

Why Hegel Is Difficult & Why It's Good

About half a year ago I was contacted by a moderately big online intellectual e-zine asking if I was interested in writing a short piece on Hegel concerning his difficulty. I accepted the request and wrote a 1st draft of the piece, sent it in, and never got a response since despite shooting a few emails asking what was up. Since that is pretty much apparently not going to go anywhere, I'm posting a reworking of the material and idea of that piece here.

Learning is not merely the treasuring up of words in the memory; it is through thinking that the thoughts of others are seized, and this after-thinking is real learning.

—Hegel, Philosophy of Right

Hegel is difficult, this is no mystery to anyone who ever engages his writings, but for better or worse, he is *difficult on purpose*. The experience of many which is recounted in comments and remarks everywhere from books to online posts today is telling of two things: the terminology is a high barrier, and the “dialectical” style seems to not easily nor clearly flow from one proposition to the next when it comes to sublation.

Hegel, against what is the common belief, did not write his philosophy only for the already philosophical, but to teach others *how to think for themselves by showing the work of thinking itself*. To learn we must think, but what of learning to think?

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* was originally meant to be one such lesson of learning to think philosophically... but we all know how that worked out.

Regarding the problem of terminology, it isn't a major problem itself. For the vast part the issue is one of diligence and reading order. How can I say this? Well, because it's actually true from my own experience. There are two books by Hegel that can be technically begun with no prior knowledge of Hegelianism: the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the *Science Of Logic*. The former requires a repertoire of some philosophical skills and term knowledge, but Hegel's own meanings are slowly and subtly built up. You're not supposed to know everything that is going on in your first pass. The latter actually provides explanations of certain fundamental terms which appear in the former, and does so more readily and clearly in pure conceptual form. Neither of these are easy reading, but both actually define things quite readily, the *Science of Logic* more so, and are not such a struggle if we don't mind our definitions being a thinking exercise.

As to the style problem, there is no better example than Hegel's short satirical essay “*Who Thinks Abstractly?*” to prove that Hegel was able to write clearly. Why then did he choose to write in the manner he did? Why not write clearly? Because, Hegel

claimed, speculative thinking required the denseness and moment by moment exposition of his method. Hegel claimed to have found the truth in thinking itself, as such the thinking of a thought could not and should not be overlooked. As far as Hegel was concerned he *was* writing clearly. One may fault him for failing to consider the real usefulness of making clear the key to his philosophy, the method, but we must consider that Hegel thought the method could not be truly justified without first thinking through things and then realizing what we did. If the method were just given to us we would not appreciate why it was worth our use of it.

Here I must say I find myself agreeing and disagreeing with Hegel around the point of method. I agree, because none of Hegel's philosophy is anything so special if it were just like other philosophies where things are merely claimed or formally argued. Hegel's arguments are something unique and just aren't what they are without being quite an intellectual effort to endure and work through.

I disagree on this: his never having given a simple clarity to his method so we could join his journey in thought sooner and more easily. My own experience was one of a burning desire to know just what the method was and why it was anything good. To this end I spent a not small amount of time considering what I read from and about his works, slowly coming to reflect more and more on what was happening in the thoughts I was working through. This journey of thought has molded my mind in ways I doubt would have happened had I simply encountered the answer from the get go, but I do question if the experience makes the comprehension that much better or unique. I disagree with Hegel's choice on this because once I figured it out I frankly felt it was *the most stupid waste of time*, and I wish I could have saved myself so much trouble. Yeah, it's not Hegel's fault entirely thanks to a lot of bad pop literature on him, but he does have significant fault. I like immersive learning and figuring things out on my own, don't get me wrong, but I don't think I will *ever again* give a philosopher the time and place I've given Hegel on this matter.

Back to what I agree with, Hegel's writing style is a style designed to *force* the reader to slow down and *think* about what they're reading by exposing the reader to the experience of thinking a thought itself through the unpacking of its dense content. Whether one is reading the *Phenomenology*, *The Science of Logic*, or any other Hegelian work, one finds the exact same style of exposition more or less. Hegel's method invites the reader to *think* along with Hegel and to further *think about this thinking*, not to merely take finished thoughts in formal order. He does not wish to present to us a philosophical doctrine, rather he wants to present to us the philosophical endeavor itself, the thinking which implicitly goes on in every genuinely philosophical development.

