

Freud, Hegel, and Dialectics

“Nothing will come of Nothing; speak again” (*King Lear*)

Discussion of Hegel, Freud, Transformational Reversal in Development, and Phenomenology

Heward Wilkinson

[Freud's paper *Die Verneinung* - on *Negation*, - and Jean Hyppolite's discussion of it, are included with this discussion to give the full background]

Introduction

Hegel is a very difficult philosopher to understand because of the incredible concentration of his writing. It assumes an understanding brought to it already which of course most people do not have. I try to unpack the implications of this implicit assumed understanding as clearly and explicitly as I can. I frame the discussion of it by using a remarkable, - and equally terse, - paper of Freud's, *Die Verneinung*, the paper on *Negation*. Despite bearing some signs of the manipulative authoritarian, almost Ericksonian, aspect of Freud, it is his most Hegelian paper, and profoundly maps the mode of an Hegelian dialectical understanding of developmental transformation.

Both Hegel and Freud simply *use* their insights, in concentrated fashion, and do not deign to explain their assumptions. I try to remedy this, and unpack them, somewhat, here, though explanations of these difficult transitions. sadly, are almost as difficult as the originals. As we see in Jean Hyppolite's exposition, to which I now turn.

Hyppolite's Account of Freud's *Negation*

I begin by articulating it in terms of Hegel's famous word *Aufhebung* which is normally translated by a meaningless and ghastly Latin-English word, *sublate*, which means nothing to anyone. In Lacan's first Seminar, 1953-54,

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Seminar-Jacques-Lacan-Technique-1953-54/dp/0393018954/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=lacan+seminar+1953-1954&qid=1634628537&s=books&sr=1-2

Lacan invites the great French Hegel interpreter (who wrote a major commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* - n.b., Hegel is not using the word in its post-Brentano and Husserl sense), Jean Hyppolite, who is attending the seminar, to read and comment on *Negation*, this extraordinary short Hegelian paper of Freud's, and there is an amusing and informative exchange about this word *Aufhebung*, following Hyppolite's presentation of Freud's examples of reversal by negation (the kind of thing involved in these reversals is illustrated by 'I don't wish to be disrespectful but....', where the speaker is going to go on to be just that):

M. Hyppolite: "So this is an analysis of concrete goings on, generalised until its basis

is encountered in a mode of presenting what one is in the mode of *not* being it. Because that is exactly how it is constituted: 'I am going to tell you what I am not; pay attention, that is exactly what I am.' That is how Freud engages with the function of negation and, in order to do this, he uses a word which I could not but feel at home with, the word *Aufhebung*, which, as you know, has had a variety of destinies; it is not for me to say it....."

Dr. Lacan: "But if not you, who else will it fall to?"

M. Hyppolite: "It is Hegel's dialectical word, which means simultaneously to deny to suppress and to conserve, and fundamentally to raise up. In reality, it might be the *Aufhebung* of a stone, or equally the stopping of my newspaper subscription. At this point Freud tells us: 'negation is already an *Aufhebung* of the repression, though not of course an acceptance of what is repressed.'

This is the start of something truly extraordinary in Freud's analysis, whereby what emerges from these little anecdotes, which we might well have taken as nothing more than anecdotes, are implications of prodigious philosophical importance, which I will attempt to summarise....."

***Aufhebung* and Freud's Negation**

'Reversal' is a key word here. I myself have come to translate '*Aufhebung*' by 'transformational reversal', and, once one grasps it, one finds it in all sorts of places

[<http://hewardwilkinson.co.uk/sites/default/files/Transformational-Reversal-of%20Conflict-Situations.pdf>]

In German it means to cancel or annul, but it also has the metaphoric connotation of, for example, to lift or rescind, or reverse, as in 'we lifted the seige', 'we lifted the embargo', 'we rescinded the decree', 'we reversed the decision'. Hegel employs, therefore, simultaneously, both connotations, both cancellation or annulment, and an opening and lifting up. Freud, significantly, uses this Hegel word, in this sense, at a key moment in this paper on 'Negation'. Hyppolite later sharpens it up by making explicit Hegel's concept of negation of negation, which is implicit in Freud. In Hegel's hands, it is a reversal, the making explicit of the impact of a conflict, or a war to the death, and, emerging, it is simultaneously a transformation. I shall return to all this. This, for instance, is what Kierkegaard does in *Fear and Trembling* with the Abraham and Isaac story. Like many post Hegelians, including Feuerbach, Marx, Heidegger, Sartre, Derrida, and Levinas, to overturn Hegel, as Kierkegaard does, is a very Hegelian thing to do; it is itself an '*Aufhebung*'.

