

Hegel on Malebranche, Berkeley and Hume

Brad Thomson

(1) From his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, we shall consider Hegel's thoughts on Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715), George Berkeley (1685-1753) and David Hume (1711-1776).

(2) Hegel begins, “The philosophy of Malebranche is in point of matter entirely identical with that of Spinoza [1632-1677]...”¹ During the early-modern period of philosophy it was not desirable to be accused of lapsing in Spinozism. This represented an accusation of atheism, and such suggestions would have been quite galling to Father Malebranche, who was a high-ranking priest in the Roman-Catholic church. What are Hegel's reasons for this interpretation of Malebranche? Hegel explains, “The catechism [doctrine of the church] says: “God is omnipresent,” and if this omnipresence be developed Spinozism is arrived at...”² According to Hegel, defining God as *omnipresent* leads to Spinozism. What does it mean to define God as *omnipresent*? This is to suggest that God has neither a past nor a future. He exists outside of time. Or, all time is *eternally present* to God. Hence God is *omnipresent*. Hegel suggests that this definition of God leads to Spinozism- a deterministic, atheistic system of thought. Thus, Hegel is leveling very harsh accusations upon Father Malebranche.

(3) Hegel begins his analysis of Berkeley and Hume with the somewhat immodest contention that, “The decadence which we find in thought until the

1 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, translated by E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Volume Three, page 290.

2 *Ibid.*, page 292.

philosophy of Kant is reached... may be called... a reflecting empiricism...”³ Hegel considers both Berkeley and Hume to be *skeptics*. Hume, we know, insists upon skepticism as his conclusion. For Hume, no metaphysical knowledge is possible. But Berkeley strenuously denies the accusation that he is a skeptic. The basis of Hegel's assertion may rest on the fact that for Berkeley only *limited* metaphysical knowledge is possible. Berkeley is a Christian theologian who will rely upon faith. But Berkeley is not a skeptic with respect to ideas of sense, nor what we consider to be the external world. Berkeley is only concerned to ensure that the external world is understood for precisely what it is. And that is- ideas of sense placed into our minds by God. Hegel also notes that both Berkeley and Hume are *idealists*. Berkeley would have no disagreement. His immaterialism contends that there can be no mind-independent objects. But for Hume the question is moot. Calling Hume either an *idealist* or a *materialist* changes nothing. The *phenomena* of Hume's *phenomenalism* are what they are irrespective of the word we name them by. Hegel continues, again with less than full reverence, “The crudest form... is when... We find this subjective idealism in Berkeley, and another form of the same in Hume.”⁴ Both Berkeley and Hume espouse what Hegel terms to be a crude *subjective* idealism. We know that Hegel is himself propounding, a presumably more refined, *absolute* idealism.

(4) Hegel states, “Berkeley advocated an idealism which came very near to that of Malebranche.”⁵ Thus, just as Malebranche lapses into Spinozism, so too might Berkeley. And just as Roman-Catholic Father

3 *Ibid.*, page 361.

4 *Ibid.*, page 363.

5 *Ibid.*, page 364.

Nicolas Malebranche may be disquieted by this accusation, so too may be Anglican Bishop of Cloyne George Berkeley. The reason for this lapse is, again, the defining of God as *omnipresent*. Hegel's observation is very accurate. For it is worthwhile to note that Berkeley is himself fully aware of this difficulty. In his *Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Hylas represents all possible opponents to Berkeley, while Philonous represents Berkeley himself. Hylas points out to Philonous, "...is it not plain, God did either execute that decree from all eternity, or at some certain time begin to will what he had not actually willed before... If the former, then there could be no Creation or beginning of existence in finite things. If the latter, then we acknowledge something new to befall the Deity; which implies a sort of change: and all change argues imperfection."⁶ What is Berkeley's defense? Philonous responds, "...God is a being of transcendent and unlimited perfection: his nature therefore is incomprehensible to finite spirits."⁷ We see that Berkeley is well aware of Hegel's objection, but perhaps less aware of a possible solution. The adopting of a theologically motivated appeal to the mysterious workings of an "incomprehensible" God cannot be a sufficient replacement for genuine philosophical understanding.

(5) Hegel continues, "Berkeley's first and fundamental thought is consequently this: "The Being of whatever is called by us a thing consists alone in its being perceived..."⁸ We are reminded of the Latin phrase so

⁶ *Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Dialogue Three, page 243. Everyman edition of Berkeley's writings titled *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision*, edited by Michael R. Ayers, 1975.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume Three, page 364. Hegel here and in other places refers to Buhle, *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*.

commonly associated with Berkeley- *esse est percipi*. To be is to be perceived. Hegel adds that for Berkeley, “All objects of human knowledge are ideas... which arise either from the impressions of the outward senses, or from perceptions of the inward states and activities of the mind...”⁹ Next, Hegel addresses an important philosophical question when he writes, “A union of different sensuous feelings [ideas of sense for Berkeley] appears to us to be a particular thing...”¹⁰ This sounds reminiscent of Hegel's own analysis of a grain of salt that appears in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here thought begins to recognize itself, it sees its own activity in the positing of its object. And thus for both Hegel and Berkeley, what we deem to be external material objects are simply collections of ideas of sense associated with one another by the perceiving mind. But the two thinkers will differ greatly as to the exact manner of that association. Hegel posits a knowable Absolute Idea. Berkeley posits the “incomprehensible” Christian God.

