

A Short Note on Hegel and the Exemplum of Christ

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Abstract: This article introduces a new element in the dialectical relationship between the concept and its examples. This new element, that is the third, is the *exemplum*, which is opposed to what we commonly understand by an example.

This is done through Hegel's reading of Christ and Christianity. In doing so, this work attempts to affirm the relevance of Hegel in our epoch.

Keywords: Hegel, Christ, God, Christianity, exemplum.

To properly grasp the dialectical relationship between a concept and its examples, a third term has to be introduced, that of *exemplum* as opposed to simple example. Examples are empirical events or things which illustrate a universal notion, and because of the complex texture of reality they never fully fit the simplicity of a notion; exemplum is a fictional singularity which directly gives body to the concept in its purity. Pierre Bayard recently articulated this notion of exemplum¹ apropos its three examples. First, there is nicely-provocative case of Hannah Arendt's thesis of the "banality of evil" illustrates by Adolph Eichmann. Bayard demonstrates that, although Arendt proposed a relevant concept, the reality of Eichmann doesn't fit it: the real Eichmann was far from a non-thinking bureaucrat just following orders, he was a fanatical anti-Semite fully aware of what he was doing – he just played a figure of the banality of evil for the court in Israel.

Another Bayard's very pertinent example is the case of Kitty Genovese who was murdered in front of her apartment block in Queens at 3 AM in 1964: the murderer tracked her and stabbed her by a knife for over half an hour, her desperate cries for help were heard all around, but although at least 38 neighbours turned on their lights and observed the event, not even one called the police, a simple anonymous act which would have saved her life... This event found a wide echo, books were written about it and researches confirmed the thesis that people didn't call the police because they were aware that others are also looking, so they counted that another guy will do it. Repeated experiments proved that the more people witness a traumatic event (fire, crime...), the less probability there is that one of them will call the police... Looking into the original data, Bayard shows that the reality of Kitty Genovese's murder didn't fit the popular description: there were maximum 3 observers, and even these three didn't see anything clearly, plus one of them *did* call the police. We get here another case of how an exemplum is imagined in order to illustrate a thesis which is in itself correct and important. Bayard argues that this fiction predominated over facts because it served perfectly as an apologue with a moral lesson which makes us (the public) feel well: we are disgusted by the story, presupposing that if we were

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1 Bayard 2020

among the observers we would definitely called the police. - Bayard's final example case is the mass panic caused by Orson Welles's performance of *The War of the Worlds* as a radio show: here also, the reality (millions taking the radio fiction as truth and escaping home) is far from truth.

In *Capital I*, Marx often uses an imagined exemplum to illustrate the exchange between a worker and a capitalist or the process of the circulation of the capital. Here is his famous description of how, when a capitalist and a worker depart after signing a work contract, the signature causes "a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae": "He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but — a hiding."² Such cases are imagined cases of a "pure" situation which cannot ever take place in the thick texture of reality where different moments reproduce themselves in different rhythms which cannot directly follow demands of the market (working force needs decades to reproduce itself, etc.). The paradox of exemplum is thus that, although it is empirically a fiction (it never "really happened exactly like that"), it is in some sense "closer to truth" since it perfectly renders (gives body to) the inner notional structure of a phenomenon – yet another way to understand Lacan's claim that truth has the structure of a fiction. We thus have to distinguish between the fiction of exemplum which illustrates the abstract notional truth and the fiction which enables the capital to function and reproduce itself in reality.

It is easy to see how this distinction between example and exemplum perfectly exemplifies the Hegelian triad of the universal, the particular, and the individual: the universal is the abstract notion, particularities are its (always imperfect) examples, and the individual is exemplum, a singularity in which the domain of contingent reality unites with the universal. It is thus not enough to insist that universality is always mediated by its particular examples; one should add to this multiplicity of examples the exemplum in which a universality returns to itself.

