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Hegel on the Bacchanalian Revel of Truth

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HEGEL ON THE BACCHANALIAN REVEL OF TRUTH

Das Wahre ist ... der bacchantische Taumel, an dem kein Glied nicht trunken ist, und weil jedes, indem es sich absondert, ebenso unmittelbar aufloest, -- ist er ebenso die durchsichtige und einfache Ruhe.

Truth is the bacchanalian revel in which an unintoxicated member is not to be found. And since each member, insofar as it is separated, immediately dissolves its membership in the revel, the revel itself turns out to be a state of transparent and simple tranquility.

I would like in this paper to concentrate just on this one sentence, taken from the Preface to Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I think it captures very nicely the Hegelian view of truth which is a constant throughout his work. In any case, it presents a rather unique epistemological position -- if we can call it that -- and requires some unpacking. I might add that if you start off in the spirit of revelry, you will probably not be overly critical of this paper....

First of all, I would like to draw your attention to the reference to *Glied*, "member." This is an uncommon way of referring to participants in a festivity. Could we speak of being a "member" of a TGIF party or a birthday party? Granted, a revel is a somewhat larger operation than a mere party; but one might already suspect from the organic imagery here that Hegel has something special in mind.

Notice also the double negative: literally, "there is no unintoxicated member." Sometimes a double negative is used for deemphasis, as for example when someone wants to say that your joke was not really all that funny, they might say, "I am not unamused by your punning, but I'm very busy now...." But here it is obviously used for emphasis: to say that there

is "no unintoxicated member" is to bring home the point that there are no exceptions -- everyone is drunk, really drunk.

The double negative leads into an oxymoron: a revel in ordinary parlance is about the furthest thing from a state of inactivity. But here is a state of quiescence: the revel as rest. Combined with the metaphorical allusion to truth in the first clause, it implies that the situation with regard to the truth -- can we say, the evolution of epistemology? -- in spite of appearances of continual movement and shifting, is a state of paradigmatic constancy and stability.

Notice, finally, a grammatical peculiarity: *aufloesen* in German is a transitive verb, like "make," "force," "lift." You can't just "dissolve" -- you have to dissolve something. Hegel, although he went through the Preface just before his death with a fine-toothed comb, never corrected this mistake (if it was a mistake). But one of Hegel's grammatical idiosyncracies was the occasional omission of pronouns, auxiliary verbs, reflexives, etc.; and the editors of Hegel's works sometimes tried to supply omissions which disturbed grammatical integrity. One editor suggested that the masculine pronoun, *er*, which would refer to the revel, should be added to this clause, so that we are to understand Hegel as saying the the revel dissolved each of its members. Another editor added *sich* after *aufloest* by way of interpretation. According to this reading, each member dissolved itself; or, since reflexives in German sometimes are equivalent to the passive voice in English, Hegel might simply be saying that each member "is dissolved." I think this latter interpretation is more likely. That being said, let's return now to the first clause:

"Truth is the bacchanalian revel..."

This sounds strange to us because we usually think of truth as a relationship of the mind to reality or vice versa -- some kind of "fit" or "conformity" is implied.

For a scholastic realist, truth is the conformity of the mind to that which is external to the mind -- the thing. But just any sort of thing? Is it really important for the mind to conform to, and accurately reflect, hair and dirt and mucus, etc.? To reflect these things in a one-on-one relationship would leave something to be desired. Mucus, for example, is not worth much mental effort in itself; it only begins to make sense in the context of biological secretions, white blood corpuscles, immunity responses, the limits of immunity, etc. Or -- turning from biological to sociological considerations -- a realist might characterize truth as the accurate depiction of the way things are in the community or the nation or the world. But could anybody ever give an accurate depiction without having knowledge of the totality? Can there be bona fide truths isolated from the context of the whole? And may not the "whole" also include some very subjective things -- notions, principles, perspectives, ideas and ideals?