The Two Stages in Freud

Now the profound step, which Freud goes on to make, takes us into Kleinian territory and implicitly confirms Hegel as the first 'Object Relations' thinker. But Freud, like Hegel, is going to show us the *ontological or metaphysical transformation* upon which this is based, and returns to his first love, philosophy, as he once wrote to Fliess, in the process. In Klein's thinking we *begin as split*, though each side of the split is experienced as a unity or rather as a totality, whether that of complete merger into myself, or that of complete annihilation of what is alien.

This is the – pre-Hegelian – phase I am relating to phenomenology, in the modern sense. And Freud goes on to succinctly map, in Hegelian terms, the emergence of what we realise is the classic Aristotle analysis of an entity or being with attributes (*to on, ousia*), the dominant paradigm of the Western traditions. And here ontology is profoundly welded together with developmental transformation, by means of transformational reversal, *Aufhebung*:

“The function of judgement is concerned in the main with two sorts of decisions. It affirms or disaffirms the possession by a thing of a particular attribute; and it asserts or disputes that a presentation has an existence in reality. The attribute to be decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest - the oral - instinctual impulses, the judgement is: 'I should like to eat this', or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.' That is to say: 'It shall be inside me' or 'it shall be outside me'. As I have shown elsewhere, the original pleasure-ego wants to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad. What is bad, what is alien to the ego and what is external are, to begin with, identical.”

This is the first phase, roughly the paranoid-schizoid position, in Klein’s terms, but *we*, looking back retroactively, see both good and bad together, as related. However, in reality, *for the child* the phase of their co-existence has not been attained.

If we contrast the phenomenological and the dialectical, and we say that in pure phenomenological mode everything is *experienced just as it is*, it is as it is purely as is; this is how the child experiences this phase, as pure being or pure annihilation, without any sort of dialectical reconciliation. This primary desire for pure ‘is-what-it-is-ness’ is at the root of the philosophical-ontological dilemmas of the west, such as the problem of perception and knowledge (as in a famous argument between A.J. Ayer – *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* - and J.L. Austin – *Sense and Sensibilia*. Ayer defends sense impressions as the ultimate reality and hence is a phenomenalist. Austin defends a sophisticated version of commonsense realism. And the positions of Husserl and Heidegger, as phenomenologists, roughly correspond to those of Ayer and Austin. Heidegger even denounces Kant for requiring a ‘proof of the external world’.) I believe it is at the root of phenomenology (c.f., Derrida on Husserl: *Voice and Phenomenon*).

Hegel and post-modernism move into the next, dialectical, or deconstructive, phase, where the ‘not’ and the ‘as if’ of reflection become possible. And, this is where Freud likewise, incredibly succinctly and without explanation, like a sleepwalker, goes next!! This is the prototype of the phase of reflexivity, agency, and re-recognitional memory. It is what Piaget calls ‘object constancy’, and Daniel Stern (*Interpersonal World of the Infant*) the phases of the ‘intersubjective’ and the ‘verbal self’.

“The other sort of decision made by the function of judgement - as to the real existence of something of which there is a presentation (reality testing) - is a concern of the definitive reality-ego, which develops out of the initial pleasure-ego. It is now no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be

rediscovered in perception (reality) as well. It is, we see, once more a question of external and internal. What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; what is real is also there outside.

In this stage of development regard for the pleasure principle has been set aside. Experience has shown the subject that it is not only important whether a thing (an object of satisfaction for him) possesses the 'good' attribute and so deserves to be taken into his ego, but also whether it is there in the external world, so that he can get hold of it whenever he needs it. In order to understand this step forward we must recollect that all presentations originate from perceptions and are repetitions of them. Thus originally the mere existence of a presentation was a guarantee of the reality of what was presented. The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. *It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there* [my italic - HW]. The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is, not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *refind* such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there. Another capacity of the power of thinking offers a further contribution to the differentiation between what is subjective and what is objective. The reproduction of a perception as a presentation is not always a faithful one; it may be modified by omissions, or changed by the merging of various elements. In that case, reality-testing has to ascertain how far such distortions go. But it is evident that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction.”

The Reason for this Condensedness of Freud's Variant on Hegel

In this paper Freud, in the difficult manner often characteristic of his later writing, is dialectically weaving together several polar antitheses or contrasts at once; here it is the pleasure principle versus the reality principle; the eros drive for unification versus the thanatos drive for destruction; internal versus external; repression versus the phases of de-repression; the contrast of affective and intellectual or cognitive; and the primal developmental phase of unity versus the dialectical phase of differentiation and negation, indeed negation of negation. What makes the inferences he makes so startling is that, like Hegel, he derives the positive and transformational *from the negative*. ***But this does not make it less radically creative.*** Here, first, is the innocent and sensible sounding introductory comment:

“With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning.”

