

# GOETHE AND HEGEL ON HEDONISM AND IDEALISM

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**Abstract:** This paper begins with a general comparison between Hegel and Goethe, identifying both similarities and dissimilarities in their narratives of the spirit. It then advances with a more technical comparison of direct quotes from Goethe and Hegel dealing with hedonism and idealism that speak of either individual happiness or collective happiness. It shows that both Goethe and Hegel deem pleasure and social utopia as unable to secure an authentic reconciliation.

**Keywords:** Goethe; Hegel; idealism; hedonism; Faust.

## 1. GENERAL REMARKS

Comparing Goethe and Hegel immediately evokes a difference between a poet and a philosopher, imagination and reason, romanticism and rationalism, nature or spirit. But if we were to more concretely compare for example *Faust* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* such initial dichotomies get blurred. Both texts propose to the same quest, to the same age and seek to heal what they take to be the *Geistlosigkeit* (*spiritlessness*) of their time. In view of overcoming this spiritlessness, both books include a diagnose as well as a treatment.<sup>1</sup> This paper proposes a modest comparison of some relevant points.

Firstly, in both Goethe and Hegel we notice a priority of the metaphysical. The *Prologue* in *Faust* indicates that the human drama is but the reflection of a metaphysical drama. In Hegel's view logics precedes nature and spirit – which means pure thinking, the objective intelligible realm precedes its exteriorization as the sensible world. This amounts to saying that *Divina Comedia* conceptually precedes *Humana Comedia*.

Secondly, both *Faust* and the *Phenomenology* can be described as *Bildungsromane*, “novels of education”, pedagogical wisdom designed to guide the process of formation, the odyssey of the spirit. In both cases a *universal consciousness* is at stake, either symbolically or conceptually, beyond the immediate narrative concreteness. This formation is a process of becoming, maturing and initiation, which means that all progressive determinations leave a residual imprint on the final result.

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<sup>1</sup> “Writers and philosophers seeking to remedy what they diagnosed as a *spiritlessness* of their age with its devastating effects upon Europe. One might read Goethe's *Faust* as a dramatic exegesis of the same philosophical “cure” prescribed by Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, both revealing how an individual and a culture progress from spiritless fragmentation to authentic, spirited wholeness”, Sybol Sheron Cook, *The Quest for Wholeness: The Parallel Journeys of Goethe's Faust and Hegel's Consciousness* (Washington. American University, 2001).

Thirdly, there is something Faustian in Hegel as well as there is something dialectical in Goethe. The dialectical objectivity of negation as necessary mediation and propulsive agent finds an equivalent in both Faust as *concrete negation* (*Aufhebung*) and Mephistopheles as *abstract negation* (*Vernichtung*). This means that Faust strives for the *positive* through the mediation of the *negative*, whereas Mephistopheles strives for *the negative alone*. In both cases we witness a progression of consciousness through *negation* to a slow self-discovery and the *positive* attainment of truth. Hegel's dialectical restlessness of consciousness corresponds to the Faustian restlessness of the soul. Uprooting is decisive in seeking truth and overcoming error is a condition of truth. "Consciousness certain of itself is destined to lose its object, to lose its knowledge, to lose itself, at the same time when, behind its back, its own becoming unfolds: its damnation and salvation. *Every time it despairs at the progression of its knowledge, consciousness is Faust*".<sup>2</sup> Victim of a long series of Mephistophelian temptations, Faust never fully identifies with transient urges but progresses further to freedom through truth. The same way, a long chain of certainties are dialectically torn apart before self-consciousness is able to finally achieve absolute Truth through speculative reason – the very aim of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

In both cases the unfolding is a gradual initiation into the mystery of life. But the *mere way* is not the point – as it is often the case with the philosophical *platitudo* claiming that it is the way of thinking (*Denkweg*), not the destination, that matters. Or (a version of the same philosophical platitudo) that it is *the problem, not the solution that matters*. This is false in both Hegel and Goethe since in both cases we eventually access *a higher wisdom* through *positivized negation* (the *Aufhebung* wherein negation is positivized and error, false structures of consciousness, temptation, weakness – even sin – are retroactively understood as dialectical moments or necessary stations to the ultimate Truth).

