

Hegel And The Holocaust¹

David Bronstein
University of Toronto
dbronste@chass.utoronto.ca

My topic is the debate between Emil Fackenheim and James Doull on the question: would Hegel today be a Hegelian? The debate was originally published in 1970,² and took its departure from Doull's review of Fackenheim's book *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*.³ Doull called the book the most valuable work on Hegel he had ever read, but in the review he also defended Hegel and Hegelianism against a number of criticisms Fackenheim had raised. What brought these two thinkers together was the belief that understanding Hegel is indispensable to understanding the history of philosophy since Hegel. What set them apart was the question of the viability of Hegelianism today, after the holocaust.

I will begin with a brief summary of Fackenheim's career, for those unfamiliar with his work, and of his argument in the debate. Then in sections IV-VII I will take up and defend Doull's response.

1. I first wrote this paper for oral presentation, and since I have made no substantial changes to the structure or content of its argument, I feel that a disclaimer of sorts is in order. I make a fair number of rather sweeping claims in this paper, about Hegel, about the holocaust – about topics, in other words, that resist such treatment and about which I cannot claim anything close to expertise. While I admit to being overly sweeping, I sincerely hope that I have not been facile. And I trust that my claims will be taken as they were intended, a stab at a topic about which I have given a fair bit of thought, but which also continues to elude my thoughts. Many thanks to Eli Diamond, Dorota Glowaka, Graeme Nicholson, Joanna Polley, John Russon and the participants and audience members of the book panel on *Philosophy and Freedom* at the meeting of the Canadian Philosophical Association in Halifax, May 2003.

2. Fackenheim and Doull, "Would Hegel Today be a Hegelian?" *Dialogue* (1970) 222-35; reprinted in *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*, ed. David G. Peddle and Neil G. Robertson (University of Toronto Press, 2003) 330-42. Subsequent citations of the debate occur within the text of the paper; I cite page numbers from both versions: first *Dialogue*, then *Philosophy and Freedom*.

3. Doull, "Review of Fackenheim's *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*" *Dialogue* (1968) 483-92.

I. Fackenheim: Life And Work

Fackenheim was a German-born Jew, and a rabbi, who came to Canada in 1940 as a refugee from Nazi Germany. He spent over 30 years on the faculty of the Philosophy Department at the University of Toronto, before moving to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Before 1967, there were two important but separate strands in Fackenheim's thought: one was his renowned scholarly work on German Idealism, and the other was his work as a Jewish thinker. These two strands came together, so the story goes, as a result of the 6-Day War in 1967, after which Fackenheim felt compelled to think more and more about the holocaust.⁴ This debate, published in 1970, comes, then, at a very interesting point in Fackenheim's career. Here we find him bringing together the two strands of his work – German philosophy and Jewish thought – in a sustained philosophical reflection on the holocaust. In fact, it is this question – the relation of German philosophy, especially Hegel's, to Judaism and to the holocaust – that animates Fackenheim's argument in this debate.

Fackenheim addresses two related but distinct questions. "Would Hegel today be a Hegelian?" essentially means (1) "can a Jew be a Hegelian?" and (2) "can anyone today, 'after Auschwitz', be a Hegelian?" I want to make a few remarks about the first question and then examine the second in greater depth.

II. Can A Jew Be A Hegelian?

Briefly put, Fackenheim argues in this debate and elsewhere that the answer to this question is no. He has two reasons. The first is that one must be a Christian to be a Hegelian. This is because, according to Fackenheim, the standpoint of Absolute Knowing or Hegelian science that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* would educate its readers towards is infected with, and inseparable from, Hegel's particular religious commitment to Lutheran Protestantism. Moreover, Hegel's system depends upon the living historical presence of Lutheran Protestantism, not to mention the Prussian state, both of which have since passed away. This "passing of Hegel's Germany"⁵ makes the Hegelian system as a whole irretrievable today to anyone at all, and its religious taint makes it inaccessible to Jews in particular.

4. For a more detailed biography, see *Fackenheim: German Philosophy and Jewish Thought*, ed. Louis Greenspan and Graeme Nicholson (University of Toronto Press, 1992) 3-12.

