

Hegel and the Enlightenment: An Essay on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*¹

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I am going to talk about Hegel's relationship to the Enlightenment. In particular I am going to comment about the Enlightenment chapter in *Phenomenology* and I mean by this in particular those paragraphs from 538 to 581. Hegel's relationship to Enlightenment is a controversial topic. Let me first say few words about how I came to research on this topic. I am an Adam Smith and Karl Marx scholar and I am interested in Hegel's relationship to Smith and Marx. But in particular I am working on a book on Rosa Luxemburg's political theory. Luxemburg's legacy is as controversial as Hegel's. I am trying to approach her work from an entirely new angle, namely to present her work from her philosophical point of view. I believe that this has never been done before – at least not as broad as I think of it. In her more what we may call philosophical and science theoretical papers Luxemburg attacks neo-Kantianism and suggests instead that Hegelian dialectical philosophy is the point where any serious philosophy should start and proceed on the way Marx paved for revolutionary generations to come. As Wilhelm Raimund Beyer argues in his *Hegel-Bilder*² neo-Kantianism produced the neo-Hegelianism and that they require each other. He argues that neo-Hegelianism leaves aside the most important element of Hegelian philosophy, that is to say his theory of dialectic. This means that neo-Hegelianism is a kind of peculiar Hegelianism without Hegelian dialectic. My further research led me to one of the most influential figures among neo-Hegelians, who sort of founded the so-called live-philosophy which Georg Lukács classified as a 'reactionary imperialist' direction in German philosophy at beginning of 20th century. I am thinking of Wilhelm Dilthey as you may know. In his account of young Hegel's history, that is, by relying on Hegel's pre-*Phenomenology* writings Dilthey provides a picture of young Hegel's development, in which we can hardly recognise Hegel anymore – at least as the philosopher we know. In Dilthey's account of young Hegel's development there occupies a central position Hegel's relationship to Enlightenment and French Revolution of 1789. He presents us Hegel as a fundamental critic of the Enlightenment. He claims that Hegel's philosophising was based on mystic pantheism and that Hegel was a mystic metaphysician. Hegel's ideal of future was the realisation of religiosity. By freeing himself from the influence of the French revolution from 1789, as Dilthey claims, Hegel tried to reform religion. Dilthey sort

¹ This paper was presented to the international conference on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Istanbul on October 6-7, 2007. An expanded version with additional literature is available Turkish.

² Beyer, W. R., *Hegel-Bilder*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1967.

of implies then that Hegel was against the separation of the state from church, politics from religion. At the end of the day in Dilthey's account Hegel stands there as a romantic, German nationalist, as an anti-Semite and reformer without being revolutionary. This romantic account of young Hegel is still present for example in Charles Taylor's approach. Taylor, deferring from Dilthey, restricts his romantic account of Hegel to his early development. Dilthey, by contrast, thinks that Hegel's later work should be viewed from the standpoint of his early writings.

Now, there are two points to be made here against this account of Hegel's development. First, this account of young Hegel's history has been forcefully attacked by Georg Lukács in his unique work *Young Hegel*. In this epochal work Lukács shows illuminatingly that Hegel's pre-*Phenomenology* writings are not theological in nature but they are studies to clarify his mind on some of the important topics that were on the agenda of the Enlightenment. By referring to Hegel's letters to Niethammer, Lukács argues that Hegel supported the French revolution almost without any reservation. When Hegel shows reservations towards the French revolution, Lukács argues, then, they concern the detail of the French revolution – not the nature of it. Second, more contemporary scholars like the editors of Suhrkamp-Edition of Hegel's works, Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, suggest that some of the early writings of Hegel's are of no significance for Hegel's philosophical development and therefore left them out of the edition. Following this line of thought one of the most contemporary scholars, Thomas Sören Hoffmann, argues that Hegel the Philosopher begins with *Phenomenology*. Though I do not agree with this claim entirely I do think, generally speaking, there is some truth in this claim.

