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# THE HEGEL LEGEND OF "THESIS-ANTITHESIS-SYNTHESIS"

BY GUSTAV E. MUELLER

Hegel's greatness is as indisputable as his obscurity. The matter is due to his peculiar terminology and style; they are undoubtedly involved and complicated, and seem excessively abstract. These linguistic troubles, in turn, have given rise to legends<sup>1</sup> which are like perverse and magic spectacles—once you wear them, the text simply vanishes. Theodor Haering's monumental and standard work has for the first time cleared up the linguistic problem. By carefully analyzing every sentence from his early writings, which were published only in this century, he has shown how Hegel's terminology evolved—though it was complete when he began to publish. Hegel's contemporaries were immediately baffled, because what was clear to him was not clear to his readers, who were not initiated into the genesis of his terms.

An example of how a legend can grow on inept reading is this: Translate "Begriff" by "concept," "Vernunft" by "reason" and "Wissenschaft" by "science"—and they are all good dictionary translations—and you have transformed the great critic of rationalism *and* irrationalism into a ridiculous champion of an absurd pan-logistic rationalism and scientism.

The most vexing and devastating Hegel legend is that everything is thought in "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis."

A prominent illustration of this interpretation is W. T. Stace's *The Philosophy of Hegel* (1924). He first supposes that he has to construe Hegel's philosophy in "triads of thesis, antithesis, synthesis" (97), then he finds that Hegelian texts do not follow this "ideal, method," and what is his conclusion? "These irregularities do not indicate, however, that our description of the dialectic method is wrong. What they do show is that Hegel has not himself been able to carry out his own dialectic method with absolute consistency in all cases. This is of course an imperfection in his system" (*ibid.*). And although he claims that his chapters "embody all the essential principles," nevertheless, he does admit that they "can give little idea of the vast fields which Hegel covered, the profuse wealth of his concrete illustrations, the enormous learning which he brought to bear upon these studies, the profundity and breadth of his vision" (p. viii). This abstract separation of "principles" and "vision" is utterly un-Hegelian. The actual texts of Hegel not only occasionally deviate from "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis," but show nothing of the sort. "Dialectic" does not for Hegel mean "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis." Dialectic means that any "ism"—which has a polar opposite, or is a special viewpoint leaving "the rest" to itself—must be criticized by the logic of philosophical thought, whose problem is reality as such, the "World-itself."

Hermann Glockner's reliable *Hegel Lexikon* (4 volumes, Stuttgart, 1935) does not list the Fichtean terms "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" together. In all the twenty volumes of Hegel's "complete works"<sup>2</sup> he does not use this "triad" once; nor does it occur in the eight volumes of Hegel texts, published for the first time in the twentieth century. He refers to "thesis,

<sup>1</sup> See the excellent study by Walter A. Kaufmann, "The Hegel Myth and Its Method," *Philosophical Review*, LX (1951), 459–486.

<sup>2</sup> The new critical edition, being published by F. Meiner in Hamburg, will contain 32 volumes.

antithesis, and synthesis" in the *Preface* of the *Phaenomenology of Mind*, where he considers the possibility of this "triplicity" as a method or logic of philosophy. According to the Hegel-legend one would expect Hegel to recommend this "triplicity." But, after saying that it was derived from Kant, he calls it a "lifeless schema," "mere shadow" and concludes: "The trick of wisdom of that sort is as quickly acquired as it is easy to practice. Its repetition, when once it is familiar, becomes as boring as the repetition of any bit of sleight-of-hand once we see through it. The instrument for producing this monotonous formalism is no more difficult to handle than the palette of a painter, on which lie only two colours. . ." (*Preface, Werke, II, 48-49*).

In the student notes, edited and published as *History of Philosophy*, Hegel mentions in the Kant chapter, the "spiritless scheme of the triplicity of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" (*geistloses Schema*) by which the rhythm and movement of philosophic knowledge is artificially pre-scribed (*vorgezeichnet*).<sup>3</sup>

In the first important book about Hegel by his student, intimate friend and first biographer, Karl Rosenkranz (*Hegels Leben, 1844*), "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" are conspicuous by their absence. It seems Hegel was quite successful in hiding his alleged "method" from one of his best students.

