



## Hegel's understanding of God and Idea as Platonic interpretation of the 19th century?

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**A**bstract: Hegel uses a Platonic terminology, though in German, to explain his understanding of God in philosophy. As such, it is of interest, whether the usage of the terms rather describes a 19th century reading of Plato or whether it explains a unique understanding of God. The author argues that Hegel's explanation of God as Geist is Platonic because, for Plato, reason is ultimately connected to the Divine; thus, the logistikon possesses a spiritual dimension. On the other hand, Hegel derives the divine attributes from the Bible where God is described as the logos. By combining these two teachings, Hegel uniquely emphasizes the special importance of reason as a reference point to reality. The Biblical-Platonic notion of reason as appearance in the finite which can never be dissolved or distinguished from reason in the infinite is brought to light in Hegel's philosophy.

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## **I**ntroduction:

Hegel was a German Idealist philosopher who wanted to demonstrate the philosophical-historical significance of God and its absolute validity in the course of the advancing materialization and de-metaphysization in 19th century Europe. As such, he reflects back on the idea and thus the origin of Greek philosophy of the classical period in antiquity (which ended the Pre-Socratic philosophy of the pre-classical period). This naturally raises the question of whether Hegel's philosophical understanding of God and the Idea should be understood primarily as 19th-century Platonism, or whether it stands apart from it.

## **M**ethodology:

1 In his *Phaedo*, Plato most prominently introduces the "idea". Since the "idea" is also essential for Hegel, the work is suitable as a parting point of comparison.  
2 The Greek original title is *Politeia*, which literally neither means Republic nor State (as the German translation is commonly known as "Der Staat") but

The author will compare the concepts of God and being between the two authors, focusing on the main theories to see, how Plato's view of reality is mirrored in the Christian worldview of Hegel. The focus will lie on Plato's *Phaedo*<sup>1</sup> and *Republic*<sup>2</sup> and the first volume of Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion).

## **F**indings:

Plato supposes that everything which is true being is not found in our common perceptible world, but true being exists beyond the physical, because if something is universally conceivable then it must be intelligible. To understand this, we have to know what Plato means when he talks of "form":

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constitution or state order. In his work, Plato constructs a state in analogy to the soul, since the soul is a very abstract entity and thus explaining it through a state order makes it more graspable for us. *The Republic* therefore is a good fit for our examination.

“In his early, Socratic dialogues Plato was already starting to call this unitary object of definition a ‘form’: the Greek word is *eidos* or *idea*. This was not yet a remotely technical term, just a convenient way of picking out the character or property that makes something the kind of thing that it is” (Sedley, 2016: 8). Like his teacher Socrates, Plato sought to determine what makes a thing what it is by identifying its properties, which can be discovered through definition. The goal was to find an adequate definition of the object and to refute those definitions initially believed legitimate but later shown to be inadequate through dialectical reasoning (cf. Sedley, 2016). Later, the term ‘form’ becomes more technical: “What we call Plato’s theory of Forms is expressed with this same term, but by a modern convention we tend for convenience to spell ‘Forms’ with a capital F. This

spelling at a stroke turns ‘Forms’ into a technical term. [...] What is a Platonic Form? The key is separation. The eternal and changeless ‘forms’ which as we have seen are sought in definitional inquiries and are the potential objects of pure knowledge, exist separately from all their sensible instances, rather than being immanent in them” ” (Sedley, 2016: 8 f.).<sup>1</sup> This implies that forms exist beyond the finite, because the idea or Form shares something with the sensible thing—the *hypokeimenon* (as Aristotle would later call a physical object)—but is not identical to the *hypokeimenon* itself. As such, it becomes intelligible, because it is not object to change and can be validated at any time within our sensible world. Epistemologically, the chair can be recognized as such because of its participation in the intelligible idea. The chair

1 At the same time, we find a shift in paradigm from an epistemological pessimism, such as in the *Meno* and

*Phaedo* to an epistemological optimism, such as in the *Symposium* and *Republic* (Chen, 1985: 686).

epistemologically can be recognized as a chair because of its intelligible share, the idea. At the same time, the idea also has ontological consequences. Matter alone cannot bring something into existence; it requires form to transform potential into actuality. Thus, matter and form together make existence possible—a point Aristotle, despite rejecting Plato's Theory of Forms, would elaborate upon. In the same way, God is beyond space and time and exists in a oneness, a unity (cp. Axt-Piscalar, 2013: 38). Anything beyond space and time is not subject to change for Plato, so God is an unchangeable, simple being (ibid.). "Simple" means that its being cannot be divided in any way, it is an unique oneness (ibid.). This view of God is also present in Islam, where it is called tawhid, describing the inseparable oneness, unity, and highest perfection of God. (Other names for God in Islam include Al-Ahad, meaning the One, a name which is also used

in Platonism.) As Stocks pointed out: "Socrates's counsel in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic* is that the love of knowledge should be the leading motive in life. Nothing is to stand in the way of its satisfaction. Attention to anything else is only excused by necessity. Pleasure and honour, as such, are not to be sought at all. The undivided pursuit of knowledge, and that alone, brings a man success in this world and in the next" (Stocks, 1915: 212). Thus, it is no surprise that Plato attributed reason with the Divine: the soul has three parts as described in his *Republic* (4.435e-441c), one of the three parts is the *logistikon*, the reasonable part through which we are able to recognize the Forms and thus truth, which means that true reason does not focus on the sensible, but on the intelligible, since the soul wants to know what is true and one turns away from the bodily to the intelligible. As such, "the philosopher is to purify his soul

of the bodily infections; here the work of the educator is to 'drag' the soul of the educated from the world of becoming to the world of being" (Chen, 1985: 687).