5. A phrase I borrow from Graeme Nicholson, from whose paper "The Passing of Hegel's Germany" (in *Fackenheim*, ed. Greenspan and Nicholson) I have learned a great deal.

Fackenheim's second reason for arguing that a Jew cannot be a Hegelian is that Hegel's philosophy fails to do justice to Judaism. (This theme of philosophy or thought 'doing justice' to what it thinks will become important below.) It follows that a Jew must choose either Hegel, who has an inadequate understanding of the Jewish faith, or Judaism, which falls short of the final standpoint that the Hegelian phenomenology reaches, just because this final standpoint is an essentially Christian one. One cannot have both full-blown Judaism and full-blown Hegelianism; Fackenheim's allegiance is clear.

I want to bracket the vexed issue of Hegel's interpretation of Judaism, including Fackenheim's denial that a Jew can be a Hegelian, and Doull's defence of Hegel on this point. I will, however, make one brief remark before moving on to the central question of this paper.

It is worth noting that Doull's response to Fackenheim on this question is unconvincing in at least one important respect. Doull writes: "Certainly Christianity is for Hegel the absolute religion, but philosophy shows the absolute religion as unable to exist adequately to its concept unless the other religions are also present, preserved as well as transcended." (229; 336) He goes on to argue that Hegel does not look forward to the assimilation of Judaism into Christianity (which Fackenheim fears). Rather, Hegel looks forward to "the dissolution of the antagonism between Judaism and Christianity." (229-30; 337) However, since the result of this dissolution is Christianity Hegelianized, for a member of the Jewish faith, e.g. Fackenheim, the difference between assimilation and dissolution of antagonism could never be a meaningful difference at all. Here Doull shows himself strangely insensitive to a basic fact of human psychology: people, e.g. members of religious faiths, will tend to resist being told that they are necessary but subordinate moments in a system whose truth they do not recognize. This, of course, says nothing about the accuracy of Hegel or Doull's account of Judaism. It only expresses some doubt that Fackenheim would have found Doull's response at all convincing, and some bewilderment that Doull could have thought that he would.

III. Can Anyone Today, 'After Auschwitz,' Be A Hegelian?

This is the question that I want to focus on. Here again Fackenheim's answer is no. He argues that the demand of the Hegelian philosophy is that it not only comprehend and mediate all things but that it also do justice to them. The problem is that, in relation to the holocaust, it becomes impossible to fulfil both sides of this demand. If one tries to comprehend the holocaust in the Hegelian sense, one will fail to do justice to the utter uniqueness and incomprehensibility of the demonic evil that transpired there; to do justice to the holocaust one must give up any claim to absolute comprehension. For this reason, Fackenheim urges that we give up the "god-like self-confidence" (226; 334) of the Hegelian system. He thinks that Hegel alive today would himself give up this self-confidence, and so Hegel today would not be a Hegelian, and neither can we. Instead,

Fackenheim argues that philosophical reflection on the holocaust finds itself in an aporia that it cannot overcome but must endure: philosophical thinking cannot remain silent about the holocaust, but neither can it claim to fully understand it.

Now it is important to note that Fackenheim insists that philosophy must think the holocaust and attempt to do justice to it. His claim, in his debate with Doull and elsewhere, is that this thinking about the holocaust cannot be a Hegelian thinking. This gives us the question that I want to pursue in the rest of this paper: what kind of thinking thinks the holocaust in a just manner? And can it be a Hegelian thinking? I want to pursue this question by saying a few things about what I take Hegelian thinking to be, and why I think it can do justice to the holocaust. This is the position that Doull defends in the debate, and I am, therefore, largely in agreement with him. Though I will be defending Doull's answer, it is important to recognize that it is very much Fackenheim whom we have to thank for the question – for ensuring that it occupies an important place on the contemporary philosophical scene, and for provoking Doull to formulate a response that is, I believe, of enduring value.

IV. Hegel's Account Of Evil

Fackenheim's position on the relation of Hegel's philosophy to the holocaust rests on two principal claims. The first is that Hegelian thinking cannot do justice to the holocaust. The second is very much related to this. Fackenheim argues that nowhere in Hegel's work is the demonic evil that transpired in the holocaust anticipated or accounted for. Fackenheim repeatedly claims that 'the kingdom of Auschwitz' is not of this world; its evil is wholly otherworldly, and, therefore, incomprehensible through Hegel's philosophy. Two aspects of Fackenheim's criticism of Hegel on evil can thus be discerned. The first is that evil is not afforded a central place in Hegel's thought; the second is that Hegel mistakenly attributes demonic evil to human nature – it is, for Hegel, all too worldly. Let me begin with the former claim.