(6) Hegel next proceeds to a comparison between John Locke (1632-1704) and Bishop Berkeley, wherein he will take the side of Berkeley on a vital historical question. Let us recall the distinction Locke makes between *primary* and *secondary qualities* of objects. For Locke, primary qualities such as shape and motion inhere in the objects themselves, whereas secondary qualities such as colour and sound do not. These exist only within the perceiving mind. Hegel, in a more congenial tone, states that, “...the manifold sensuous conceptions and feelings [ideas of sense] can only exist in the mind. Locke [however] distinguished extension and movement... as qualities which

⁹ *Ibid.*, page 365.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

pertain to the objects themselves. But Berkeley very pertinently points out inconsistency here from the point of view that great and small, quick and slow, hold good as something relative...”¹¹ Berkeley goes to great lengths to argue that we cannot have an *abstract idea* of matter, all ideas are relative, or particular. Hegel then continues, “Thus, while Locke's ultimate point is abstract substance... Berkeley declares this substance to be the most incomprehensible assumption of all...”¹² Hegel suddenly shifts focus and continues in the same sentence, “...but the incomprehensibility does not make this Being into an absolute nullity [as Hume contends], nor does it make it in itself incomprehensible [as Berkeley contends].”¹³ Hegel is now expounding his own principles. He explains, “This incomprehensibility... is destroyed in the Notion, for the Notion is the negative of things...”¹⁴ In other words in the Notion, in thought grasping itself, the origin of external objects becomes perfectly comprehensible. They have their place in the entire systematic philosophy. And with this we have a transition into Hegel's own thought. We see precisely where Hegel departs from Berkeley and moves in his own direction. Hegel has no intention of positing an “incomprehensible” God as his theory. Absolute knowledge is posited. The *Idea* thinks itself.

(7) Hegel next informs us that, “...in... [Berkeley's] formal idealism reason has no content of its own.”¹⁵ In other words, thought does not recognize itself in its own objects. There is no dialectic of thought taking place. And the distinction between the *subjective* idealism of Berkeley and

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, page 366.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, page 368.

the *absolute* idealism of Hegel becomes more clear. We may now turn our attention to David Hume.

(8) Hegel begins, in something of a foul mood, when he states that the skepticism of Hume, “...has been given a more important place in history than it deserves...”¹⁶ This is a curious comment, for one might simply respond by asking Hegel why, if Hume is so unimportant, is he bothering to talk about him in the first place? As might be expected though, Hegel is one step ahead of us. For he continues, again in the same sentence, that the, “...historic importance [of the skepticism of Hume] is due to the fact that Kant really derives the starting point of his philosophy from Hume.”¹⁷ What are we to make of this? Recall that in Kant's own words it was Hume who awoke him from his “dogmatic slumber”¹⁸ and set his thinking on the correct path. Yet Hegel suggests that this is not important. He then adds, “Hume is more celebrated as a writer of history than through his philosophic works.”¹⁹ It is true that Hume was a prolific and successful writer of history in his own day. But we know that in our day Hume is recognized as a giant of Western philosophy. And one quite possibly equivalent to, or even exceeding, dare we say, the great Hegel himself. Further, Hume is now all but forgotten as an historian.

(9) Hegel continues by stating, “...[Hume's] skepticism has the idealism of Berkeley as its object.”²⁰ There are many agreements between the empiricisms of Hume and Berkeley, but one fundamental disagreement.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 Preface to *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*.

19 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume Three, page 369.

20 *Ibid.*, page 370.

Hume is an atheist, Berkeley is a theist. We observe that Hegel is once again quick to grasp the essence of his subject matter. For Berkeley himself clearly recognizes the objections to his own thinking that Hume raises. In the *Dialogues* Hylas says to Philonous, "...to me it seems that, according to your own way of thinking, and in consequence of your own principles, it should follow that *you* are only a system of floating ideas, without any substance to support them."²¹ Thus, Berkeley demonstrates precisely the position of Hume that Hegel makes note of. If we subtract God from Berkeley, we get Hume.

(10) Hegel next turns to Hume's analysis of the relation of *cause and effect*. We know that Hume denies the possibility of any such knowledge, and that mere *constant conjunction* is all that experience can provide us with. Hegel paraphrases Hume, "...we must receive the conception of cause and effect, and thus of a necessary connection, from experience; but experience, as sensuous perception, contains no necessity, has no causal connection. For in what we term such [causal connection], that which we properly speaking perceive is merely the fact that something first of all happens and that then something else follows. Immediate perception relates only to a content of conditions or things which are present along side of and in succession to one another, but not to what we call cause and effect."²² Hegel will now assess Hume by stating, "It may be said that this is quite a correct remark on Hume's part, if by experience we understand outward experience. Experience is sensible that something exists, but nevertheless the universal is not yet present in it..."²³ Hegel continues, "...but sensuous existence is likewise

21 *Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Dialogue Three, page 450, Easton Press edition.

22 *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume Three, page 371.

23 *Ibid.*, page 372.

universal in itself...”²⁴ This suggests the standard philosophical question as to whether or not universals exist. For Hume, *universals* do not exist. There is no *becoming*. Thus for Hegel, the idealism of Hume is, “...quite devoid of thought or Notion.”²⁵ The dialectic is not grasping itself.

(11) Finally, Hegel sums up by stating, “...the result which Hume arrives at is necessarily astonishment regarding the condition of human knowledge, a general state of mistrust, and a skeptical indecision- which indeed does not amount to much.”²⁶ Not much other than the “over-rated” awakening of Immanuel Kant from his dogmatic slumber which lead directly to the advent of Hegelianism itself.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, page 373.

26 *Ibid.*