

EXCESSIVE SPECULATION
UNMASKING THE METAPHYSICS OF HEGEL
(1976/2011)

In his philosophical 'Encyclopedia' (§6) Hegel strives to explain the meaning of a weird statement which has been misinterpreted almost as often as it has been quoted. The statement runs as follows: *Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich* (rational? real?), *und was wirklich ist* (neither illusion, nor just appearance), *das ist vernünftig* (reasonable?). Hegel thus insists that reason and reality are identical concepts. The intention behind his identification is, apparently, to bridge the gap between idealism and empiricism.

The term 'reality' should expressly be taken in the sense of "that which is real by virtue of necessity and which thus cannot be thought not to be", in contradistinction to "that which is real by virtue of accident and which therefore can be thought not to be". Hegel, however, does not take the trouble to explain what sort of necessity he refers to. Is it logical - or physical - or perhaps ethical? But at least that much seems clear that, with regard to his concept of reality, we must distinguish between two kinds of reality, viz.: one which is "really real", and another one which is only "apparently real".

However, it is first a little later (§8) that we get the key to a deeper understanding of his enigmatic statement. Hegel here mentions the so-called *principle of empiricism* which runs thus: *nihil est in intellectu quod non (prius) fuerit in sensu*, there is nothing in the reason which was not already in the senses - noticing that the principle, of course, is accepted by his own, admittedly "speculative", philosophy. But, as he also affirms, his speculation likewise accepts the contrary *idealistic* principle, which runs as follows: *nihil est in sensu quod non (prius) fuerit in intellectu*, there is nothing in the senses which was not already in the reason. How does he overcome this contradiction?

It is clear that no philosopher, not even Hegel, would consider claiming that these two principles, that of empiricism and that of idealism, holds simultaneously for exactly the same, and in the same respect. If so, he would have uttered nonsense, *flatus vocis*. The logical principle of non-contradiction preserves its formal validity, even for Hegel. But how should we then interpret his insistence on this seemingly clear contradiction? The solution is that the word 'reason' does not denote the same in the two contexts: whereas the principle of *empiricism* refers to *human reason* which is only *particular*, that of *idealism*, on the contrary, refers to *divine reason* which is *universal*.

It is natural to guess that Hegel was led to this stance by his predecessor Leibniz. In fact, in the *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, his lengthy reply to Locke, Leibniz quotes the principle of empiricism, only making a seemingly innocuous addition: *nihil est in intellectu quod non (prius) fuerit in sensu - nisi ipse intellectus*, there is nothing in the human reason which was not already in the senses - except reason itself. This little addition opens up a world of difference. What does reason itself contribute? That was the question posed by Kant, leading forward to his transcendental criticism. With his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant insisted to have shown a middle course between the excesses of radical empiricism and radical idealism, i.e., a sort of synthesis. Hegel, however, was not satisfied with that synthesis. In Hegel's opinion, Kant's proposal to investigate the contribution of reason before engaging in philosophy and metaphysics was just as plausible as the suggestion of a scholastic who advised his pupil to learn swimming while remaining safely on the shore, before jumping into the sea.

How, then, did Hegel conceive of a synthesis which could evade contradiction? With man, who does not exist in general, as mankind, but only in particular, as persons, rational thinking is always conditioned by experience founded on sense impressions; this is the kernel of the principle of empiricism. With God it is different: divine reason has immediate knowledge of everything which can be known, future as well as present and past, because such knowledge is the ultimate condition for everything manifesting itself in time and space as sensible reality; this is the core of the principle of idealism. Thus, on one hand, divine reason holds the pattern of all reality disclosed to the senses; on the other, reality as shown to the senses is the source of all human knowledge.

To Hegel, the concept of being is the most meagre of all concepts, a *prope nihil*. 'Being' is such a poor predicate that even the tiniest fly can make a rightful claim to it. Therefore it is also a matter of course that *God is*. But God has the unique prerogative that he is by virtue of necessity. Hence God alone is truly real - in fact, is reality itself. As thinking beings we realize, with Descartes, that it is impossible for God not to be. The perfection of God is so lofty, yea infinite, that it can be surpassed by nothing at all. For this reason, God cannot lack anything that humble, indeed inferior, as *pure being*. However, the difficulty pointed out by Hegel is precisely that the concept of pure being is so shallow, so empty, that it threatens to capsize, transmuting itself into its contrast, *pure nothing*. In this way something else is brought into play, viz., change, or motion: by being reduced to nothing, being reappears as *becoming*, or *creatio continua*.