Fackenheim would seem to have us think that Hegel ignores, diminishes or tries to explain away the importance of evil. When one reads Hegel on evil, however, one finds the very opposite. Hegel everywhere insists, against contemporaries and predecessors, on the prevalence of evil, in modern life especially. This insistence reaches an almost polemical fervour in sections 139-140 of the *Philosophy of Right*, which is his most sustained discussion of evil, though all of his most important works contain some treatment of it. His account is the same throughout. Like Kant before him, Hegel defines evil as the self-conscious or freely-willed decision to pursue one's particular ends which one knows to be in conflict with the universal good. Hegel insists that human beings are

intrinsically evil – evil in our “innermost being.”⁶ More specifically, “evil is located in the act of cognition, in consciousness.”⁷ Since Hegel puts evil at the heart of human consciousness, Doull rightly points out that it lies too at the heart of his science of the experience of consciousness, i.e. the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Doull says: “the [Hegelian] system has its origin in the consciousness of radical evil.” (227; 335)

This brings us to the second aspect of Hegel’s account of evil that Fackenheim rejects. Evil, for Hegel, is part of human nature. More specifically, it has its source in human knowing or thinking, and it is most prevalent in the form of thinking embodied in modern life, where individuals have a greater sense of their power as self-certain, thinking subjects capable of self-consciously subordinating the universal good to their particular desires and inclinations. For Doull, then, who defends Hegel’s account of evil, the demonic evil of the holocaust is one of the modern world’s own-most possibilities, though it is also a failure of the modern world to reach its deeper possibilities. Against Fackenheim, Doull, following Hegel, puts the holocaust kingdom firmly within the human, and the modern, world.

In what follows, I am going to defend this claim that the evil of the holocaust is not other to human nature, and especially not other to human nature as embodied in the modern world. To do this, I want to turn to Fackenheim’s other criticism of Hegel: that Hegelian thinking cannot do justice to the holocaust. My argument is going to be that the holocaust demands at least two things from those who would think it, demands which Fackenheim himself articulates. The first is that we bear witness to the evil and suffering that transpired there; the second is that we obey in thought the holocaust’s own command that it never happen again. I am going to try to show that a distinctively Hegelian thinking is the thinking that fulfils both of these demands.

V. Worries About Hegel

Fackenheim’s claim that Hegelian thinking cannot do justice to the holocaust rests on the following worry. Since Hegel does not have an adequate concept of evil, and since Hegelian thinking is too ambitious in its attempt to comprehend and do justice to all things, it will come in from outside, so to speak, in thinking the holocaust. Faced with either flight from the world of the holocaust or fidelity to it, Fackenheim argues that Hegel would stay with the actual and demonic essence of the holocaust, seeking, in Fackenheim’s words, what little “comprehensiveness and transcending wisdom as remain

6. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (University of California Press, 1988) 447.

7. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 443.

within its grasp.” (226; 334) The thought implicit here is that if Hegelian thinking were to hold to its claim to absolute comprehensiveness in thinking the holocaust, it would fail to do justice to it. Hegelian thinking, unfettered, would be intolerably external to the holocaust, imposing its will to understand and its inadequate categories and concepts onto it from outside.

Fackenheim’s worry can be rephrased in such a way as to bring it into line with an oft-expressed concern about Hegel’s philosophy. For Fackenheim, the demonic evil of the holocaust stands as the absolute ‘other’ to thought, especially to Hegel’s thought. The holocaust is that event in which rational thought cannot possibly find itself. But as Lin Jackson writes: “The comprehension of otherness in self and self in otherness is . . . precisely what [Hegelian] thinking is; . . . an absolute Other cannot exist for it.”⁸ Jackson’s formulation is particularly helpful, since, for Fackenheim and many postmodern thinkers after him, this is exactly where the problem with Hegel lies. The holocaust is the absolute other to thought, and so the thought that comprehends or identifies itself in the holocaust could only annihilate its demonic essence; it could only reduce the holocaust’s utter uniqueness to a subordinate moment in the system, and thereby fail to do justice to it.