And finally, it must be said that, in different ways, Goethe and Hegel try to mend the illness of the age manifest in the harsh antagonism that characterized both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. "Hegel's thought begins to form precisely in reaction against the Enlightenment but also defines itself in reaction to Romanticism. Or Goethe's thought forms in an analogous manner. He began by completely opposing sentiment and intellect. He incarnates both in characters that he sets into conflict. In *Werther*, Albert the rational opposes Werther the sentimental; the rational Antonio opposes the poet in *Tasso*. In the first *Faust*, Schiller claims Mephistopheles is the intellect, whereas Faust is the heart. Goethe does not entirely justify and defend neither of these adversaries. Each possesses what the other lacks. Goethe thinks that "*They are two men which make up a single one (...)*. Hegel believes being able to escape the opposition between intellect and sentiment through the progression of spirit towards the idea of the *Whole*, concrete universality allowing to elevate beyond the particular data of individual sensibility as well as beyond artificial abstractions where the moments of intellectual development are isolated and fixed."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jérôme Lèbre, "Faust minimal", in *La phénoménologie de l'esprit, Revue germanique internationale*, 24/2016, 118.

<sup>3</sup> René Berthelot, "Goethe et Hegel", *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 38.3, 1931, 391.

## 2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HEGEL AND FAUST

Differences, however, are no less important, since Faust begins his journey by abandoning *reason* for an existential leap in the *sensible*, by sinking himself in life to devour its pleasures, while Hegel begins the journey by leaving *sensible certainty* behind in the progress of speculative reason to achieve a higher knowledge. As a disillusioned scholar Faust comes to hold the entirety of his knowledge as *hollow*. In Hegel's view this original knowledge is *abstract* or *empty*, but this is precisely why it requires *the unfolding not the abandonment of the Concept*. It can be however argued that Faust only leaves this abstract knowledge behind in order to unfold it *indirectly* through more concrete life experiences. This makes his spiritual becoming a dialectical as well as an existential process of gaining more determinate knowledge

Moreover, Hegel's *Absolute Knowledge* can be compared to the medieval notion of *visio beatifica* (direct contemplation of the *divine essence* combining *absolute knowledge* and *beatitude* (happiness), knowledge acquiring thereby a soteriological status. *Visio beatifica* means knowledge *plus happiness*. Absolute (limitless) knowledge without happiness is indeed hollow (not just theoretically, but practically as well). Abstract knowledge as such is disillusioning and rather brings about unhappiness (as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Cioran will later argue). Faust separates knowledge from happiness: his abstract empty knowledge of the whole world is discomforting by contrast since it is *a lot of* knowledge. But, lacking the ultimate principle that holds everything together, it cannot satisfy the soul. Pursuit of pleasure and pursuit of knowledge: Faust will not settle for less, Faust wants it all. The meaninglessness of existence can only gain meaning again if Mephistopheles grants him *knowledge beyond knowledge* (absolute knowledge) and *pleasure beyond pleasure* (more than mere contention). Faust seeks *absolute knowledge* and *plenary happiness* as well, just like Hegel. In view of this totalization Faust compromises with the "abstract negation" of a super-human demonic power, whereas Hegel uses speculative (infinite) reason to follow through the ladder of knowledge, not relying on purely human forces but acknowledging human subjectivity as a positive moment of the Absolute itself.

## 3. DIALECTIC OF HEDONISM

Faust never denied himself any desire. Always on the run, always seeking totality, fulfilment and plenitude he is however painfully aware that this restlessness is precisely what prevented him from settling in a stable, full existential achievement. Hegel comments that, in seeking full satisfaction, Faust seeks full independence. But is condemned to find his independence only through ... dependence. Faust can only achieve his state of bliss through Margaret or in other words: in order to *affirm* himself he needs to *deny* another. His independence is mediated by another's dependence. This renders pleasure enslaving instead of liberating.

Pleasure does a different thing than it pretends. It promises happiness but creates addiction. It promises fulfilment but it is so transient that it can be defined as a permanent residual void. Hegel, in the chapter “Pleasure and Necessity” of his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, famously regarded *Ur-Faust* as the spiritual figure (*Gestalt*) trading wisdom for pleasure<sup>4</sup>. Just as Faust comes to the late realization that pleasure does not yield a fulfilment able to make life worth living, so does Hegel identify the *dark necessity* grinding down any striving to achieve an enduring fulfilment in life through pleasure. Both have also identified and criticized the *amorality* of pleasure.