The dialectical interplay between being and nothing is thereby origin and source of a created world in which all existence is subject to the incessant motion of change. Does anything at all in this abiding manifestation of change remain forever immutable? We are able to know only that which we can grasp by subsuming it under our concepts.

Can the idea of God in any way lead to anything like an insight into the nature of God? In so far as the idea of God is true, its connotation must be identical to its denotation. At the same time the idea of God is human in the sense of being given to our intellect. The idea of God being a human concept given to human reason, it must necessarily be the concept of a human God. Human reason is able to grasp only that much of divine wisdom which it is able to express by means of its concepts, and its thinking is true only in so far as it corresponds to that which it pretends to express, viz. God. This naturally gives rise to the suspicion of Nietzsche that God, after all, is only too human.

Babbling of "absolute science", Hegel is in fact so heedless as to pretend that it is possible for man, in particular himself, to obtain speculative knowledge of divine truth. Had he been only a little less complacent in his vainglory, he might have found himself confronted with a number of difficulties, of which it is hard to mention the most serious. First, he is unwilling to admit any fundamental difference between the divine wisdom, which is infinite and infallible, and human speculation, which is only finite and frail. Second, he ignores the obvious difference between divine truth, which is eternal and necessary, and human experience, which is only temporal and contingent. Third, in line with the two former difficulties - which are, in fact, only one and the same - he does not consider the possibility that human reason may be so much at variance with ultimate truth that it has deliberately made the choice to avoid truth, gazing at it from a distance. Maybe human reason, by its quest for objective truth, has predestined itself to remain outside truth as an impartial observer, whereas it should have asked for subjective truth, thereby giving itself the chance of taking part in truth as an ardent agent?

If human reason, as intimated by Kierkegaard, is cut off from truth in the sense that it no longer has that immediate relation to truth which it once had in its original state of childish innocence, then human knowledge and divine wisdom has nothing to do with each other, but should be understood and described as basically incompatible. So the question naturally arises: How can that be? How could such change ever arise? The only possible explanation seems to be that our relationship to truth has been cut off in the sense that man, from the first instant of his creation, has offended against truth. But, of course, that man chooses to reject truth cannot count as a proof against it.

Hegel apparently did not consider this possibility which mocks his entire project. Maybe one should not go so far as to blame him for giving way to deliberate hypocrisy. The difficulty of the questions he attempted to solve might be reckoned to his advance. One can find it misplaced that he - motivated by a wish to ensure the absolute validity of his own thinking - restricts himself to consider only the speculations of human reason (*speculatio* - the vision and contemplation of ideas - at first nothing was odious in this). In that manner he, who more than anyone else struggled to be concrete in his thinking,

was caught in a huge web of abstractions spun by his own brain. Against his own will, he ended up digging a trench between the contemplative life of the spirit and the active sensual life of the body, between barren speculation and corporeal existence.

This comes to the fore in his claim that religion can obtain full insight into its own nature solely by transforming itself into conceptual thinking and speculative reasoning. By this move, reason is misguided to insist on its own superiority with regard to faith, whereby Christianity is transformed into philosophy and life is feigned to be theoretical. A sign that this is indeed the case can be found in the Hegelian translation of central religious terms into philosophical ones. Kant spoke of God as "the ideal of pure reason". Hegel takes a step further by baptizing his own philosophical god by the name of 'Idea'. A consequence of this transition from 'God' to 'Idea' is the identification of God with something intelligible, making "him" easier to handle by the speculative philosopher. In contrast to the word 'God', 'Idea' cannot pretend to denote any kind of divine person. Hegel can then misuse his own logic to maltreat the Christian idea of Lógos.

Hegel was not able to make any sense of talking about a deity who could be real and whose nature could yet remain unknown, indeed inconceivable, to human reason. "The Spirit investigates everything, even the depths of God", he quotes (2.Cor.2,10). God, accordingly, cannot keep his secrets concealed to the inquiring intellect of Hegel! The connotation of the Lógos-Idea is then unfolded dialectically in a timeless manner by a presumed logic pretending to reveal "the secrets of God before his act of creation". Now logic, following Hegel, is an exact discipline of absolute science; consequently, the innermost secrets of God must be subject to the laws immanent to speculative logic. This little turn lies bewilderingly close, and one understands that it must have been unacceptable to Kierkegaard - as well as to anyone else who believes in a personal God. However, it is wise make a serious attempt to understand Hegel before dismissing him, and this is best done by considering his criticism of the Kantian "Ding an sich".