The idealist perspective -- that truth is the conformity of the thing to the mind -- seems offhand to offer a more attainable kind of conformity. If, like Kant, we hold that sense intuitions must be molded by the mind into spatial and temporal forms and that physical laws involve the application of a fixed number of conceptual categories to phenomena, then the conformity demanded by truth seems to consist in the proper and judicious use of twelve categories

necessarily resulting from our logic and the various species of logical judgement. But can I be sure that my own logical operations are uniform at all times? that they are not affected by moods and emotions, and that they are never idiosyncratic? And what if my categories do not jibe with those of others? One does not have to be a Peircean to recognize that there is an inevitable communitarian aspect of truth.

It is not inconceivable that both realists and idealists might be willing to admit that the truth is only to be found in the overall context -- the objective context of the universe in its development, the subjective context of the multitude of consciousnesses in their development. But they might want to refer to this as "absolute" or "mystical" truth -- truth with a capital "T," probably unattainable, and in any case not the sort of truths that ordinary philosophers-in-the-field should have to deal with. This *context*, if we examine it further, is like an all-pervasive but intangible mood -- something like the revel itself. For the revel, although it is not any concrete and determinate object that you can pinpoint, is there nevertheless; and you might even say that it's the most important factor of all -- like team spirit, or personal identity, or a friendly atmosphere, and other equally intangible factors.

"...at which an unintoxicated member is not to be found..."

Historians and theologians argue e.g. about when and where Jesus was born. But surely the only really important thing is the religious significance of Jesus and his message, which should supply the context for such investigations. Geometers can demonstrate that $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$; but the human mind, confined to a diet of such "truth," will waste away. The larger picture is required to put isolated and finite truths into perspective. And this larger perspective, forming the horizons of our everyday knowledge, is provided by philosophy. Philosophy is not just a luxury for the truth-seeker, Hegel insists. He observes:

That which, even as regards content, in any given species of knowledge or science, is "truth" -- can only be worthy of such a name when it has been engendered through philosophy;... the other sciences, though they might prefer to pursue truth by ratiocination without the help of philosophy,....cannot, on their own, appropriate for themselves their life, their spirit, their truth.

Hegel in this respect joins the ranks of numerous philosophers who have regarded philosophy as the queen of the sciences, or the ultimate architectonic discipline, or the foundation for all empirical investigations. But he avoids self-serving hype. He cautions us that there is a lot of intellectual drunkenness going on among professional philosophers, who should be in the service of the truth. Yon Thomist thinks that his principles of active and passive and possible intellect, esse and form, ens reale and ens intentionale, etc. he has the handle on reality. Yon Wittgensteinian believes he holds the Archimedean lever with his analysis of "family resemblances" of words, and envisions corps of uniformed philosophers patrolling the boundaries

of language to prevent speculative nonsense and pompous nostrums. Yon Kantian comes equipped with his 12 categories and 3 formulations of the categorical imperative and 3 postulates of practical reason, ready to help human reason to work within its limits. Yon deconstructionist appears out of nowhere with his non-methodical method of "dissemination," in order to generate "displacements" and to displace traditional binary "representations" with "differance." Yon skeptic in the corner has is the melancholy member of the philosophical revel: the truth, he tells us, is that there is no truth; and he is quite as certain of this as any of the other participants. And so it goes. They are all drunk with their own version of the truth. But this does not go on indefinitely, Hegel assures us:

...and since each member, insofar as it is separated, immediately dissolves its membership in the revel,...

Each member, in other words, reaches its limit of intoxication, which is also the limit of its association with the revel. It falls by the wayside in a drunken stupor, and the noise and the excitement of the revel fades away for it. It has become "past history." Is it possible for any philosophical position to escape this fate? Hegel was certainly hoping that his philosophy would somehow learn from such mistakes, and avoid what seemed to be an inexorable fate.