Is the ultimate exemplum not Christ himself? We, ordinary humans, are imperfect examples of God, made in his image, while Christ is (for us, materialists, at least) a fiction and as such the exemplum in which the divine universality returns to itself. Among the Christian theologians, Martin Luther came closest to this when he deployed how only the limit-experience of our utter impotence and incapacity to fulfil god's commandments, the experience which compels us to accept that we have no free will, can bring us to true faith – here is Frank Ruda's concise description of this paradox:³

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2 Marx 1999

3 Ruda 2016

“God has willed what he willed for eternity, “even before the foundation of the world.” For this reason, his “love... and hatred [are] eternal, being prior to the creation of the world.” This is why there is predestination. This is also why his commandments cannot be fulfilled by us if he does or did not will it so. They exist for us in order to allow us to have the “undeniable experience of how incapable” we are. The law thus generates knowledge of one’s own incapacity and impotence, of “how great weakness there is.” Commandments produce knowledge of the fact that there is no free will.”⁴

The first thing to note here is the superego-dimension of divine commandments: for Freud, superego is a commandment coming from an obscene agent who bombards us with it with the aim to make visible our failure to comply with it – the one who enjoys here is the Other (God), and it sadistically enjoys our failure. This convoluted structure of an injunction which is fulfilled when we fail to meet it accounts for the paradox of superego noted by Freud: the more we obey the superego commandment the more we feel guilty. This paradox holds also when we follow Lacan and read superego as an injunction to enjoy: enjoyment is an impossible-real, we cannot ever fully attain it, and this failure makes us feel guilty. (Another paradox is at work here: enjoyment as an impossible-real means that we cannot ever attain it AND that we cannot ever get rid of it since our very attempts to get rid of it generate a surplus-enjoyment of their own).

The implicit lesson of Luther is that we should not be afraid to apply this notion of superego to God himself and to how he relates to us, humans. God not only imposes on us commandments (he knows) we are unable to fulfil, he imposes on us these commandments not in order to really test us, not with the hope that we will maybe succeed in following the commandments, but precisely in order to bring us to despair, to make us aware of our failure – and here, at this point only, we reach the limit of Christianity proper: this awareness of our utter impotence is the act of freedom, it changes everything. It is because of our freedom that the experience of our impotence drives us to despair: without freedom, we would simply accept that we are an unfree cog in the divine machinery. (If, on the contrary, we would find in ourselves the strength to meet the challenge and to act according to divine commandments, this would also not mean that we are free but simply that the ability to act according to divine commandments is part of our nature, of our natural dispositions and potentials.) For this insight into our despair and utter impotence, Christ is not needed – it is just the omnipotent hidden God versus us:

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4 Ibid., p.31-2

“The affirmation of the fact that there is no common measure that relates God and mankind — there is no human-divine relationship. Erasmus falsely assumes that there is a continuity between man and God and thereby also confuses ‘God preached and God hidden.’ It is precisely this distinction (in Hegelian terms, that between God for us and God in itself) that needs to be taken into account. God is not his Word. The Word is God revealed to mankind. To think God, one needs to avoid the temptation of fusing revelation (the Word, Christ) and God as such”⁵

Here, however, we have to introduce a key Hegelian twist: if “there is a radical gap, a difference different from all other differences, that separates the revealed God (Scripture) and God in himself (the hidden or ‘naked’ God),”⁶ then this gap is not just the gap between God-in-itself and how God appears to us, it is also a gap in God itself - the fact that god appears is an event which deeply affects god’s identity. There is no human-divine relationship – but *this non-relationship exists as such, in the figure of Christ*, God who is a human being. In other words, Christ is not a figure of mediation between god and man, a proof that god relates to man with loving care; what happens with Christ is that the non-relationship between god and man is transposed into god itself – the gap that separates man from god is asserted as immanent to god. Everything changes with this move: the one who experiences utter despair (expressed in his “Father, why have you abandoned me?”) is god (the son) himself, Christ dying on the cross, and through my belief in Christ I identify with god in my very despair. Identity with god is not achieved through some sublime spiritual elevation but only in the passage through utter despair, by way of transposing our own incapacity and impotence to God himself. When this happens, God the father is no longer an obscene superego agent, and the abyss of utter despair turns out to be the other face of my radical freedom. We should never forget that, in Luther’s vision, an individual is thrown into despair when he experiences his impotence and inability to obey god’s commandments, not to do some impossibly difficult task (in Paradise already, Adam and Eve ate the prohibited apple) – and is freedom not precisely the freedom *not* to obey commandments?