Hegel's stance on this issue was inspired by his predecessors Fichte og Schelling. However, his position differs from theirs. They had objected, e.g., that the notion of a thing in itself, considered in abstraction from all experience based on sense impressions, is incomprehensible; it is impossible to grasp what the concept signifies or represents. To this objection Hegel made the ironical remark, that nothing can be easier, since the thing in itself is nothing but the empty *caput mortuum* of our own abstract reflections. The notion of emptiness disguised as something transcending our intellectual capacities is determined as pure conceptual identity by the successive renunciation of predicates. However, negation is one of the categories of reason, and as such it is well known. Consequently, one cannot say that a concept determined by pure negation is unknown. Nothing is incomprehensible about this notion. Only it is completely redundant.

Following Kant, *das Ding an sich* is a border concept which indicates the limits of human reason; subsuming the concept of God under this type of concepts he noticed that, by making this move, he would neither reject, nor affirm, the existence of God. Hegel denied the validity of limiting concepts, insisting that reason has no fixed border, his point being that, in so far as reason has recognized a limit, it has also transgressed it. But, on this issue, Hegel was gainsaid by Kierkegaard who claimed that such bordering concepts should be taken seriously; for instance, Kierkegaard identified "the deity" with "the unknown", insisting that it indicated the limit of human comprehension.

The question therefore is: which importance can be ascribed to limiting concepts? Kant claimed the border to be fixed once and for all, by transcendental argument, as the boundary between *Vernunft* and *Verstand*, its signposts being the so-called *antinomies* which demonstrate that any attempt at transgression unavoidably leads to contradiction. According to Kant, contradiction is precisely what characterizes those ways of thinking that struggle to attain knowledge of a truth supposed to be independent of experience. Against this, Hegel accentuates that contradictions are equally characteristic to those forms of thought which pretend to be firmly founded on the testimony of experience. Contradictions lurk and emerge whenever human reason strives to reach bottom rock. This is not our fault, says Hegel, but due to the fact that reality is full of contradictions. We just have to live with the conflicts latent in our existence, to accept and understand that they are what makes events happen, thereby causing change and evolution.

If we think truthfully, the contradictions in our thought are merely the conceptual expressions for those collisions which dominate our existence. Contradiction is nothing but the verbal expression for tension or conflict, the causes of motion and development. God is the first or unmoved mover of everything, so the divine nature contains the pure and unconditional plenitude not only of contrast and conflict, but even of contradiction. Hence Hegel can be said to agree with Kierkegaard in his determination of "the deity" as "the absolute paradox" (however, from this one cannot infer that Kierkegaard agreed with Hegel; most certainly, he did not!). And what else is the divine work of creation than one unique contradiction? So, how much starker must the contradiction inherent in the nature of God not be, when we consider the fact that God is the cause of creation? So huge it is that it can combine being with nothing, uniting the two as becoming!

According to Hegel, all this is simple logic. To Hegel, God is identical to the Idea, and the Idea, both *an und für sich*, is unfolded by the subtle logic of Hegelian dialectics. Science (the absolute one of Hegel) is able to map the divine nature in its tiniest details, so that everyone, yea, even a fool, is able to grasp the necessity of God leaving himself, thereby replacing his original unity with something else, in which way the divine nature was made expressible, and eternity became externalised in the world of time and space.

Thus God relinquished his own hidden essence, revealing himself as external nature. The world, then, is the visible expression of a God playing hide and seek with himself. However, judged in the light of eternity, the world is nothing but a manifestation of sheer outlandishness which must always suffer from a yearning back to its divine origin. The fulfilment of nature first occurs when it has been transformed into the spirit of man, whose elevated assignment it is to attain knowledge: of God, of nature, and of itself.

For those knowing something of the history of ideas it is clear that, with all this, Hegel has simply adopted the antique scheme of neo-Platonism, elaborating it a little. The transformation of God occurs in three stages, viz.: 1) *μονή*, representing the divine *Oneness* as it rests in itself ("*an sich*"), hidden and silent, 2) *πρόδος*, designating its alienation and externalization to become for itself ("*für sich*"), as *World*, or *Nature*, and 3) *ἐπιστροφή*, signifying its conversion and return home, as *Spirit* ("*and und für sich*"). The whole movement forms a closed circle. This movement, this three-phased circuit, claims Hegel, *is* the eternal life of God. At first (*i*), God is "*reine Idée*", secondly (*ii*), he is "*entfremdete Natur*", and finally (*iii*), he returns to himself as "*menschlicher Geist*". The circle becomes closed when the deity, as human spirit, recognizes itself.