Probably by taking into account the outcome of more contemporary research some contemporary scholars prefer to follow a more a less a weakened position of Dilthey's and suggests that Hegel unified in his philosophising the Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment. (By anti-Enlightenment I understand the teaching of Burke, Gobineau, Carl Schmitt and so on.) Probably following Hans-Georg Gadamer's traditionalist philosophy of hermeneutics Vittorio Hösle put this claim forward. In a paper entitled 'Moral Reflection and Decomposition of Institutions. On the Dialectics of the Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment' Hösle argues that modern philosophy swings between two extremes, namely between the Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment. He thinks that we can find a synthesis of Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment in Plato and German idealist philosophy – in particular in Hegelian philosophy.³

³ Hösle, V., 'Moralische Reflexion und Institutionenzerfall. Zur Dialektik von Aufklärung und Gegenklärung', in *Hegel-Jahrbuch* 1987, Germanial Verlag, Bochum 1987, pp. 108-116.

As you may see from what has been said, Hegel's relationship to the Enlightenment is still on the agenda and needs further research and clarification. In what follows I am going to argue that Hegel is neither a critic of Enlightenment as understood by Dilthey nor his philosophy is a synthesis of the Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment as claimed by Höhle. As opposed to these scholars I am going to claim that Hegel is a philosopher of the revolutionary philosophy of the Enlightenment. As far as his critique of Enlightenment concerns this should be understood in the sense of an inner critique of the Enlightenment from his point of view.

Most scholars who put forward this and other similar claims seem to come to this position because of Hegel's commitment to Lutheran theology and the role Hegel ascribes to religion in relation to philosophy. Among others in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, for example, Hegel says explicitly 'I am Lutheran and want to remain Lutheran'.⁴ As Thomas Sören Hoffmann argued Hegel thinks that revolution cannot be obtained without reformation.⁵ Hoffmann classifies idealist German philosophy from Kant to Hegel as a philosophy of freedom. When Hegel says 'revolution without reformation' is not obtainable he means by that that political freedom must also bring about the freedom of conscience. Unlike Kant, for example, Hegel uses here a dialectical concept of external and internal freedom. What Hegel aims at, in other words, is a total revolution.

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* he makes the following observation about German philosophy from Kant over Fichte to Schelling:

'Kantian, Fichtean and Schellingian philosophy. In these philosophies is the [French,-DG] revolution put down and spoken out as in the form of thought, to which spirit in Germany in recent time is proceeded; its consequence obtains the course which thought has taken. Only two peoples, German and French, though they are contrary or just because they are contrary, took part in this epoch of world history, the most inner nature of which is grasped in world history. Other nations did not participated in, but their governments, also peoples, politically not from inner. In Germany this principle is poured out as thought, spirit, concept, in France into the reality. That what is stepped out of reality in Germany appears to be violence of external circumstances and reaction against it.'⁶

⁴ Hegel, G. W. F., *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 1, in *Werke*, vol. 18, p. 94.

⁵ Hoffmann, Th. S., *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel – Eine Propädeutik*, Marix Verlag, Wiesbaden 2004, p. 61.

⁶ Hegel, G. W. F., *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 3, in *Werke*, vol. 20, p. 314.

I think the nature of German classical philosophy can hardly be classified better than this. Hegel defines here German philosophy clearly as a philosophical expression of French revolution of 1789. He clearly sees his philosophy in the tradition of this philosophy, which he revolutionised in many ways. As we know from his various statements one of the definitions Hegel gives about philosophy is that it is the grasping its time in thought. Now, many people refer to the famous passage from his *Philosophy of Rights*, where he says:

“To grasp that *what is* is the task of philosophy, because that *what is* is reasonable. Concerning individual so is each a *son of his time*; so is with philosophy which grasps *its time in thoughts*. It is foolish to imagine that any one philosophy goes beyond of its contemporary world as if an individual would steps beyond of his time... Goes his theory indeed beyond of his time, he builds him a world of how *it should be*, it might indeed exist, but only in his meaning...”⁷

Here Hegel seems to be rather sceptical about whether philosophy can point out the direction the world might go. But in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* he is prepared to say something more about how this mirroring relationship of philosophy to its time to be understood. I think this is very important for understanding of the background of *Phenomenology*. There he is prepared to recognise that philosophy can formally go beyond of its time by reflecting upon its time. And this is what Hegel does in *Phenomenology*, I think. In fact Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is an attempt to give a philosophical expression of the French revolution by implying its further development. In other words, he wants to show the direction which the revolution in France, Germany and elsewhere in the world might go.