Let's continue a bit further with the analogy of the revel: What if one of the members retains his or her sobriety -- like the "designated driver" at a New Year's party, who has to remain sober to make sure no one at the party ends up on the road as a drunken driver. If we apply this analogy to philosophy, this would mean not becoming intoxicated with one's own version of the truth. This would imply also an ability to assess the viability of each of the other versions, with which the others tend to become intoxicated. In the strong sense, it would imply developing a system of philosophy which explicitly takes into account the history of philosophy, and adopts whatever measure of truth is found in all the schools or systems. In short, it is a combination of systematic philosophy with the history of philosophy -- a system of history which involves a history of systems. With this in mind, Hegel observes:

A superficial surveillance...does not so easily see the differences among philosophical systems as the inexorable unfolding of the truth; but rather finds only contradiction amid such differences. But the bud disappears with the appearance of the blossom -- and one could say that the former "comes to be refuted" by the latter. And then again, with the advent of the fruit, the blossom itself proves to be a 'false' existence of the plant, and the fruit comes on the scene as the plant's 'truth' instead of the blossom.

Hegel, who rejected the possibility of physical evolution, nevertheless believed in a spiritual evolution which governed the immanent teleology of philosophical systems. Ideally, the trustworthy and sober "designated driver" of philosophical systems would come into

existence precisely at a time when the most mature modern systems of philosophy had supplied the intellectual apparatus necessary for the generation of this ultimate system, and an intellectual audience which would be amenable to its leadership. This optimal time, in Hegel's estimation, had indeed arrived in his own day. The outcome should be a new view and appreciation of the ongoing and ceaseless revel:

...the revel itself turns out to be a state of transparent and simple tranquility.

The revel is a paradoxical state of affairs, like the "unmoved mover" of Aristotle. Hegel characterizes it as a restless tranquility, an overarching stable conceptual atmosphere which instigates and inspires all the intoxicated particular revelries without being intoxicated or affected in any way by the excesses. Philosophy for Hegel is essentially a movement towards the highest degrees of self-consciousness; and if we apply the analogy, Hegel is saying that philosophy, when all is said and done, is the calm and inexorable movement of Spirit inspiring mankind to become self-conscious about themselves and their place in the world. Each isolated vision and version of the truth contributes to this movement in its own way. But with each of the visions, the excitement eventually passes away. Would Hegel's system also suffer the same fate? Maybe not. If it were possible to capture the spirit of the revel itself, to tell the truth about this revel, possibly this would be to attain the calm stratosphere above the storm, which is not subject to the same laws of change and disappearance. Hegel did set out to develop a system which would not be subject to the vulnerabilities of his predecessors; and part of his strategy was to incorporate all that was salvageable in previous philosophies in his own system, so that it would be no longer one-sided, and hence unbalanced and unstable. He pursued this goal in both his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in his later system of philosophy, but with different emphases. In the *Phenomenology*, he attempted to reenact and reconstruct the stages in which the various visions of philosophical truth arise and reach their denouement, and thus in the process catch a glimpse of the truth of Spirit which is both instigating these developments, preserving all the elements of truth within them, and drawing them all together in a calm recollection. In his later system (the *Science of Logic*, the *Encycloedia of Philosophical Sciences*, and the various extensions of this system) he tried to develop a philosophical Science in the strict Aristotelian sense of "science." This tightly organized body of philosophical knowledge, having learnt its lesson about excesses and aberrations, explicitly sets out to avoid one-sided presentations of the truth. If it were successful (and this is still a matter of much dispute), it would approximate as closely as possible to the presentation of the truth of Spirit, which is the mainspring behind all the variant pursuits of truth. If Hegel were successful in this enterprise, he would be like the "designated driver," refusing to join in the inebriation, and thus optimally qualified to drive the busload of hungover philosophers to their own chosen destinations. If everything went according to plan, as he dropped off his passengers one by one, each one would begin raise their sights to the truth of self-consciousness advancing, willy nilly, through their efforts.