The mistake by this way of thinking is not, what might be believed, that it is flatly false but, instead, that it is outrageously superficial. Hegel does not appear to recognize the difficulties; he just supposes, or pretends, that they do not exist, that there are none. Accordingly he bows reason into a short circuit, thus missing what is essential, the core. So one inevitably gets the feeling that life is reducible to logic, albeit of an alien type. Kierkegaard is right that Hegel thereby distorts human existence to abstract inhumanity, and it is good fortune to have him close by hand when trying come safely through a study of Hegel. According to Hegel, truth inheres in the system; this sounds inhuman, and one understands very well why Kierkegaard found it outrageous.

However, one may still ask if Kierkegaard's criticism hits the target at its center. By 'system' Hegel does not, as assumed by Kierkegaard, refer to "the final and closed system of reality", but rather to "the reality conceived as a totality", that is, "the entire and complete reality without adornment" which, after all, is something quite different. Hegel at least had the best intentions to preserve his knowledge open to experience and to think reality as concrete. That he does not always succeed - or does not succeed at all - is more tragical than comical. Kierkegaard mocks with biting sarcasm "this tiny little gimmick of a professor", which has a place to everything in his system except himself. But it is a mistake to believe that one exalts Kierkegaard by abating Hegel.

Hegel was a great philosopher, indeed one of the greatest the world has ever seen. But, like so many other great figures of history, he was great not only as regards merits, but also as regards defects; so he resembles Plato, Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard.

The consequences of his thinking, indirect as well as direct ones, have been enormous, but he can hardly be reproached for that. One can view his philosophy as an expression of arrogance and presumptuousness, *ὕβρις*. Maybe one could say that his thinking was greater than befits a fallible human being. Such accusation, however, is narrow-minded. Rather, one should reproach him that they, in spite of greatness, were not great enough. What happened was that they came short when compared to reality, because reality was greater, as it must always be. If the truth about man is to inhere in a single individual, more is needed than great thoughts. If not, we might have learned truth from Hegel.

Hegel can be called the last great philosopher and the first great historian of ideas. With him an evolution was completed that began with Augustine, having these marks: 1) the amalgamation of Christian dogma and Antique philosophy, 2) the transition from an ontological way of thinking to a historical one. These two marks are interconnected. Christianity having root in a historical event, Christian talk of God must refer to history. The incarnation therefore becomes the central event. Hegelian philosophy can be said to have made the incarnation its central theme. But it then interprets the incarnation in its own way, and this definitely is much more philosophical than Christian.

According to Hegel, philosophy is inseparable from its own history. In this view, philosophy shifts its character: from having been static it henceforth becomes dynamic, evolving towards being the history of philosophical ideas; but more than that: thinking thereby becomes extended in a way that makes it coincide with the history of mankind. With this we are back where we started: by the relationship between reason and reality. As a historian of ideas, Hegel strictly has only one single idea - but this is great, indeed. The Idea, with a capital I, is the central theme both of the history of human thinking and of the history of human life and reality - hence the connection between the two. Hegel equates the Idea, understood as a philosophical term for God, with the absolute, and it is a mark of its divinity that it preserves its own nature free and unimpressed by anything that is different and alien to it. But the Idea does not just hover over the ocean. Relating itself to the world of man, it enters history by the event of incarnation.

Now *history*₁ and *history*₂ are two very different things, viz. partly 1) *res gestae*, i.e. past reality itself, partly 2) *investigatio rerum gestarum*, i.e. the science of the past. History as science of the past describes the deceased, their lives, their pains, their deeds. But the past is not there any longer, we have no immediate, factual, experience of it, so it is only accessible to us as *truth mediated by science*, that is, as scientific knowledge. Since the past itself cannot be present to us - the opposite would involve contradiction - history, in so far as it pretends to be an empirical science founded upon experience, must at least be mediated by something immediately present, and this we call: sources. Science as knowledge of the past must be based upon something which is still present.

It is the sources which bridge the gulf between past and present by being themselves present remnants from the past disguised as naturals, artefacts, or written documents. Thus, in their silent factuality, they betoken a past open to scientific interpretation.