For Hegel, God is Geist which means "spirit" and "mind" alike if translated in English. However, God is not just any spirit; He is absolute spirit (absoluter Geist), as opposed to the worldly, which belongs to the realm of the subjective (Ahlers, 1975: 76 f.; for God/Geist as absolute, see Hegel, 1993: 278). As such, it is something mental, and man as a spiritual being is in so far spiritual in that he inherits spirit/ mind as well; however, Geist is always thought together with the divine. In this way, the infinite (which is absolute) finds itself within an environment of finitude (Endlichkeit), a problem Hegel addresses by pointing out that the finite has its origin and purpose in the infinite (Ahlers, 1975: 76). It is important to note that Plato distinguishes between

the infinite and finite realms: ideas exist beyond space and time (the world of being), and what is beyond space and time is always valid, while that which exists in the world of becoming is within space and time and thus subject to change; it cannot exist infinitely. Thus, if the finite has its truth in the infinite, the finite points back to its origin (the infinite), in other words: Geist becomes aware of Itself. In this process, Geist realizes that it always is, was and is to be which it always is, was and is to be, with God/Geist at the beginning and the end (Hegel, 1993: 266 f.). This notion of Geist is not Platonic though, but obviously of Biblical reference, as is written in Revelation 1:8: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty." Furthermore, the idea that God and reason are the same is a crucial idea in the Gospel of John. In its very beginning of the Gospel, it is

pointed out that in the beginning there was only logos and the logos was with God, because the logos is God (on the influence of this passage of the Gospel of John on Hegel, cp. Hirschberger, 1976: 416).<sup>1</sup> Hegel brings Platonism and Christian Protestantism in his religious philosophy together, in which he explains the Christian God obviously through the lenses of Plato, in which he shapes his own ideas about the Divine. In Hegel's view: God is a self-referential, He thinks of Himself and becomes aware of Himself (through man), thus he is self-conceived (Hegel, 1993: 307)<sup>2</sup>, as only the godly is Being (Sein) while the rest just lends its being but is not Being as such (geliehenes Sein; Schein eines Seins) (Hegel, 1993: 268). As a result, we can see that Hegel's God is the God of the

Philosopher, not the Christian God in his actual sense anymore, despite Hegel's trinitarian understanding of Geist (for Hegel's trinity, see Hegel, 1993: 86-91). According to Hegel, the absolute idea (absolute Idee) should be the only object and content of philosophy (Fulda, 1986: 59): If nature is understood rationally, that is, understood by the Geist, then the idea is grasped within the self-conscious process of Geist (cp. Fulda, 1986: 59-61). As Hegel writes: "The idea is the adequate term, the objective True or the True-as-such. If anything has truth, it received it through its idea, or something has only truth insofar as it is idea" (Hegel, 1980: 20, translation mine). Here we can see that Hegel brilliantly understood the term "form" from the Early Plato who associates it as definitory and

1 Note also that the notion that God is spirit can be found in John 4:24 "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." and 2 Corinthians 3:17 "Now the Lord is that

Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

2 "The *Geist* testifies the *Geist*. This testimony is the own inner nature of *Geist*" (Hegel, 1993: 307, translation mine).

thus sees idea in a linguistic aspect to be a term which adequately refers to the thing itself. It is "True" insofar one can logically state that what is ascribed to the term is valid, thus true. But Hegel also understands the Late Plato and his – to put it in my words – *Vergeistigung* of Idea. Idea is not just a definition of a *hypokeimenon*'s nature, it is not a description out of a sensual (such as Aristotle, who tries to see the *ousia* through the *hypokeimenon*) but conceiving the intelligible. However, the traditional view of paradigm and manifestation (*Urbild-Abbild-Gedanke*) vanishes in Hegel's philosophy (Hirschberger, 1976: 408).

Philosophy itself, for Hegel, has to be understood as cognition of God (*Gotteserkenntnis*) in the sense that God reveals Himself to human beings through the philosophical approach and all philosophical disciplines are impossible without Him (cp. Axt-Piscalar, 2013: 228 f.). This is evident, since the history

of Western philosophy since Plato has focused on what is reasonable, and all other sciences seek to produce reasonable results; today, no one would defend a claim that cannot be supported by reason. However, to Hegel God is absolute reason (Axt-Piscalar, 2013: 229), and thus I argue that if we read this statement in the negative, it means: Nothing can exist without God because all being goes back to God, and therefore, anything which "is" (in the sense of "it exists") presumes the existence of God. And indeed, Hegel placed in the beginning that "God is" (*Gott ist*) in which "is" is the predicate and God the subject (Hegel, 1993: 278). Hegel criticized those who sought to prove God's existence through traditional arguments, noting that they made God the object of examination, rather than recognizing that God is the subject and the premise of all existence (Hegel, 1993: 278–281). Note that the term object has quite a few meanings here.