VI. Immanent Thinking

Let me try to answer these concerns, starting with the problem of thought’s alleged externality. It seems to me that Fackenheim’s view fails to notice the extent to which Hegel himself is sensitive to this very worry and misses what is distinctively Hegelian about Hegelian thinking. The thought that would come in from outside and impose itself externally onto the holocaust, or any historical event, is indeed present in Hegel’s philosophy, but as a form of consciousness which he criticizes, namely, the Understanding. Hegel writes:

Instead of making its way into the inherent content of the matter in hand, understanding always takes survey of the whole, assumes a position above the particular existence about which it is speaking, i.e. it does not see it at all. True scientific knowledge, on the contrary, demands abandonment to the very life of the object, or, which means the same thing, claims to have before it the inner necessity controlling the object, and to express this only.⁹

8. Jackson, “The Hegelian Idea” (in *Philosophy and Freedom*) 311.

9. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie (Harper Torchbooks) 112.

Fackenheim's fear, it seems, is that a Hegelian thinking would impose a concept or law onto the holocaust external to its nature. However, for Hegel, as Graeme Nicholson says, "knowledge does not impose forms of its devising upon an alien material. It recognizes the *Begriff* [concept] as it has become constituted in life. And what we find here ... is the very quintessence of Hegelianism."¹⁰ John Russon interprets Hegel in much the same way: "The truest definition of [Hegel's] dialectical method is the method that lets the other speak for itself"¹¹ And in Hegel's own words:

[Spirit is not] a *tertium quid* which casts distinctions back into the abyss of the Absolute, and declares them all to mean the same there. On the contrary, true knowledge lies rather in the seeming inactivity which merely watches how what is distinguished is self-moved by its very nature and returns again into its own unity.¹²

These passages demonstrate that Fackenheim fails to address adequately the demand that Hegelian thinking imposes on itself to think everything, including the holocaust, from within. Contra Fackenheim, my interpretation suggests that Hegelian thinking would be an immanent thinking, one that would abandon itself to the life of the holocaust kingdom and watch as the event articulates its own concept. In so doing, it would respond to the holocaust's own demand that we bear witness to it in thought. As I have noted, "bearing witness" is surely a criterion for any thinking that will do justice to the holocaust; it is a demand that Fackenheim himself recognizes, and one that Hegelian thinking fulfils. Finally, we might note that immanent thinking is what is so distinctive about Doull. We find him often and rightly praised in *Philosophy and Freedom* for thinking the history of philosophy from within, for understanding the figures he studies on their own terms. And this is also what is so distinctively Hegelian about Doull's thought.

10. Nicholson, "The Passing of Hegel's Germany" (in *Fackenheim*, ed. Greenspan and Nicholson) 47. Nicholson perfectly states this point again in the closing lines of his Preface to *Philosophy and Freedom*: "Philosophy is the cognition of that which is – for instance, ourselves – by way of a concept and an idea. But the ground for that cognition is that which has already been informed by a concept and an idea from the start." (*Philosophy and Freedom*, xv) Nicholson says this in reference to Doull, but I think he would agree that it applies just as well to Hegel.

11. Russon, *The Self and its Body in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (University of Toronto Press, 1997) 114.

12. Hegel, *Phenomenology* (trans. Baillie), 804.

VII. Self-Consciousness

This brings us to the other distinctive feature of Hegelian thinking to which I would like to draw attention. Hegelian thinking is perhaps above all the thought that thinks itself. The demand that we come to greater and greater self-consciousness of ourselves as the lived embodiment of our age is a demand that Hegel and Doull impose on themselves and on us. Doull writes: “The Hegelian philosophy is accessible because it is the philosophy of the scientific-technical age, the demand and necessity that this come to an adequate consciousness of itself ... The [Hegelian] system is the self-conscious thought of the modern age.” (230; 337-8) When Lin Jackson writes about Hegelian thinking as the thought that comprehends itself in otherness and otherness in itself, I take him to be making the same point. Hegelian thinking is the thinking that seeks to know or identify itself as embodied in what appears—but is not in fact—other to it, namely, human history and experience. Thus Hegelian thinking would demand that it know or identify itself as embodied in the holocaust, albeit it in an utterly degraded form. This identification, moreover, would not be an annihilation of the holocaust’s essence but obedience to its demand that it never happen again.