Vanished reality is disclosed to science by the answers gathered by questioning our sources, which means that the reality uncovered depends on the questions we pose. We can only get reasonable answers from our sources if we pose the relevant questions, but the sources are silent until we make them talk, so we must provide the answers too. Here it is important to separate what is essential from what is not; it is certainly not the aim of science to recall all the petty details of a process, but rather to focus on the core. However, no historian can do a job in total abstraction from all personal presumptions; but opinions diverge, and even learned people often disagree. Who shall then decide? Which instance is in possession of the necessary authority? Philosophy, Hegel insists. Now, to Hegel, philosophy means: Hegel - and his answer is: the becoming of freedom. Freedom, and how it emerged, is the thin red line in the web of history.

The Idea - constituting the divine nature - is at once transcendent and immanent in relation to the world: highly elevated above it, and yet fully and freely present within it. For this reason it makes good sense to determine the main theme of history as freedom; this means, that freedom determines the course of evolution, constituting its final goal. God, in exalted freedom, is the cause of everything which is or happens in the world; but freedom is first really free when it permeates the society of man, thereby realizing itself in the course of history. As a concept, freedom is posed by the history of ideas. As a factual reality, however, freedom depends on the history of politics and economy. History is the story about the road to freedom. Hence history appears to be the story of the liberation from serfdom. Freedom can never be present as a final result on this side of doomsday. When freedom has become fact, history has come to its end.

From philosophy we learn that freedom is the great theme of all human history. This could never be known in advance by the historian simply by being a historian, but it is something that the historian must know before his encounter with historical reality, and if this condition is not fulfilled, he will not be able to understand a single word. Every historian chooses a specific subject to which he approaches, bringing with him a long series of conceptions and questions, a veritable arsenal of problems and categories; this is a condition of interpretation which should be recognized by all hermeneutics. Knowledge is acquired by the comparison of already known with hitherto unknown, but this naturally implies that something must be presupposed as being already known. What must be presupposed by the historian as already known is, as we already know, the idea of freedom: without knowing that idea, he can never disclose the core.

Philosophy gives us the idea of freedom *in abstracto*. Understood philosophically, this idea is identical to the eternal essence of God, the unity of thought and being, reason and reality. Interpreted as origin, ἀρχή, it is not only the source of all concepts, but also of everything real, κόσμος and ἱστορία. *History* depicts the development of freedom *in concreto*. The primary goal of human evolution is the realization of freedom. Its motivating force is human passion. This passion is from the beginning purely selfish; but although it merely strives for its own advantages, being blind for everything else, it nevertheless - in strange and cunning ways - is fooled to further public utility.

Behind the egotism of man and the muddy mess of human passions, we trace the invisible hand of *world spirit* which, with divine cunning, outlines the hidden patterns of providence by disturbing the petty purposes of people in order to pursue its own goal, which is: the common benefit of humanity. But the nature of world spirit is: *freedom*. For that reason, *history* is the *autobiography of freedom*. This has three phases:

1st phase: The origin of the Idea in God, meaning its remaining "*an sich*", that is, its being conceived as pure intellectual abstraction. *God understood as an abstract Idea* is analyzed by the science of *logic* which maps it as the *dialectics of categories*.

2nd phase: The alienation of the Idea from God, meaning its emergence "*für uns*", its appearance in time and space as real external Nature. *The Idea interpreted as Nature* is scrutinized scientifically by the disciplines of *physics, chemistry* and *biology*.

3rd phase: The reversion of the Idea to God, meaning its undergoing a process of evolution "*an und für sich*", leading to self-consciousness, *God thus reappearing as Human Spirit*, the manifestations of which are studied by the *phenomenology of spirit*.

The eventual unfolding of the *Idea* as *spirit* occurs simultaneously on three levels: α) as *subjective spirit*, β) as *objective spirit*, γ) as *absolute spirit*. On the subjective level we have to distinguish between *perception, apperception, and cogitation*; on the objective level we have to distinguish between *law, moral, and community*; finally, on the absolute level, the human spirit manifests itself as *art, religion, and philosophy*.

The three phases mentioned point to a conceptual distinction and do not represent an immediate temporal succession. Taken together they form a logico-dialectical circuit. This circuit symbolizes the eternal life of the *Idea*, or *God*. Considered as phenomena, the manifestations of the spirit can be described in two ways which are very different. Historically everything should be interpreted as the realization of what is universal in what is particular, as the temporal actualization of latent potentialities, or as expressions of what he termed: "*Weltgeist*". In the *phenomenology of spirit*, where the distinction between idea and phenomena has been suspended, the *Idea* is interpreted systematically in the light of its empirical manifestations. According to Hegel both sciences, history as well as phenomenology, claim the identity of way and end, of process and destination.