God is not just not an object in the sense of being the opposite of the subject, but the English word object also denotes the German word “Gegenstand” (a “thing”). And Hegel explicitly rules out that God is such a mere thing (cp. Axt-Piscalar, 2013: 233). Here, Hegel goes beyond the traditional rationalization of God as being an object of research, as a some-thing which the researcher wants to conceive. This research however can never go beyond the finite, and as God is infinite, the traditional arguments for God must be unsatisfying (Hegel, 1993: 312 f.). Here we can see the important distinction from the beginning: on the one hand, being is being – but it exists in different spheres. In the finite it is finite being (endliches Sein), in the infinite it is infinite Being (unendliches Sein), which goes beyond the classical understanding of Platonists (though one could argue that these differences are only nuances). For the latter,

something emanates from the infinite to the finite and through its emanation, its being becomes weaker, so as further it is away from its origin, as less being it inherits (cp. Schmitz, 2022). For instance, the Late Platonist Proclus regards evil to be a disfigured manifestation of a form of the good (ibid.). And already for Plato, the manifested is already imperfect to the idea, while the idea is perfect: Thus, being in the finite world must be bound to the limits of being, and through philosophy one tries to get over the barrier to realize what being is. In the same way, God is only conceivable to us in a finite way until we decide to go the path of philosophy and become aware of the finiteness. As such, God is both, the subject and the object: He (as a subject) reflects upon Himself (as an object) and becomes self-aware. So, man exists that he can grasp himself through man.

In summary, when we consider Plato and Hegel together, God as logos can be logically

conceived, since what is logical derives its logic from the logos within human beings—the logistikon—which reflects the transcendental logos, so that the logos reflects upon itself. Thus, it is cyclical. If the logos did not exist, all logics became obsolete and being was impossible. As a result, we have to think of Hegel as a strict Panlogist. In other words, reason can only be conceived through itself; anything beyond reason is unreasonable and therefore not real. This is why reason is always real and constitutes reality, making reality itself inherently reasonable (cf. Hirschberger, 1976: 411). Daniel Heinz argues that there are generally two ways of seeing the world, either through the Greek-philosophical (griechisch-philosophisch) or Christian-prophetic (christlich-prophetisch) (Heinz, 2022: 6). I think that Hegel unites both paths within his philosophy, explaining the prophetic-theological and the rational-philosophical together. Finally,

there are also differences between Plato and Hegel; in particular, the dynamism of Geist in Hegel appears more Heraclitean, since in Heraclitus' philosophy everything is in constant motion (Hirschberger, 1976: 413), whereas Plato conceives of true being as static and eternal, making the world of being unchanging.

### **D**iscussion and **C**onclusion:

Hegel stands in a classical Idealist tradition in which he follows the reading and understanding of the world in the way Plato did. Accordingly, Hegel not only engages with the ideas of later Platonists within this framework, but also incorporates Biblical wisdom, thereby interpreting Plato within a Christian context (though he is not the first to do so). As such, he does not see God only in a simple oneness but interprets him in a trinitarian view. Christians regard Jesus as the Son of God and therefore as a divine being; similarly, in Hegel's

philosophy, Geist in our world is an immediate emanation of the heavenly Geist and is not diminished by its finitude. In other words, although Geist appears in the finite, its source must be understood as infinite, making the distinction between finite and infinite Geist ultimately untenable. Like Plato, Hegel sees true being in a spiritual and not in a sensual dimension. Thus, same as Plato sees reality in being, and thus beyond the immanent, Hegel affirms that being itself can only be found in and through Geist and thus, the sensual is not being or reality as such, making reality fall together with what is reasonable, which can be seen as the Platonic relationship between the reasonable part in soul and reason itself, as reality is only conceived through reason. In summary, Hegel can indeed be considered a 19th-century Platonist. However, his interpretation is unique in that it emphasizes the special significance of reason as the reference point for reality. He

demonstrates that apparent, sensual reality constitutes a domain of unreason and thus does not truly belong to the world of being. Furthermore, he shows that reason, as it appears in the finite, can never be separated or distinguished from reason in the infinite. Nonetheless, Hegel remains deeply rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition, and some of his ideas can be traced back to Pre-Socratic philosophy, such as the Heraclitean concept of motion, in contrast to Plato's notion of a static world of being. It would be interesting to further research, whether Hegel can be read in compatibility with the Islamic teaching, as both Christianity and Islam are both Abrahamic religions, and so the Christian reading of Plato might have commonalities with the Islamic reading of Plato. Whether Hegel can be a help in building a bridge here between Christian and Islamic understandings of Platonism, would be an interesting matter

of research; especially since Hegel called Islam the purest of all the monotheist religions (cp. Khair, 2007).

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