

THE HEGEL MYTHS AND LEGENDS

Edited by Jon Stewart

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the extent to which it incarnates this ideal. This extent can be notably imperfect, as Hegel teaching at the university of the King of Prussia well knew.³¹ That Hegel has seen nothing of sacrilege in this understanding testifies in its own way to the fact that the state in order to be divine, as it was in his eyes, was only a semi-divinity. Because of this, one is indeed still free to suppose that semi-idolatry is still idolatry.

The Hegel Legend of "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis"

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 legends¹ 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 panlogistic 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*.² He first supposes that he has to construe Hegel's philosophy in "triads of thesis, antithesis, and 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" (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 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*³ does not list the Fichtean terms "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" together. In all the twenty volumes of Hegel's "complete works"⁴ 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, antithesis, and synthesis" in the preface of the *Phenomenology 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 colors.⁵

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*).⁶

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 Willen und Werk*⁷ 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 (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 *Hegels Philosophie als kontemplative Gotteslehre*⁸ 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*; Theodor Steinbüchel, *Das Grundproblem der Hegelschen Philosophie*; Theodor Litt, *Hegel: Eine Kritische Erneuerung*; Emerich Coreth, *Das Dialektische Sein in Hegels Logik*; and many others have simply disregarded the legend.⁹ In my own monographs on Hegel,¹⁰ 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 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.¹¹

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."¹²

In an essay by Nicolai Hartmann, *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."¹³ 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 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.¹⁴ The few passages in Marx's 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: "This is the first trilogy: the unity of Being, Nothing and Becoming . . . we have in this first methodical thesis, antithesis, and synthesis . . . an example of or schema for all that follows" (354). 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, and 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 specialities. "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 history is distinguished from the sequence in the order of concepts."¹⁵

A third minor legend is innocently taken for granted in the recent work by R. Tzanoff. "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 human' in the German Empire! All these stiff Prussian notions are recorded in Hegel's works: they cannot be ignored."¹⁶ In the first place, Hegel is not a Prussian, but a Swabian, 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 German tribes after the disintegration of the Roman Empire reconstituted Europe or what we now call "the West," in distinction from the Arabic and 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's 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 textbooks 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 *What is Dead and What is Alive in Hegel*,¹⁷ with which the Hegel Renaissance of the twentieth century was initiated.

25. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 151. For an account of what Hegelian logic can say about just those things which "logical atomism" must pass over in silence, see E. Harris, *An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), esp. 8, 39, 62, 126, 311–19.
26. I would like to thank John E. Smith for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Franz Grégoire, A Semi-Legend: The "Divinity" of the State in Hegel

1. *Philosophie des Rechts*, §272 (Zusatz), Glockner, 370. [Grégoire cites from Hermann Glockner's edition of the *Philosophy of Right: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundriss*, vol. 7 of *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe in 20 Bänden*. Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1927–1940, which he hereafter abbreviates as *GL*.—*Trans.*]
 2. *Ibid.*, §258, *GL*, 330–31.
 3. Here we see that Grégoire himself is not wholly disabused of all the Hegel myths.—*Trans.*
 4. I hope to publish in a short time a volume of *Études hégéliennes* where the object of the present article will be treated in more detail. This is why we are content here, concerning references to Hegel's works, with a few examples for each case.
 5. *Philosophie der Religion*, IV, *Absolute Religion*, Lasson, 102. [Grégoire cites from Georg Lasson's edition of Hegel's works: *Sämtliche Werke*, Leipzig: Meiner, 1928–1938, 21 volumes, which he abbreviates as *Las*.—*Trans.*]
 6. *Ibid.*, I, *Begriff*, *Las*, 43.
 7. *Encyclopédie*, I, §213, *GL*, 8, 425.
 8. *Encyclopédie*, III, §381 (Zusatz), *GL*, 10, 21.
 9. *Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, I, *Las*, 84–85.
 10. *Recht*, §163, *GL*, 7, 242.
 11. *Ibid.*, §187, *GL*, 7, 269.
 12. *Weltg.* I, *Las*, 107–8.
 13. *Gesch. Philos.*, II, *GL*, 18, 443.
- In sum, the expression "divine" functions in Hegel as a flexible analogue to the word "theion" in the ancient Greek philosophers. The Greek usage perhaps played a role in putting Hegel at ease with this language.
- Elsewhere we see Saint Thomas Aquinas, under precisely this Greek influence, write that the collective good is more divine ("divinus") than the individual good, "eo quod magis pertinet ad Dei similitudinem" (*Comment. in I Ethic.*, lect. 2).
14. Here we see Grégoire fall victim to another Hegel myth. Although to his credit, it is not clear to what degree he takes this as indicative of Hegel's conception of the dialectic.—*Trans.*
15. Cf. *Ästhetik*, I, *GL*, 12, 193–94.
 16. *Weltg.* I, *Las*, 88–89.
 17. *Relig.* I, *Begriff*, *Las*, 1–4.