And here is the full evocation of the sequence, in which he is startlingly leaping from crag to crag, from distinction to distinction, like an Alpine Chamois goat-antelope:

“The study of judgement affords us, perhaps for the first time, an insight into the origin of an intellectual function from the interplay of the primary instinctual impulses. Judging is a continuation, along lines of expediency, of the original process by which the ego took things into itself or expelled them from itself, according to the

pleasure principle. The polarity of judgement appears to correspond to the opposition of the two groups of instincts which we have supposed to exist. Affirmation - as a substitute for uniting - belongs to Eros; negation - the *successor* [n.b., HW] to expulsion - belongs to the instinct of destruction. The general wish to negate, the negativism which is displayed by some psychotics, is probably to be regarded as a sign of a defusion of instincts that has taken place through a withdrawal of the libidinal components.

[Comment HW: this passage long confused me. But now I see that, arising out of the realisation of the later stage of object constancy, of re-finding something, he is using the eros-thanatos distinction to understand the regression to madness, to pure expulsion, and that this is his version of the regression to paranoid-schizoid in Klein, as opposed to the depressive position. C.f., the creative contrast between Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway at the end of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.]

But the performance of the function of judgement is not made possible until the creation of the symbol of negation has endowed thinking with a first measure of freedom from the consequences of repression and, with it, from the compulsion of the pleasure principle." [my italic - HW]

Like Hegel, he takes oppositions which create cognitive-affective dissonance in us, and uses those very ones in his '*Aufhebung*' of them, so that it looks as if he is not being a good creative person; but the reality is that, like the anti-Romantic 'Romantic' Hegel, he is ***dialectically generating creativity out of the jaws of destruction***, in the extraordinary way we have seen.

Hegel's Self-Discovery; Evolution from Kant in *Phenomenology of Spirit*

We can understand the parallels, to this sequence in Freud, in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the following manner. In his first and foundational masterpiece, a very difficult work, but the one which represents his own 'historical self-analysis' and his coming into his own unique understanding, Hegel reaches his own central pre-occupation in the following way. We may say that, driven by the 'not' which enables objectivity of awareness of the other, he moves from what he calls 'Consciousness' to emerge into his own world, 'Self-Consciousness', the world of intersubjectivity.

In 'Consciousness', like most great philosophers, he has to slay the father. The immediate father in Hegel's case is the mighty mind of Immanuel Kant, probably the most axial Western philosopher since Aristotle. Hegel is about the only philosopher of his own epoch who had a mind large enough to be genuinely capable of taking on Kant, - the 'theory of knowledge foundations' Kant, the Kant of the first part (the '*Analytic*') of *Critique of Pure Reason*. So it turns out that the three sections of 'Consciousness' are: 'Sense-Certainty'; 'Perception'; and 'Force and the Understanding'. And these correspond to, and are a transformatory critique of, Kant's three major analyses in the *Analytic*: the analysis of Space and Time, as the basis of the senses, in the *Transcendental Aesthetic*; the analysis of the capacity for self-recognition, self-awareness, as the basis for perceptual worldly objectivity in the *Transcendental Deduction of the Categories*; and the analysis of the mental apprehension of the laws of force, in the *Analogies of Experience*, as the basis of

cosmic and worldly causality, in the comprehensive sense, including science and mathematics. And out of this massive process we have the beginnings of an analysis of human mentality, but not yet rooted in human interaction and relationship. Hegel writes:

“What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is, - this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses, which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’, and ‘We’ that is ‘I’. It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning point, where it leaves behind it the colourful show of the sensuous here and now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present.”

“Herrschaft und Knechtschaft” – Axial Moment in the *Phenomenology*

This is the axial moment in Hegel. From here on in, which I do not pursue, he is developing the characteristic Hegelian analysis of knowledge, culture, and religion. He explores relation through very dark examples, and we feel a hint of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* and the killing of the primal father here: we face first the struggle to the death in battle, and then the feudal situation of the submission of the ‘Knecht’ (the vassal or feudal bondsman, who has been conquered and subjugated) to the ‘Herr’, the Master, and the chapter, “Herrschaft und Knechtschaft” is an archetype, icon, and reservoir for many successors, including Kierkegaard, Marx, Heidegger, Freud himself, Sartre, Derrida, and Bataille. What Hegel recognises is that the one who submits knows more about the one who controls than vice versa. And the emergence of self-consciousness follows a pattern analogous to what we have seen in Freud.

