introduced into him. To try to do this would be as absurd as to give a dog printed writings to chew, under the idea that in this way you could put mind into it. He who has not extended his spiritual interests beyond the hurry and bustle of this finite world, nor succeeded in lifting himself above this life through aspiration, through the anticipation, through the feeling of the Eternal, and who has not gazed upon the pure ether of the soul, does not possess in himself that element which it is our object here to comprehend.

It may happen that religion is awakened in the heart by means of philosophical knowledge, but it is not necessarily so. It is not the purpose of philosophy to edify, and quite as little is it necessary for it to make good its claims by showing in any particular case that it must produce Religious feeling in the individual. Philosophy, it is true, has to develop the necessity of religion in and for itself, and to grasp the thought that Spirit must of necessity advance from the other modes of its will in conceiving and feeling to this absolute mode; but it is the universal destiny of Spirit which is thus accomplished. It is another matter to raise up the individual subject to this height. The self-will, the perversity, or the indolence of individuals may interfere with the necessity of their universal spiritual nature; individuals may deviate from it, and attempt to get for themselves a standpoint of their own, and hold to it. This possibility of letting oneself drift, through inertness, to the standpoint of untruth, or of lingering there consciously and purposely, is involved in the freedom of the subject, while planets, plants, animals, cannot deviate from the necessity of their nature – from their truth – and become what they ought to be. But in human freedom what is and what ought to be are separate. This freedom brings with it the power of free choice, and it is possible for it to sever itself from its necessity, from its laws, and to work in opposition to its true destiny. Therefore, although philosophical knowledge should clearly perceive the necessity of the Religious standpoint, and though the will should learn in the sphere of reality the nullity of its separation, all this does not hinder the will from being able to persist in its obstinacy, and to stand aloof from its necessity and truth.”

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