Here is an example from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*:

"Free speech is assured by the innocuous character which it acquires as a result of the stability of government."

How are we to make sense of this? Now, this isn't so hard, but my point here is that if you could decipher this you could decipher Hegel (if you felt like it). Freedom of speech is the freedom to say whatever one wants without threat of censorship. But who would be censored for what they say? People who hold unpopular positions, have insulted someone or some group, or speak things that may lead to actual trouble for society or the powers that be. But why would unpopular speech be censored? Speech is just words, isn't it? Well, words are not always just hot air. People don't always just complain to complain; insults can have real consequences if left unchallenged, and words can lead to actions that may disrupt social order or inconvenience those in power. But if these words are not directly threatening or socially injurious they are protected as free speech regardless of popularity or power.

This is the *thinking* Hegel wishes us to perform. This thinking is reasoning. Whenever you assert anything, you are assuming many things implicit in that claim. To think about free speech is simply to think through what it implicitly means, or how it really makes sense as a concept, and you follow the chain of thought from one thought to the next. You think free speech, and you think of censorship. You then consider what is and isn't censored and draw upon experience until you think of the myriad of unpopular positions put out into the social world, even crazy or seemingly dangerous ones, and you realize most are allowed because they are powerless and incapable of effective action, that is, they are "innocuous."

Hegel's teaching method is one in which the development of concepts flow into the next by their own content, but while the pieces of the movement swing freely before the reader, Hegel does not and will not hand to the reader the fully explicit movement that connects these thoughts. The full elaboration of the movement is the reader's own labor in the work by unraveling what is implicit in the dense claims and seeing where they lead, thus making the thought their own thinking. Here, Hegel is a full believer that experience and practice is the greatest teacher.

Now, what does Hegel show in this activity he puts us through? That thinking *does not need any special teaching*, it is always already active and reveals itself in the very act of thinking. If only we stand back and look at the experience of thinking itself we would see just what reason and thought truly are. Against the common belief that thought is fixed and empty, and that reason is the privileged capacity of a natural elite few, Hegel's philosophical exposition shows the opposite: all thought is a chain of thoughts, and all humans who can think already engage in reason—just not in a conscious and coherent manner. To reason is to *think through* thoughts that only *appear* fixed, but with observation and reflection show themselves not to be. In reasoning we naturally make mistakes, think further, and turn those mistakes into a path to correct thoughts.

By paying attention to how thought leads from one to the next, and inquiring into this very movement up to the purest concepts, we engage in the highest power of reason.

Considering the history of reaction towards Hegel's philosophy, does the teaching method succeed? If we take mass popularity as a measure, no, it does not. By that measure it could be said to be a catastrophic failure, but what of Hegel's own metric for his success? After gaining his professorship positions, Hegel never again published a finished systematic work in full after the *Science of Logic*, focusing instead on his lecturing. What did he do in his lectures? Why, the exact same he did in his books: to recreate before his audience the odyssey of thought. Hegel's style was not pretty, it was not pleasant, and yet he rose to such fame and acclaim that young students flocked even from beyond Germany to come and listen to the "Aristotle of Berlin." In a written character portrait of Hegel by Heinrich Gustav Hotho, Hegel's lectures are described as a performance which agonized the mind, yet resulted in the utmost clear thoughts imaginable.

"Even one who could follow with full insight and intelligence, without looking to the right or to the left, saw himself thrown into the most strange tension and agony of mind... What he uttered in such moments was so clear and exhaustive, of such simple self-evidencing power, that everyone who could grasp it felt as if he had found and thought it for himself; and so completely did all previous ways of thinking vanish, that scarce a remembrance remained of the days of dreaming, in which such thoughts had not yet been awakened." —Hotho

The mark of a great teacher is striking their message into the heart of their students, however this is possible only if the student is willing to give it a chance. Hegel's asks us to take up the task of thinking along with him, but this requires us to give him a chance to show us what he wants to show us. Half of Hegel's success depends on our willingness to take up the challenge to think seriously and openly. If we allow ourselves to withhold judgments based on our prior positions, Hegel's thinking comes to light as something not all his own, but also as ours. I do not think he asks us to think in an alien way, but to realize how we have always thought, to perfect it, and to take hold of this knowledge to comprehend ourselves and the world.