The very important new Hegel literature of this century has altogether abandoned the legend. Theodor Haering's *Hegels Wollen und Werk* (2 vol., Teubner, 1929 and 1938) makes a careful study of Hegel's terminology and language and finds not a trace of "thesis, antithesis, synthesis." In the second volume there are a few lines (pp. 118, 126) in which he repeats what Hegel in the above quotation had said himself, i.e., that this "conventional slogan" is particularly unfortunate because it impedes the understanding of Hegelian texts. As long as readers think that they have to find "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" in Hegel they must find him obscure—but what is obscure is not Hegel but their colored glasses. Iwan Iljin's *Hegel's Philosophie als kontemplative Gotteslehre* (Bern, 1946) dismisses the "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" legend in the Preface as a childish game (*Spielerei*), which does not even reach the front-porch of Hegel's philosophy.

Other significant works, like Hermann Glockner, *Hegel* (2 vols., Stuttgart, 1929), Theodor Steinbüchel, *Das Grundproblem der Hegelschen Philosophie* (Bonn, 1933), and Theodor Litt, *Hegel: Eine Kritische Erneuerung* (Heidelberg, 1953), Emerich Coreth, S.J., *Das Dialektische Sein in Hegels Logik* (Wien, 1952), and many others have simply disregarded the legend. In my own monographs on *Hegel über Offenbarung, Kirche und Philosophie* (Munich, 1939) and *Hegel über Sittlichkeit und Geschichte* (Reinhardt, 1940), I never found any "thesis, antithesis, synthesis."

Richard Kroner, in his introduction to the English edition of selections from Hegel's *Early Theological Writings*, puts it mildly when he says: "This new Logic is of necessity as dialectical as the movement of thinking itself. . . . But it is by no means the mere application of a monotonous

<sup>3</sup> *Werke, XIX, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, III* (Stuttgart, 1928), 610.

trick that could be learned and repeated. It is not the mere imposition of an ever recurring pattern. It may appear so in the mind of some historians who catalogue the living trend of thought, but in reality it is ever changing, ever growing development; Hegel is nowhere pedantic in pressing concepts into a ready-made mold. The theme of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, like the motif of a musical composition, has many modulations and modifications. It is never 'applied'; it is itself only a poor and not even helpful abstraction of what is really going on in Hegel's Logic."<sup>4</sup>

Well, shall we keep this "poor and not helpful abstraction" in our attic because "some historians" have used it as their rocking-horse? We rather agree with the conclusion of Johannes Flugge: "Dialectic is *not* the scheme of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis imputed to Hegel."<sup>5</sup>

In an essay by Nicolai Hartmann on *Aristoteles und Hegel*, I find the following additional confirmation of all the other witnesses to the misinterpretation of Hegel's dialectic: "It is a basically perverse opinion (*grundverkehrte Ansicht*) which sees the essence of dialectic in the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis."<sup>6</sup> The legend was spread by Karl Marx whose interpretation of Hegel is distorted. It is Marxism superimposed on Hegel. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis, Marx says in *Das Elend der Philosophie*, is Hegel's purely logical formula for the movement of pure reason, and the whole system is engendered by this dialectical movement of thesis, antithesis, synthesis of all categories. This pure reason, he continues, is Mr. Hegel's own reason, and history becomes the history of his own philosophy, whereas in reality, thesis, antithesis, synthesis are the categories of economic movements. (Summary of Chapter II, Paragraph 1.) The few passages in Marx' writings that resemble philosophy are not his own. He practices the Communistic habit of expropriation without compensation. Knowing this in general, I was also convinced that there must be a source for this "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis," and I finally discovered it.