Everything in the world happens according to reason, or providence, Hegel says. The goal or purpose of history is that spirit finally reveals itself as divine intelligence by virtue of its own activity, its free actions. Nothing finite can persist as its own goal, purpose consisting in being related to something else. But infinity can abide and endure as the mutual relatedness of all finite beings as well as their relatedness to the whole. This shows that infinity does not necessarily annihilate what is finite by absorbing it; instead it just suspends it by transforming it into another, higher, kind of reality.

History is no sum of accumulated coincidences, the arbitrary outcomes of chance: its plan, pattern, or purpose is recognizable in the light of its divine idea, viz. freedom. God's wisdom being perfect, he wills himself as ultimate purpose or goal of everything; the essence of spirit is freedom, and the freedom of spirit is to become what it is: itself. That the idea must make itself known is a philosophical postulate, not an empirical one: the divine wisdom must possess the necessary power to carry out its own lofty plans. In this way freedom is the crucial condition for the self-realization of spirit.

The subject matter of history is the gradual fulfilment of the rational plan of spirit: the realization of freedom. Reason being the end of that process, it cannot be its means. Hence the hidden motor behind the development must be the irrational passions of man, his lust and greed, in short: egotism. In contrast to this, reason points to public utility and common wellness as goals worth pursuing. History accordingly presents itself to its spectator as a wild scene of opposite wishes, conflicting interests, and competing forces. But behind the back of the human actors of history, reason determines the direction of the historical process by making use of them without their conscious knowledge to further its own purposes without their willing consent. The thoughts and deeds of men thereby make them cooperate as blind instruments in the service of reason.

In our time, the most important conditions for freedom have been realized already by the great leaders of mankind who have worked as the handmen of world spirit. Indeed, progress has gone so far that the only task left to man is to become conscious of the freedom he has, says Hegel. In the Orient only one person was free, viz., the ruler. In Hellas some people were free, although the most of the population were still slaves. In Germany, however, and especially in the kingdom of Prussia *anno* 1820, all are free! According to Hegel, Prussia was simply the final incarnation of world spirit!

To posterity it remains incomprehensible how Hegel could persuade himself to put forward such a reactionary jubilation. Considering what forces Marx since found it incumbent to combat, his blindness seems feigned and, for that reason, almost criminal. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to accept the standard marxist criticism of Hegel which takes his political conservatism to be an unavoidable consequence of his philosophy. As I see it, Hegel's attitude is rather at variance with the best of his thinking.

To Hegel, history presents itself as a sinister picture, or as a book where the happy times turn up as empty pages. So the past rests upon us as a heavy block, its bloody colour showing that it has been used as a slaughterbench for the happiness of people. Nevertheless Hegel admires the great personality: the political, or even military, leader. His hero is the outstanding individuals of world history who unconsciously become instruments to providence by unknowingly accepting its purposes as their own.

Relative to such persons, moral worries are irrelevant. Even though all their acts are performed with the purpose of pursuing selfish interests, that makes no difference: the point is that nothing great in the world has been done without any selfish motives. The greatness of the hero is that he manifests himself as an instrument of providence: the Idea, as it must appear in this age under such circumstances, is incarnate in this man (of course, he must be a man). Famous examples are Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon. That countries are wasted and innocent people massacred are not their fault, says Hegel; one cannot blame elephants for walking around with feet that are too big.

But even Hegel must pose the question: what is the purpose of all these sacrifices? The problem of God's righteousness thus breaks its way to the surface of his thinking; and here - on the surface - it also remains, as so many times before with other thinkers. Hegel thereby makes it an easy job to scum a nice fat cream off the surface of history: for him, the solution to this enigmatic problem consists in an easy reference to the Idea. The Idea takes no part in the whirlpool of events; instead, it stays in the background, making use of the miseries of man according to its own preferences.

Immovable and unassailable, the divine Idea plays havoc with mankind, leaving it to men to pay for its game with their sufferings. This accords well - too well, indeed - with the old Greek idea of divine immutability and self-sufficiency (*αὐθάρκεια*). By contrast, we are a huge way from the Christian belief in God's unconditioned love and his torments as son of man. That God himself takes part in the pains of his creation belongs to the core of the Christian Gospel. This is also the only meaningful answer to the problem of human suffering: God himself suffers with us.