The unique role of Christ is something that escapes mysticism even at its best, which means, of course, Meister Eckhart. Eckhart was on the right track when he said that he’d rather go to hell with Jesus than to heaven without – but his ultimate horizon of the mystical unity of man and god as the abyssal Oneness in which man and God as separate entities disappear prevents him from drawing all the consequences from his

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5 Ibid., p.32

6 Ibid., p.33

insight. Let us quote extensively from Eckhart's Sermon 87 ("Blessed are the poor in spirit") which focuses on what does true "poverty" amounts to:

"as long as aa man still somehow has the will to fulfil the very dear will of God, that man does not have the poverty we are talking about for this man still wills to satisfy God's will, and this is not true poverty. For, if a man has true poverty, then he must be as free of his own will now, as a creature, as he was before he was created. For I am telling you by the eternal truth, as long as you have the will to fulfill God's will and are longing for eternity and for God, you are not truly poor. For only one who wills nothing and desires nothing is a poor man. /.../Therefore, we say that a man should be so poor that he neither is nor has a place in which God could accomplish his work. If this man still holds such a place within him, then he still clings to duality. I pray to God that he rids me of God; for my essential being is above God insofar as we comprehend God to be the origin of all creatures. In that divine background of which we speak, where God is above all beings and all duality, there I was myself, I willed myself and I knew myself, in order to create my present human form. And therefore, I am my own source according to my timeless being, but not according to my becoming which is temporal. Therefore, I am unborn, and, in the same way as I have never been born, I shall never die. What I am according to my birth will die and be annihilated; since it is mortal it must decompose in time. In my eternal birth all things were born and I was the source of myself and of all things; and if I had so willed there would be neither I nor any things; but if I were not, then God would not be, for I am the cause of God's existence; if I were not, God would not be God. However, it is not necessary to know that."¹⁷

Eckhart relies here on the distinction between me as creature, part of the realm of creatures with God (the origin of all creatures) at its top, and between the eternal impersonal I that is one with God beyond all creaturely life ("as I stand empty of my own will, of God, of God's will, and of all His works and of God Himself, there I am above all creatures, I am neither God nor creature, rather I am that I was and will remain, now and forever."¹⁸) But this distinction is not enough to really account for Eckhart's own claim that it is better to be in Hell with Christ than in Heaven without Christ.

One has to be precise here – Eckhart does not talk about Christ but about God: "ich will lieber in der helle sin und daz ich got habe, denne in dem himelriche und daz ich got nit enhave" ("I would rather be in hell and

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7 Eckhart

8 Ibid.

have God than be in the kingdom of heaven and not have God.”)⁹ It is my contention that one should replace here “God” with “Christ”: one cannot be without God in Heaven because God IS Heaven, and the only way God can be in Hell is in the figure of Christ. The reason we have to replace “God” with “Christ” is thus simply that this is the only way to make Eckhart’s proposition meaningful in a Christian sense. (We have here a nice example of how a misquote is closer to truth than the original.) Or, to go even a step further: not only is a world without God Hell, but God without Christ (i.e., God in his separation from man) is Devil himself. The difference between God and Devil is thus that of a parallax: they are one and the same entity, just viewed from a different perspective. Devil is God perceived as a superego authority, as a Master enacting his caprices.

The mystical unity of my I and God in which we both dissolve is beyond Heaven and Hell, there is even no proper place for Christ in it, it is the void of eternity. Insofar as we nonetheless define Heaven as the bliss of eternity in which I am fully one with God, then Christ as an embodied individual, as a God who is simultaneously a mortal creature (dying on the Cross), definitely belongs to the domain of Hell. In their “Engel,” Rammstein describe in simple but touching terms the sadness and horror of angels who dwell in Heaven – here is the first strophe of the song:

“Who in their lifetime is good on Earth
Will become an angel after death
You look to the sky and ask
Why can't you see them
Only once the clouds have gone to sleep
Can you see us in the sky
We are afraid and alone
Because God knows I don't want to be an angel”

Angels are afraid and alone in Heaven, sad because there is no love up there – maybe the deadly-suffocating love of God which is a mask of His indifference. God-the-Father knows I don't want to be an angel, but He keeps me there. Love comes only through Christ, and Christ’s place is in Hell where life is, where passions divide us. And there is a step further to be made here: if, in order to reach the abyss of the Void, I have to get rid of God himself as the supreme creature, the only place to do it is Hell where God is by definition absent. To step out of the realm of creatures one has to descent to the lowest level of creaturely life which is Hell.