18. *Recht*, §270, *GL*, 7, 353–56; Vorrede, 29–30.
19. *Relig.* I, *Begriff*, *Las*, 176–80.
20. *Recht*, §270, *GL*, 7, 349–50.
21. *Weltg.* III, *Las*, 662.
22. The triad: family, civil society, state is compared to an organism expressly and in detail (*Recht* §263, Zusatz, *GL*, 7, 347–48). We are going to examine whether Hegel draws the logical consequences of this doctrine, which is related to that of the ordering of civil society to the good of the individuals.
23. *Recht*, *GL*, 7, 90–91; 182–83; *Gesch. Philos.*, I, *GL*, 17, 79–80.
24. Concerning the right of the individual to pursue his private satisfactions, Hegel curiously unites Christianity and Romanticism in the same praise (*Recht*, §124, *GL*, 7, 182).
25. *Ibid.*, §209, 286.
26. *Ibid.*, §270, 354, n. 1.
27. *Recht*, §124, *GL*, 7, 182–83.
28. *Weltg.* I, *Las* 91; *Gesch. Philos.*, II, *GL*, 18, 394–400.
29. *Recht*, §33, *GL*, 7, 84–87.
30. *Ibid.*, §324, *GL*, 7, 433–36.
31. *Ibid.*, §3, *GL*, 7, 43; §212, *GL*, 7, 290–91; §258 (Zusatz), *GL*, 7, 336 *et alibi*.

Gustav E. Mueller, The Hegel Legend of "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis"

1. See the excellent study by Walter A. Kaufmann, "The Hegel Myth and Its Method," *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), 459–86.
2. W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (Dover, 1955).
3. Hermann Glockner, *Hegel Lexikon*, 4 vols. (Stuttgart, 1935).
4. The new critical edition, being published by F. Meiner in Hamburg, will contain 32 volumes.
5. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart, 1928), preface, 48–49.
6. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 19, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, 610.
7. Theodor Haering, *Hegel, Sein Wollen und Sein Werk*, 2 vols. (Teubner, 1929, 1938).
8. Iwan Iljin, *Hegel's Philosophie als kontemplative Gotteslehre* (Bern, 1946).
9. Herman Glockner, *Hegel*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1929); Theodor Steinbüchel, *Das Grundproblem der Hegelschen Philosophie* (Bonn, 1933); Theodor Litt, *Hegel: Eine Kritische Erneuerung* (Heidelberg, 1953); Emerich Coreth, *Das dialektische Sein in Hegels Logik* (Wien, 1952).
10. Gustav Mueller, *Hegel über Offenbarung, Kirche und Philosophie* (Munich, 1939); *Hegel über Sittlichkeit und Geschichte* (Reinhardt, 1940).
11. G. W. F. Hegel: *Early Theological Writings* (Chicago, 1948), 32.
12. J. Flugge, *Die stitlichen Grundlagen des Denkens in Hegels Logik* (Hamburg, 1953), 17.
13. N. Hartmann, *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1957), 225. Hartmann concluded: "this twaddle should gradually subside" (227).

14. See Karl Marx, *Das Elend der Philosophie* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1957), summary of chap. 2, par. 1.
15. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 12, 59.
16. R. Tzanoff, *The Great Thinkers* (New York, 1953), 487.
17. Benedetto Croce, *What Is Dead and What Is Alive in Hegel* (English trans., London, 1912).

Jon Stewart, Hegel and the Myth of Reason

1. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professors Henry E. Allison and S. Nicholas Jolley for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

2. For a list of the Hegel myths see the following: Wilhelm Seeberger, "Vorurteile gegen Hegel," in his *Hegel oder die Entwicklung des Geistes zur Freiheit* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1961), 42ff.; John Findlay, *The Philosophy of Hegel: An Introduction and Re-Examination* (New York: Collier, 1962), 15ff.