I skip those famous passages from the ‘Preface’ to *Phenomenology*, where he explicitly links his philosophy with the French revolution, and come immediately to those passages I am going to look at more closely. They occur in *Phenomenology* in section VI. The subject of this section is ‘Spirit’. When Hegel comes to deal with spirit in the introductory part he indicates that there is a logical break in the construction of *Phenomenology*. In the previous sections Hegel deals with consciousness, self-consciousness and reason. These are, he says, shapes of consciousness, whereas the shapes in this section spirit has to pass through to attain knowledge of itself are ‘real Spirits, actualities in the strict meaning of the word’. (441) This means in the section on Spirit we have to do with reality and various forms of alienated Spirit in reality. And the terms ‘insight’ and ‘the Enlightenment’ occur already in the introduction to this section. (442)

⁷ Hegel, G. W. F., *Rechtsphilosophie*, in *Werke*, vol. 7, 26.

As you know Hegel uses the term 'insight' and more often 'pure insight' synonymously for the Enlightenment as opposed to faith. He sets out his programme in the same paragraph in which these terms occur as follows:

“The *living ethical* world is Spirit in its *truth*. When Spirit first arrives at an abstract knowledge of its essence, ethical life is submerged in the formal universality or law. Spirit, which henceforth is divided within itself, traces one of its worlds, the *realm of culture*, in the harsh reality of its objective element; over against this realm, it traces in the element of thought the *world of belief or faith*, the *realm of essential being*. Both worlds, however, when grasped by Spirit (...) when grasped by the *Notion* [Begriffe], are confounded and revolutionized by the insight and the diffusion of that insight, known as the Enlightenment’. (442)

Another similar passage occurs in the paragraph 486. The revolution (I use this term because it is Hegel's original term) of these two worlds results in the realisation of the Spirit. Here Hegel puts forward the idea that the Enlightenment has to revolutionise cultural and ideal worlds at the same time. This is the project which Hegel sets out to justify as a necessity in the Spirit section of *Phenomenology*.

Here Hegel seems to define the Enlightenment as a total revolution. But he hardly attempts to give a direct concentrated definition of what he means by the *Enlightenment*. He probably takes this for granted because in the last three decades of the 18th century there was in Germany a highly controversial and widespread debate on what the Enlightenment is. Hegel's various affirmative and critical statements about the Enlightenment are disposed all over his works and lectures. To collect them here would take me far away from my purpose here. From various passages in *Phenomenology* we may gather that he ascribes to the Enlightenment such attributes as truthfulness, reasonableness and honesty, and he sees the aim of the Enlightenment in freeing masses from superstition, prejudices and errors. (542, 543) To the concept of utility Hegel refers to in *Phenomenology* as the truth of the Enlightenment I will be coming at the end of my paper.

As regard to the genesis of revolution. Hegel defines all spheres of social life, that is to say family, cultural world, ethical, legal and political life as a system of mutual recognition. Recognition is a concept that was worked out systematically by Adam Smith. Smith is also that philosopher in the history of modern European philosophy, who applied this concept systematically to social

philosophy. 'To see one-self as others are likely to see' is his maxim. In his even from today's point of view unique work *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*, first published in 1759, Smith deals with mutual recognition as a process of mutual mirroring. According to Smith it is an essential individual and social need that we seek to recognise ourselves in others and others in us. Unlike Smith, as far as I see Hegel does not use a concept of class in *Phenomenology*. But he was very well aware of the fact that class issues were involved. His concept of master-slave relationship is a meta-theoretical concept and can be applied to any situation that involves lack of mutual recognition and conflicts that are likely to be intensified. In *Phenomenology* Hegel refers to masses as spirit and individuals as consciousness or self-consciousness and sometimes as particular spirit. He describes society as a system of individualisation process. As soon as individuals are self-conscious and perceive lack of recognition in any sphere of their activity they naturally strive for change. Even if they do not strive for change consciously they do it just by acting in their everyday lives, by carrying out their everyday business. In other words, if we take the concept of the Enlightenment in the broad sense of the term, following Hegel we may be allowed to say that permanent enlightenment and consequently permanent revolution is the nature of Society. The nature of these revolutions may change but they will remain always an essential part of human life.