In his provocative claim, Eckhart doesn’t only imagine where to be with or without Christ, he proposes a real choice we have to make, the choice between God and Christ, and it is the choice between Heaven and Hell. Rimbaud wrote in his *A season in Hell*: “I believe I am in Hell,

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9 Ibid.

therefore I am.” One has to take this claim in its full Cartesian sense: only in Hell can I exist as a singular unique I, a finite creature which is nonetheless able to separate itself from the cosmic order of creatures and step into the primordial Void.

Eckhart progresses from the temporal order of creatures to the primordial abyss of eternity, but he avoid the key question: how do creatures arise from this primordial abyss? Not “how can we reach eternity from our temporal finite being?” but: “How can eternity itself descend into temporal finite existence?” The only answer is that, as Schelling saw it, eternity is the ultimate prison, a suffocating closure, and it is only the fall into creaturely life which introduces Opening into human (and even divine) experience. This point was made very clearly by G.K.Chesterton: “Love desires personality; therefore love desires division. It is the instinct of Christianity to be glad that God has broken the universe into little pieces [...]. Christianity is a sword which separates and sets free. No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls.”¹⁰

And Chesterton is fully aware that it is not enough for God to separate man from Himself so that mankind will love Him – this separation HAS to be reflected back into God Himself, so that God is abandoned BY HIMSELF: “let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.”¹¹

In the standard form of atheism, emancipated humans stop believing in God; in Christianity, God dies *for himself* - in his “Father, why have you abandoned me?”, Christ himself commits what is for a Christian the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith. And, again, this is what eludes Eckhart: for him, God “dies for himself” in the sense that God as the supreme Being, as the origin of all creaturely life, also disappears when a human being reaches its utmost poverty – at this zero-point, man and God become indistinguishable, the abyssal One. For Chesterton, however, the ultimate mystery of Christianity is the exact opposite, the DIVISION of man from God which is transposed into God himself in the figure of Christ.¹²

Here we finally reach the ultimate paradox of Luther’s theology: how does the divine self-division affect the relationship between freedom and Predestination? Predestination is not an objective fact but a matter of choice, of our own unconscious choice which precedes our temporal existence: “This peculiar kind of choice to which we are condemned is structurally analogous to what Freud calls ‘the choice of neurosis’ — a choice that is peculiarly ‘independent of experiences’. This means that

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¹⁰ Chesterton 1995, p.139

¹¹ Ibid., p.145

¹² See Žižek 2000

in a certain sense the subject is forced to choose its own unconscious: 'This claim that the subject, so to speak, chooses her unconscious . . . is the very condition of possibility of psychoanalysis.'" (162) When Freud says that this forced choice (forced because it always-already happened: we never choose), this choice which is simultaneously impossible and necessary (unavoidable), is "independent of experiences," one should give to this formulation all its Kantian weight: the fact that the choice of neurosis is independent of experience means that it is not an empirical ("pathological," in Kant's sense) choice but a properly transcendental choice that precedes our empirical temporal existence. Kant talks about such an eternal/atemporal choice of our character, and Schelling follows him at this point: if I am evil, I cannot avoid acting in evil ways in my life, such is my character, but I am nonetheless responsible for it because I've chosen it in an atemporal act.

Are we thereby back at our starting point, exemplum as different from examples? The eternal/atemporal choice is, of course, a fiction in the sense that it never takes place in our temporal reality, it is a fictional X presupposed by all our actual acts and choices – and precisely as such, it is THE exemplum of a free choice. Or, to put it in Kantian terms, all our temporal choices can be suspected of being "pathological," not free acts but conditioned by our contingent interests and determinations – only the eternal/atemporal choice is actually free.

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