3. Cf. M. W. Jackson, "Hegel, the Real and the Rational," *International Studies in Philosophy* 19 (1987), 12.

4. Cf. Karl R. Popper, "What is Dialectic?" *Mind* 49 (1940), 413ff. Cf. also W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (New York: Dover, 1955), 94, 183; Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), 703; Stanley Rosen, G. W. F. Hegel: *An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 64–68; and Findlay, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, 62ff., 73ff.

5. For an example of this belief, see J. M. E. MacTaggart, *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), §4: "The whole course of the dialectic forms one example of the dialectic rhythm, with Being as Thesis, essence as Antithesis and Notion as Synthesis. Each of these has again the same moments of Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis." For a debunking of this myth, see Gustav E. Mueller, "The Hegel Legend of 'Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958); Philipp Merlan, "Ist die 'These-Antithese-Synthese'-Formel unhegelsch?" *Archiv für die Geschichte der Philosophie* 53 (1971), 35–40; and Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1966), 154ff., 198ff.

6. Cf. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947, 1971). In English as *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969). Alexandre Koyré, "Hegel à Iéna (à propos de publications récentes)," *Revue philosophique de la France* 59 (1934), 274–83; reprinted in *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse* 15 (1935), 420–58; L. Esposito, "Hegel, Absolute Knowledge, and the End of History," *Clio* 12 (1983), 355–65; Reinhard Klemens Maurer, *Hegel und das Ende der Geschichte: Interpretationen zur "Phänomenologie des Geistes"* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965); Philip T. Grier, "The End of History and the

Return of History," *The Owl of Minerva* 21 (1990), 131–44; Wilhelm Seeberger, *Hegel oder die Entwicklung des Geistes zur Freiheit*, 63.

7. Cf. Bertrand Beaumont, "Hegel and the Seven Planets," *Mind* 63 (1954), 246–48; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 27; Otto Neurath, "Wege der wissenschaftlichen Weltauffassung," *Erkenntnis* 1 (1930–31), 107; Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*, 52–53.

8. Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1857), 357ff.; Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 705, 709; T. M. Knox, "Hegel and Prussianism," *Philosophy* 15 (1940), 51–63, 313–14; Hans-Christian Lucas and U. Rameil, "Furcht vor der Zensur?" *Hegel-Studien* 15 (1980), 63–93; Hans-Christian Lucas, "Philosophie und Wirklichkeit: Einige Bemerkungen wider die Legende von Hegel als preussischem Staatsphilosophen," *Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Philosophie* 9 (1987), 154–61; E. F. Carriv, "Hegel und die Politik: Zur Kritik 15 (1940), 190–96, 315–17; Henning Ottmann, "Hegel und die Politik: Zur Kritik der politischen Hegellegenden," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 26 (1979), 235–53; Sidney Hook, "Hegel Rehabilitated" and "Hegel and His Apologist," in *Hegel's Political Philosophy*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Atherton Press, 1970), 55ff., 87ff.; Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel and the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

9. The classic example of this is of course Karl Popper's account in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. See also Gilbert Ryle, "Critical Notice," *Mind* 55 (1947), 170, 172; Jacques Maritain, *La philosophie morale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 159; Bertrand Russell, *Philosophy and Politics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1947); Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), 22; Hubert Kieseewetter, *Von Hegel zu Hitler: Eine Analyse der Hegelschen Machtstaatsideologie und der politischen Wirkungsgeschichte des Rechts-Hegelianismus* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1974). For a debunking of this myth see Walter A. Kaufmann, "The Hegel Myth and its Method," *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), 246–48; and Shlomo Avineri, "Hegel and Nationalism," in *Hegel's Political Philosophy*, 109–36.

10. Cf. Karl R. Popper, "What is Dialectic?" *Mind* 49 (1940), 414ff.

11. William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 155.

12. Robert Heiss, *Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx*, trans. E. B. Garside (New York: Dell, 1963), 190–91. Originally: *Die großen Dialektiker des 19. Jahrhunderts: Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1963), 202. Also see Marcuse's discussion, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Humanities Press, 1941), 4ff.

13. William Earle, "Hegel and Some Contemporary Philosophies," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 20 (1959–60), 364.

14. Richard Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924), 268 (my translation).

15. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 706, 712: "The time-process, according to Hegel, is from the less to the more perfect, both in an ethical and in a logical sense."