As to the mode and means of revolution Hegel differentiates between evolutionary changes or reformation and conflict theory of revolution. In the § 542 he differentiates between priesthood, despotism and masses. He defines them all as enemies of the Enlightenment. They are representatives of faith (*Glaube*) and superstition (*Aberglaube*). Let me first say few words on how Hegel sees the mutual relationship between the Enlightenment and faith. According to Hegel faith is the opposition of the Enlightenment or pure insight. In relation to one another both pure insight and faith have a relation to the actual world. Both pure insight and faith are the same pure consciousness. But they differ in the sense that faith is actual and has content, where pure insight is potential and void of content. It has to realise itself against faith and by this receive its content. As opposed to faith pure insight is self-reflective, that is, critical and therefore it is able to return into itself and become self-conscious. In other words, the Enlightenment or pure insight, though it is part of the actual world, though it is involved in the actual world, it can look upon the actual world from without. Faith, by contrast, remains in-itself or *an-sich* and has therefore 'no *special insight* into the world of culture'. (§ 539) Rather, it has 'impure intentions and insights of the actual world.' (§ 538) This is the reason also the reason why Hegel thinks that 'the essence is for faith [mere] *thought*, not *notion*', to put it in German the essence for faith is *Gedanke* not *Begriff*. (§ 541) As opposed to faith pure insight is self-conscious and knows itself to be absolute. Though

Hegel sees the opposition between faith and pure insight as regards form, he assesses faith, because of these classifications just given, as 'sheer opposite' of pure insight or self-consciousness. (§ 541) Since pure insight is related to the actual world it necessarily enters into a dispute with the pure consciousness of the absolute essence of 'all reality', that is, with faith. (§ 541)

Now Hegel's distinction between priesthood, despotism and masses is closely connected to these classifications of faith. Just to remind us Hegel uses *fait* often synonymously for actual world. Now who is doing what in this actual world? Priesthood and despots administer the actual world, whereas masses are victims of the conspiracy of both priesthood and despots to keep down the masses. He says:

The masses are the victims of the deception of a priesthood which, in its envious conceit, holds itself to be the sole possessor of insight and pursues its other selfish ends as well. At the same time conspires with despotism which, as the synthetic, non-notional unity of the real and this ideal realm – a curious inconsistent entity – stands above the bad insight of the multitude and the bad intentions of the priests, and yet unites both within itself. From the stupidity and confusion of the people brought about by the trickery of priestcraft, despotism, which despises both, draws for itself the advantage of undisturbed domination and the fulfilment of its desires and caprices, but is itself at the same time this same dullness of insight, the same superstition and error. (§ 542)

Because of this highly contradictory and explosive unity of these three aspects of the enemy of the Enlightenment Hegel proposes different means as regards how to deal with them. Hegel thinks that the will of the deceiving priesthood and the oppressive despot is not the direct object of the Enlightenment or pure insight. Its immediate aim is the enlightenment of the masses. Thomas Sören Hoffmann whom I referred to above suggests that the political theory of classical German philosophy is about the principle of participation as opposed to the principle of representation. Above all Hegel's political theory seeks to develop a framework in which the dominating principle is participation rather than representation. He sees the improvement of the participation of the masses in political decision making process in the enlightenment of masses. Pure insight approaches masses from without, but the principle it seek to flourish are not taken from without. Following the principle of immanence Hegel suggests that it is already in the masses as potentiality, yet not present qua notion, that is to say qua Begriff. In delivering the masses however with its honest insight the Enlightenment wrest them from the bad intentions of

priesthood and despots. By this the Enlightenment receives its content, it realises itself becomes reality and a power in the masses. As I said above though it is negative work of pure insight at faith it is conceived by Hegel as an evolutionary process. Hegel compares this communication of pure insight with masses to a 'silent expansion or to the *diffusion*, say, of a perfume in the in the unresisting atmosphere.' (§ 545) But at the end of the day it makes a qualitative jump and it becomes the consciousness of the masses. If this stage is arrived faith is emptied from all content and essence, and breaks down under the stormy attack of masses for establishing a social system of mutual recognition.