Let me expand on this last point. The demonic evil of the holocaust would appear as the absolute other to human thought and human nature – this is Fackenheim’s position. But the thinking that knows itself not as utterly alien to the holocaust but as embodied therein as a form of human consciousness utterly degraded, this is the kind of thinking that sees in the holocaust a possibility that remains alive for it today. This recognition, I believe, is our best guarantee that it never happen again, and it is one that comes out of a distinctively Hegelian thinking. Hegelian thinking, then, is the thinking that sees the holocaust as a former human actuality that remains a real human possibility, one that it must be absolutely vigilant in guarding against. ‘Never again’ cannot just be a practical demand, to be fulfilled, for instance, in the founding of the state of Israel. It must also be a philosophical demand that human thought take responsibility for the form of life it came to embody in the holocaust. This is exactly Doull’s point in his response to Fackenheim. In the holocaust what is good in modern thought and life was utterly renounced and forgotten. Our response to this should not be less of the kind of immanent, self-conscious thinking that Hegel prescribes, but more of it, just because this is what best meets the holocaust’s own demands that we bear witness to it and never again renounce and forget ourselves and our deeper possibilities so completely. This is the kind of thinking that does justice to the holocaust, and it is a distinctively Hegelian, and Doullian, thinking.

Conclusion

One frequently encounters the following concern about Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a version of which I discussed above. In the *Phenomenology* we lose contingency because all forms of consciousness, other than the standpoint of the

Absolute, are reduced to necessary but subordinate moments in the system. In thinking through this very legitimate worry one needs to bear in mind a point about Hegel that cannot be over-emphasized. The demand, if not the result, of the Hegelian phenomenology (though I think in many ways the result too) is that any given form of consciousness generate its own concept. If such a concept entails the subordination of the relevant form of consciousness to a moment in the system, then the demand of the Hegelian phenomenology is that this subordination also be brought about by that form of consciousness itself; the demand is that it be a self-subordination, not one brought about by some external logic.¹³ What justifies Hegel's claim and makes necessary this subordination is again not some alien logic, but the very logic of human experience, namely, the dissatisfaction we ourselves feel with the forms consciousness takes in common, everyday experience. This is a point Doull makes eminently clear. He writes:

To make the elevation to science possible the forms of experience must all be capable of receiving scientific form ... To make it necessary there must be in ordinary consciousness a dissatisfaction with the forms of experience and a tendency to the scientific standpoint.¹⁴

Surely in reflecting on the holocaust, thought experiences not simply dissatisfaction with itself, but utter disgust with the evil form it took there. Thought's immediate inclination is to take flight, but as both Fackenheim and Doull agree, this is an unsatisfactory response. Fackenheim would leave Hegel at this point, and remain sceptical about thought's alleged tendency to the scientific standpoint. Doull, on the other hand, adduces compelling reasons for staying with Hegel. He shows that we have in Hegel the demand that, in facing the kind of demonic evil that transpired in the holocaust, thought's proper course is to turn on itself and recognize the evil it encounters there as one of its own-most possibilities. When our thinking can hold together the knowledge of the holocaust as one of the deepest failures of human existence with the recognition of itself as embodied therein, then we will have finally done justice to it. That this is the only means by which human consciousness can fulfil its deeper possibilities and realize itself as Spirit, Hegel himself clearly recognized:

[T]he life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains

13. Fackenheim, of course, saw the flaw in this objection as well as any one, and knew that the Hegelian philosophy was entirely beholden to the contingent (see for instance *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Indiana University Press, 1967) 24). Ultimately Fackenheim does, however, recognize and exploit the distinction between the demand and the result of Hegel's philosophy (see again *Religious Dimension*, 24). But he shows against tendencies still alive today that this discrepancy cannot be assumed as a forgone conclusion. Rather, "[i]t is the question most in need of examination." (*Religious Dimension*, 24)

14. Doull, "Review of Fackenheim," 485.

itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive which closes its eyes to the negative ... , on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it.¹⁵

15. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977) 19, §32.