Goethe, <i>Faust I</i>	Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i>
<p><b>1. Desire creates dependence</b>  <b>CARE:</b> Have you not ever, then, known Care? (11430)  <b>FAUST:</b> I've never tarried anywhere;  I snatched from fortune what I wanted  I've only had desires to fulfil them, then  wished anew,  and so I've stormed again my way through  life;  (Act V)</p>	<p><b>1. Desire creates dependence.</b>  “‘It attains therefore to <i>the enjoyment of pleasure, to the consciousness</i> fits actualization in a consciousness which appears as independent, or to the vision of the unity of the two independent self-consciousnesses. It attains its End, but only to learn there what the truth of that End is. It comprehends itself as this particular individual who exists <i>for himself, but the realization of this End is itself the setting aside of the latter. For it is not as this particular individual that it becomes an object to itself, but rather as the unity of itself and the other self-consciousness, hence as an individual that is only a moment, or a universal</i>”.</p>
<p><b>2. Faust refuses the Absolute but finite things never yield perfect satisfaction or completeness.</b>  What need has he to float into Eternity  The things he knows are tangible!  Let his path be this earth while he exists;  but, keeping on, find all life's pains and  joys,  always, in every moment, <i>never satisfied!</i>  (11,435)</p> <p>“It despises intellect and science  The supreme gifts of man  It has given itself to the devil  And must perish”</p>	<p><b>2. Pleasure destroys higher ends.</b>  “Self-consciousness seeks consume the objective thing to satisfy its individual self. All the higher intellectual and ethical ends of the community are set aside. Its enjoyment centers principally on another self-consciousness, Pleasure taken in another's person for one's own gratification is essentially self-destroying. There is therefore, a blind necessity driving one on to seek ever new objects in unending self-frustration”.</p> <p><b>Pleasure is ultimately destructive.</b>  “‘This necessity is nothing but the expression of the sheer emptiness of what is merely individual. The pursuit of ones own satisfaction therefore passes over from sheer individualism to <i>an absolute universalism in which all individuality is shattered</i>”.</p>

<sup>4</sup> Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, (trad. A Miller), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 217–221.

<p><b>3. His intense desire for Margareta pushes Faust “beyond Good and Evil”</b></p> <p><b>FAUST.</b> You may spare me your moral lessons!</p>	<p><b>3. Pure pleasure beyond Good and evil</b></p> <p><i>“In so far as it has lifted itself out of the ethical Substance and the tranquil being of thought to its being-for-self, it has left behind the law of existence, the knowledge acquired through observation and theory”</i></p>
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Yet another dimension of pleasure is the destruction of higher ends. Auerbach’s cellar is but the symbol of inferior pleasure and the Walpurgis Night is the symbol of extreme (transgressive) pleasure. But even higher pleasures eventually require the abandonment of selfless superior ends such as pure knowledge (truth for truth’s sake). Hegel describes Faustian pleasure as immersive pleasure: leaving philosophy, theology and science behind by leaping into “life” as one would immerse into *the river of life* and just go with the flow. This disjunction between spirit and life is the *vitalist wager* of Faust: fusing subjectivity with the substance of life itself. The Faustian consciousness evolves therefore from despair and suicide (= *nothing-matters*) to the wager whereby Mephistopheles hopes to persuade Faust that, in this imperfect life, *something-really-matters* to make it worth living forever. The promise of pleasure is but the first temptation, the first station in the quest for the meaning of life after abandoning “philosophy” (*Faust I* will be further elaborated into *Faust II* by seeking a superior investment able to make life worth living). The wager promises to grant Faust a moment of transcendence, self-sufficient perfection, plenary pleasure and permanent joy (*Vollkommenheit + Ewigkeit*) to make life worth living forever – enough to make him try to *arrest time* and wish for the *Augenblick* to endure forever – a sort of a contradictory synthesis of *Augenblick* and *Ewigkeit*.