In previous paragraphs where Hegel deals with ethical order, guilt and destiny he shows how this break down of faith may take place. I skip all this and I skip also those paragraphs where Hegel deals with the Enlightenment's life-and-death struggle with faith. So for example how faith tries to resist, what language it uses, how the Enlightenment turns into faith in this struggle and so on. We may turn to them perhaps in our discussion. I will work them out in my paper to be published. You can read it there if you are still interested. I would like to finish my presentation by returning to the concept of utility.

As I indicated in my introduction Hegel is not just a general champion of the Enlightenment but also a critic of it. However, his critique must be understood as a critique from within and should not be taken as an anti-Enlightenment critique. There is no sign of anti-Enlightenment critique in Hegel's work. The whole *Phenomenology* however can be read also as critique of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. So for example his concept of dialectics can be read as critique of that Kant and Fichte, his theory perception can be seen as a critique of English Empiricism and of the French philosophy of the 18th century. These critiques of Hegel's concern epistemological theory. Since I am interested here mainly in Hegel's social philosophy I would like to look at how he criticises the social philosophy of the Enlightenment from within, by looking at how deals with the concept of utility. And this is a logical necessity of what I have said above about Hegel's theory of revolution.

Let me begin with a quotation. In the paragraph 581, that is, in the last paragraph before Hegel comes to deal with absolute freedom and terror he says: 'The Useful is the object of pure insight both worlds are united.' (§ 581) By both worlds he means the world of Spirit and the world of intrinsic being or truth. The third world is that of Useful and unifies the first two worlds. Then he continues:

The Useful is the object in so far as self-consciousness penetrates it and has it and has in it *certainty* of its *individual self*, its enjoyment (...); self-consciousness sees right into the object, and this insight contains the *true* essence of the object (...). This insight is thus itself a *true knowing*, and self-consciousness has equally directly the universal certainty of itself, its pure consciousness, in this relationship in which, therefore, *truth* as well as presence and *actuality* are united. The two worlds are reconciled and heaven is transplanted to earth below.’ (§ 581) in German: ‘und der Himmel auf die Erde herunter verpflanzt’.

Here Hegel seems to refer to the relationship of men to nature. We know from his various statements in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that he understands by utility as referring to this relationship. He finds it a too narrow grasp of this relationship if it is restricted to the principle of utility. But he generally agrees that this relationship should be referred to as a utilitarian relationship. But then in the previous paragraph, that is, in the paragraph 580 he makes a more general statement. He says:

‘Bad as Utility may look to faith or sentimentality, or even to the abstract thought that calls itself speculation, which clings to the *in-itself*, yet it is in Utility that pure insight achieves its realisation and has itself for its object, an object which it now no longer repudiates and which, too, no longer has for it the value of the void or the pure beyond.’ (§ 580)

In this last quotation Hegel talks about the realisation of pure insight as such. He either uses the concept of the Enlightenment in a narrow sense as referring to the relationship of men to nature, then, that would be understandable, because he would then sort of imply that discovering the laws of nature nowhere else but in nature would bring about the recognition of pure insight in its object. But in that case we would expect him say something more about the concept of utility when he hereafter comes to deal with morality, where he is very much concerned about developing a critique of Kantian concept of autonomy and freedom. Or if he uses it in the broad sense of the term, then, this contradicts his concept of recognition as referring to the dominating principle in human relations. The answer to the question I am raising here may lie in section VIII on absolute knowledge. But I could not find any and I would like to ask you to indicate any paragraph or passage if you know any. I insist on the question because Hegel was very well aware of the debate on utility for example between Hume and Smith and Kant’s critique of this principle. You may reply by saying that Hegel wrote the last section under time pressure and

finished it just in the night when French troops occupied Jena where he was living. But then in his later works there is not essential critique of the principle of utility. Perhaps we have here indeed to do with the limits of the philosophy of the Enlightenment more generally speaking and perhaps also with the limits of Hegelian social philosophy. Though Hegel did not do it, we may nonetheless develop such a critique of the principle of utility by referring to Hegel's conception of recognition and needs. In any case Marx seems to have taken this question very seriously and by relying on the concept of recognition and needs he develops an essential critique of utilitarianism, which is the subject of his *Capital*.