The following difficult passage in Hegel, in the “Herrschaft und Knechtschaft” chapter, will become clearer through illustration, but therefore I provide a brief commentary also. In relation to what Hegel writes, we can explore greater variety than he does; we can note this can in fact sometimes also work for the *dominant* one in a feudal relationship, as well as the subordinate, and love will do as well as terror, though having much terror in it (cf., C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*). The dialectic works both ways, where a high degree of potential reflexivity is present. (That is the position, for instance, in Jane Austen, in the quasi-feudal relationship between Emma and Harriet, which culminates in Emma’s own awakening, when Harriet has become autonomous enough, in this Hegelian way, to lay claim to the one Emma realises she herself loves):

“For in forming the thing, his own negativity, or his being-for-itself, only as a result becomes an object to himself in that he reverses and transforms¹ the opposed existing form. However, **this objective negative is precisely the alien essence before which he trembled**, but now he destroys this alien negative and **posits himself as such a negative within the element of continuance. He thereby becomes for himself an existing-being-for-itself.**

¹ ‘sublates’ as indicated already, is the old, and dense, translation of ‘Aufhebt’, (from ‘Aufheben’, Hegel’s key concept) – but it is better translated, as I have here, for instance, as ‘reverses and transforms’.

[This is taking back agency and selfhood from an alien outside into which we, in terror, projected helplessness. Hegel thinks **our being is process**, which is what he means by the incessant creative ‘negative’, our ‘for-itself’, and in that sense we have constantly to create and recreate ourselves. At the core of her novel, for instance, Jane Austen’s Mr Woodhouse in Emma is the apotheosis of the **refusal of being as process**, which seriously impairs Emma’s development.]

Therefore, through this retrieval, **he comes to acquire through himself a mind of his own**, and he does this **precisely in the work in which there had seemed to be only some outsider’s mind**. – For this reflection, the two moments of fear and service, as well as the moments of culturally formative activity are both necessary, and both are necessary in a universal way. Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear is mired in formality and does not diffuse itself over the conscious actuality of existence. **Without culturally formative activity, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness will not become for it [consciousness] itself.**” (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Master and Vassal chapter)

[And here in this last passage the cultural-social implications are spelt out. This is the way **the human world** is created, and we assume responsibility for its creation. This is the way a humanly empowered world emerged, through massive cognitive-affective dissonance, from Feudalism into the Humanistic world of the Renaissance onwards. We find this whole process writ large in the struggles over the ‘divine right of kings’ in Shakespeare’s great tragedies, Hamlet, King Lear and Macbeth. The massive transformational reversal is perhaps most profound of all in King Lear, in relation to Cordelia. This a very condensed analysis of a huge theme, which is implicit and recapitulated in Jane Austen, and of which a rich account is to be found in Elias’s ‘The Civilising Process’. In a condensed oblique, or reversed way, this is what happens in Jane Austen’s Emma.]

What Hegel here calls ‘culturally formative’ is both the surrounding contextual conditions and devotion, which is the complex of actualities fulfilling someone’s needs for disciplined boundaries and attachments – and it is the creative work achievement and discipline someone has accomplished. *It is the cultural-social ‘civilising’ (Elias), ‘historicity’, dimension, through which the whole culture, implicitly, is internalised, and the person becomes able to integrate the inheritance of history, and historicity, of which they both form, and create, part.*

This whole process is characterised by a kind of inside-out reversal, which is analogous to the reframing and evolution, so subtly conveyed in Winnicott for instance, in infancy, between an object which disappears and is mourned absolutely; then an object which disappears and is nullified in the assertive rage of the child; - and then the one which is discovered to re-appear, now within the realm of ‘refinding’, and creating the ‘as if’ world of play. The conflict of loss which was absolute has become dialectical.

In Husserl and Heidegger we have a paradigm of absolute being: in Husserl as the domain of world-creating intentionality, existing under the sign of the through and through subjectivity of the transcendental ego, maintained through the transcendental bracketing, *epoche*, which transforms ego psychology into

philosophy, for Husserl (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Cartesian-Meditations-Phenomenology-Edmund-Husserl/dp/902470068X>); in Heidegger it lies in the absolute unassailability, in *Being and Time*, of the 'being-in-the-world' which gives us a place in being beyond doubt. Husserl still has tendrils of understanding running back to the empiricists, Berkeley and Hume, and thence to Kant. Heidegger, for his part, is nearly post-modern and is having a very long argument with Hegel (<https://iupress.org/9780253209108/hegels-phenomenology-of-spirit/>), but there is a residual faith in the givenness of common sense which brings him up just short.

I believe neither of these visions is wrong, they just appertain to a developmentally 'earlier' experience, in subjectivity, of the world. When recognition of conflict reaches the point of capacity for transformational reversal, whether in child's play, or in the resolution of fundamental conflict within the self or with others, or in great art and philosophy, we have entered the second realm of reflexivity and Hegelian dialectic.

In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse is striving, unwittingly, to reach the Hegelian second realm, - and eventually does! - but it is Harriet Smith, the much underrated and unrecognised but deeply authentic Harriet Smith, who serves as Emma's lodestone, and who may serve us as a symbol of the way the phenomenological nests within the dialectical, and how the creative tension between them may eventually be resolved.

Heward Wilkinson

November 2021