<p>Goethe, <i>Faust I</i></p> <p><b>MEPHISTOPHELES.</b> “You’re talking like Jack Reprobate; he covets every pretty flower, and fancies there’s no honest favor which can’t be plucked if he but tries”</p>	<p>Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i></p> <p><i>“It plunges therefore into life and indulges to the full the pure individuality in which it appears. It does not so much make its own happiness as straightway take it and enjoy it. The shadowy existence of science, laws and principles, which alone stand between it and its own reality vanishes like a lifeless mist which cannot compare with the certainty of its own reality. It takes hold of life much as a ripe fruit is plucked, which readily offers itself to the hand that takes it”, “It does not aim at the destruction of objective being in its entirety, but only at the form of its otherness or its independence (...) the enjoyment of desire puts an end to this existence so far as it belongs to the object of desire” (PS, 361)</i></p>
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#### 4. DIALECTIC OF IDEALISM

The Faustian search for meaning and happiness in life will eventually overcome all inferior satisfactions by culminating in the resolve to dedicate himself to the “greater good” and to the action (*Handlung*) necessary to its achievement. Sacrificing himself on the altar of humanity comes to be the true meaning of life. This is Faust’s ultimate resolve (or Goethe’s final “decision” about what the aspirational Faust must be). Brotherhood instead of selfishness, a visionary ideal instead of seeking individual pleasure or love. The aspirational image of the Faustian soul will be to dedicate his life to building a perfect society – to “make a better world” – beyond incessant desires and even romantic love. The glorification of *action* and the edification of a *new utopian city* will become the new “transcendence” and the new “fulfilment” providing the ultimate meaning in life – such a meaning that mere pleasure and even love could never yield. Happiness cannot be purely individual, but must belong to a community. The demiurgical enterprise of subjecting nature to human will by bringing about a “*new land*” conquered against a furious sea will be Faust’s crowning achievement. This is highly symbolic, and Faust literally envisions a “*paradise on earth*”. The sea itself is a plastic image of *the metaphysical Abyss*, and the new land is the image of the creation: a *world created*, that is to say, torn out of nothingness or *against* nothingness.

A. The Mephistophelian obstacle to the Faustian utopia. If the sea naturally and entropically swallows the land, the Faustian strive is to dam the sea and conquer the land, forcefully making room for humanity to the detriment of the *abyss*. But Mephistopheles argues that, eventually, Faust still sacrifices for the demons of the sea. Every human endeavour is ultimately doomed to fail, it can never endure. Faust vainly hopes he could live forever in the *terrestrial paradise* he created since it will not endure. This achievement is however bound to be ephemeral just like humanity itself. This means that Faust represents only a dialectical moment (the affirmative negation), but not the final one. This heroic achievement is the negation of the negation. But this is human, all too human. And Mephistopheles stands for the more tragical truth that humanity cannot eternalize its mundane achievements, and the Faustian collective happiness cannot be the final truth. This awareness of *the destructive Mephistophelian principle* is also a testimony to the fact that humans cannot defeat nothingness without the Absolute itself.

The Sea swallowing the land = the Abyss	1. negation
Faust damming the Sea = Faust damming the Abyss	2. negation of the negation (i.e. affirmative negation)
Mephistopheles = the Sea will ultimately devour the land	3. negation of the (negation of the negation) i.e. negation of the (affirmative negation)

Faust finally comes to peace with life only by achieving this demiurgical condition dedicated to bringing collective happiness. Contemplating the free people he led into building the new land as paradise on earth, he feels for the first time the

fullness of an achievement. But his desire to eternalize time is illusory, and it rather accomplishes the opposite – the loss of his own soul contracted on the wager.

Goethe, <i>Faust</i> , II, Act V	Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i>
<p><b>FAUST.</b> If I can furnish space for many millions to live-not safe, I know, but free to work in green and fertile fields, with man and beast soon happy on the new-made soil a dauntless people's effort has erected, creating here inside a land of Eden (11,565)</p> <p><b>MEPHISTOPHELES</b> (<i>To FAUST</i>) Your brow is grave, your look is somber despite this news of great success August sagacity has won its crown of triumph: the ocean and your shore are now at peace (11,230)</p> <p><b>FAUST.</b> I have to tell you, you who know so much it causes me such endless heartache, it's something I can bear no longer! And yet, I feel ashamed to say it. Those old folk there ought to give in. (11,270)</p>	<p><b>Chapter The Law of the Heart</b> (originally commenting Schiller's <i>The Robbers</i> (<i>Die Räuber</i>), but can also be seen as a rejection of the utopia in <i>Faust II</i>)</p> <p>1. <b>The Ideal:</b> "The law, therefore, which is immediately self-consciousness's own law, or a heart which, however, has within it a law, is the <i>End which self-consciousness proceeds to realize</i>". (PS, 368)</p> <p>2. <b>Violent realization of the Utopia:</b> "This heart is confronted by a real world; for in the heart the law is only for its own self, it is not yet realized. This other is thereby characterized as a <i>reality</i> which is the opposite of what is to be realized, and consequently is the contradiction of the law and the individuality. This reality is, therefore, on the one hand a law by which the particular individuality is oppressed, a <i>violent ordering of the world</i> which contradicts <i>the law of the heart</i>, and, on the other hand, a humanity suffering under that ordering, a humanity that does not follow the law of the heart, but is <i>subjected to an alien necessity</i>" (PS, 372)</p>