In the winter of 1835-36, a group of Kantians in Dresden called on Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus, professor of philosophy at the University of Kiel, to lecture to them on the new philosophical movement after Kant. They were older, professional men who in their youth had been Kantians, and now wanted an orientation in a development which they distrusted; but they also wanted a confirmation of their own Kantianism. Professor Chalybäus did just those two things. His lectures appeared in 1837 under the title *Historische Entwicklung der speculativen Philosophie von Kant bis Hegel, Zu näherer Verständigung des wissenschaftlichen Publikums mit der neuesten Schule*. The book was very popular and appeared in three editions. In my copy of the third edition of 1843, Professor Chalybäus says (p. 354): "This is the first trilogy: the unity of Being, Nothing and Becoming . . . we have in this first methodical thesis, antithesis, and syn-

<sup>4</sup> George W. F. Hegel: *Early Theological Writings* (Chicago, 1948), 32.

<sup>5</sup> J. Flugge, *Die sittlichen Grundlagen des Denkens in Hegels Logik* (Hamburg, 1953), 17.

<sup>6</sup> N. Hartmann, *Kleinere Schriften*, II (Berlin, 1957), 225. Hartmann concluded: ". . . this twaddle should gradually subside" (227).

thesis . . . an example or schema for all that follows." This was for Chalybäus a brilliant hunch which he had not used previously and did not pursue afterwards in any way at all. But Karl Marx was at that time a student at the University of Berlin and a member of the Hegel Club where the famous book was discussed. He took the hunch and spread it into a deadly, abstract machinery. Other left-Hegelians, such as Arnold Ruge, Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Stirner use "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" just as little as Hegel.

But "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" is not the only Hegel legend fabricated by Marx. Brutal simplifications are Marxist specialties. "Thesis, antithesis, synthesis" is said to be an "absolute method" of Hegel's alleged "rationalism." Marx says: "There is in Hegel no longer a history in the order of time, but only a sequence of ideas in reason." Hegel, on the contrary, says: "The time-order of history is distinguished from the sequence in the order of concepts" (*Werke*, XII, 59).

A third minor legend is innocently taken for granted in the recent work by R. Tsanoff, *The Great Thinkers* (New York, 1953, p. 487): "Actually the closing pages of the *Philosophy of Right* review in rapid survey the historical evolution of mankind—and discover 'the unity of the divine and the human' in the German Empire! All these stiff Prussian notions are recorded in Hegel's works: they cannot be ignored." In the first place, Hegel is not a Prussian, but a Suabian, and he is not stiff, but flexible. "Actually" the text referred to contains not a word justifying the accusation. "Germanische Welt," as Hegel calls it does not mean German ("Germanisch" is not "Deutsch"), but simply refers to the incontestable historical fact that various Germanic tribes after the disintegration of the Roman empire reconstituted Europe or what we now call "The West," in distinction from the Arabic and the Slavic worlds. Germany is not even mentioned, let alone Prussia. Hegel's theme, further, is not "the historical evolution of mankind" culminating in some particular state, but the omnipresent self-manifestation of the Absolute—always submerged in the distortions of irrationality. This interpretation is, in its origin, a vicious Marxist smear: it occurs almost verbatim in Friedrich Engels' crude diatribe "Ludwig Feuerbach and the Exit of Classical German Philosophy" (1847). To him, Hegel's organic conception of the state is, of course, a hated bulwark against the totalitarianism of his "economic class-interests."

Once the Hegel legend was established, writers of text-books in the history of philosophy copied it from their predecessors. It was a convenient method of embalming Hegel and keeping the mummy on display for curious visitors of antiquities. Hegel's dialectic was inconvenient for a century in which philosophers liked to belong to partisan schools and abstract "isms," such as idealism, realism, objectivism, subjectivism, rationalism, skepticism, and so forth. In Hegel's dialectic, philosophy had matured beyond such one-sided possibilities. Hegel's dialectic means that philosophy has found its own Logic, as Croce proclaimed in his book on *What is Dead and What is Alive in Hegel* (English transl. London, 1912) with which the Hegel Renaissance of the twentieth century was initiated.

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