B. The Machiavellian structure of the Faustian utopia. A different challenge to the Faustian idealism is identified by Goethe and Hegel alike in *the self-contradictory necessity of utopia itself*. Idealism stands for a superior moral intention dedicated to a nobler political order. Action is glorified but overlooks the freedom of others – despite his noble intentions Faust ends up in displacing and even *killing others* for his ideal. Confronted with the hard task of transcribing the ideal into the world, the Faustian subject needs to take action. But action must be given free reign so it can incorporate the higher ideal into the lower real. In the end, Faust admits, *the end justifies the means*. Hegel denounces himself the dialectical necessity of such Machiavellian structure when he demystifies the revolutionary realization of "the law of the heart" as noble intention forced upon the others. The Faustian subject is thus torn apart between the recognition of a universally posited law and a personally chosen law. The *law of the heart* necessarily opposes the *law of this world*, under which humanity is oppressed. The idealist individual

necessarily frames his personal dictates as universally acceptable. Oppressed humanity does not seem to the idealist to be aware of its oppression. To the extent that *the law of the heart* (subjectively ideal) becomes an *actual Law* (objectively real) the hearted individual must cease to find satisfaction in it. It is no longer the inner law of his heart but something alien, externalized and rigidly-realized against which his heart must, again, rebel. Not every individual heart will concur with *the new order*. Other individuals will condemn what the utopian dictates ERGO: *To fulfil the heart's law means dialectically to frustrate it*. The revolution generates the counter-revolution. The *ideal* therefore becomes a living contradiction that recognizes as universal what the individual dictated. It is when faced with the resistance of others that the Faustian idealist is self-alienated, and his blind fury vindicates the ideal hope against the precarious reality. Self-assurance becomes self-alienation and finally self-conceit so that *the utopian Faustian mind loses its mind* eventually dictating violence against the whole of the “reactionary” reality. Then (after the revolution) it either regrets this violence (just as Faust) or rationalizes it away (just as Mephistopheles).

Goethe, <i>Faust</i>	Hegel, <i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i>
<p><b>MEPHISTOPHELES.</b> Why let yourself be bothered so by this? You surely know, by now, how best to colonize. <b>FAUST.</b> So be it! Go and rid me of their presence you know the pretty piece of property that I have designated for their use. (11,275) <b>MEPHISTOPHELES.</b> We'll carry them off, then set them down; a nice new place will reconcile them to any violence they suffer. (11.280) <b>MEPHISTOPHELES and the MIGHTY MEN</b> they did not hear, they would not listen; but we refused to brook delay. and, as you wished, soon cleared them out. The couple didn't suffer much, they simply dropped down dead with fright.</p> <p><b>FAUST.</b> I wanted an exchange, not theft. My curse upon your senseless savagery (11,370) <b>MEPHISTOPHELES and the MIGHTY MEN</b> Obey with grace when Force commands! But if you're bold and must resist, then risk your house and home and life. (11,375)</p>	<p><b>1. The utopian mind ends up in fanaticism</b></p> <p>“The hearted quest for the welfare of humanity therefore passes into <i>the ravings of an insane self-conceit</i> (...) In this its derangement, consciousness declares individuality to be the source of this derangement”. (PS, 377).</p> <p><b>2. The project will destroy an order tested by time</b></p> <p>“The outcome of its action is merely that <i>its consciousness becomes aware of this contradiction</i>. For the law of the heart is something merely <i>intended which, unlike the established order</i>, has stood the test of time, but rather when thus tested is overthrown”. (PS, 377).</p>



## CONCLUSION

We have outlined some general similarities between Goethe and Hegel; then we have more concretely compared their take on two specific topics, *hedonism* and *idealism*. Both authors have underscored the secondary condition of pleasure (not able to secure lasting happiness), as well as the weakness of any human striving to build a “paradise on earth”, since both Goethe and Hegel admit that such an ideal must at some point embrace *the negative*, the Machiavellian structure in which the end justifies the means.

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