The Aftermath of Hegelian Rationalism; The Romanticism of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Seth Joseph Zinder
Lake Forest College

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THE AFTERMATH OF HEGELIAN RATIONALISM: 
THE ROMANTICISM OF KIERKEGAARD 
AND NIETZSCHE 

by 
Seth Joseph Zinder

Following the temporarily inescapable and predominating rationalism which reaches its apex with the Hegelian system, romanticism blossoms as a revolutionary and transitional movement in Western philosophy. While the Hegelian rationalism appears so massive as to explain sufficiently and encompass all things, it also brings sterility to individuals who are actually full of spirit and vitality. Rational theories, in other words, appear alienated, abstract and unreal to individuals living irrationally, emotionally, and without focus or continuity. And with the conception of the individual as purely sentient comes the romantic assertion that rational philosophy, or perhaps philosophy itself, is intrinsically incapable of accurately interpreting our human condition. So during the long and dominant rule of rational methodology, the seeds of romanticism were beginning their growth, and when rationalism became too far embedded in the abstraction of thought, romanticism sprang into existence bringing with it new light, vigor, and a revived passion for the immediate and concrete.

The major assumption of philosophical rationalism is that there exists an essential continuity and similarity to all human experience which can only be comprehended through reason. Underlying the apparent chaos, lack of continuity and dissimilarity of the subjective world, there is a rationally discernible thread of connectedness. "Regarded as the connectedness of (particular) content (philosophy) is the necessary expansion of that content into an organic whole" (Hegel 20). The task of philosophical rationalism, as Hegel sees it, is to transform or construct worldliness, the subjective and experiential, into a rational reality.

Culture and the laborious emergence from the immediacy of substantial life must always begin by getting acquainted with general principles...so as to work up to a general conception...as well as learn to support and refute the general conception with reasons (Hegel 3).

Rationalism, furthermore, is a method of interpreting a variety of subjective experiences systematically, for "knowledge is only actual and can only be expounded," Hegel writes, "as a science or as a system" (Hegel 24). In other words, the 'accidental' or the subjective parts must be conceived in terms of a functioning system. The individual

1 "Irrational" must be understood as both pre-rational and trans-rational. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche speak of an aesthetic personality being pre-rational, and Kierkegaard also speaks of a religious personality being trans-rational.
experience has its fullest and most concrete meaning in the context of its entire systematic environment. The subjective experience of the individual must be expounded or raised to the universal, where it can be properly understood according to a common and rational explanation, applicable irrespective of time or location. Philosophical rationalism, then, “consists not so much in purging the individual of an immediate sensuous mode of apprehension ... but rather [giving]... actuality to the universal” (Hegel 33). The particular, then, is not a ‘thing in itself’, but is rather a reflection or representation of the universal.

Rationalism, seen as a scientific method, generally divorces itself from the ‘accidental’ or peculiar aspects of life, placing greater emphasis on its search for an ‘essential’ quality of existence. Hegel notes, for instance, that a particular or ‘accidental’ can only be addressed with inexpressive, inadequate linguistic terms. He writes, “if nothing more can be said of something than that it is an ‘actual thing’... its description is only the most abstract of generalities and in fact expresses its sameness rather than its distinctiveness” (Hegel 66). Logically, then, peculiarities must be brought into the universal for meaning. It is here, however, that the romantics depart from the rationalists.

The romantics assert that indeed subjectivity or peculiarity cannot be explained, but only because explanations and thoughts are always bound by reason. Subjectivity, however, does in fact exist, not ideologically but phenomenologically, and to understand particularity only in terms of universality is to severely distort it. The romantics claim that there is no actual ‘meaning’ in a subjective experience, for ‘meanings’ too lie only in the realm of reason. There is always, however, an immediate sensitivity and an emotional inwardness which the individual experiences, and this inward responsiveness had a purity which should neither be debased nor stifled through rational methods. In short, there is in romanticism a pre-ideological naturalness which exists as a ‘thing in itself’.

In accordance with this romantic tradition, Soren Kierkegaard asserts that individuals live only in an immediate and most personal existence which is always confirmed by their tenderness and emotional inwardness. We live and recognize our existence, Kierkegaard maintains, through an inner intensity that cannot be reflected through the deceptive and illusive use of reason. In other words, rational abstractions hold a limited appeal for and exercise little influence on individuals at the pre-rational or trans-rational level. Thought can only concern itself with concepts, universals, and abstractions and, therefore, falsifies and fails to reflect one’s wholly individual and sentient existence. “For to think that for an instant one can break off and bring to a halt the course of the personal life, is a delusion” (Kierkegaard 168). In short, subjective and emotional experience, which is the whole of man’s existence, cannot be given generalized meaning.

The Hegelian individual is moved determinedly and dialectically through a series of developmental stages becoming actual and defined in the universal. The individual, here, exists as a dynamic interplay of relations and as a cultural configuration. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, asserts that we do not live as a configuration of univer-
sals, but as remote islands which allow for no transcendent or imaginative escape. The individual cannot become, for example, the State of Christianity, as Hegel envisages, for these are abstractions and concepts, while the individual is concrete and mundane. In fact, thought itself, for Kierkegaard, removes individuals from themselves and destroys individuals’ peculiar existences. Since the individual acts on the impulse of sensuous emotions, reason provides only an inaccurate account of the self and reduces it to some common and general description. Kierkegaard writes that “in every man,” particularly Hegel, “there is something which to a certain degree prevents him from becoming perfectly transparent to himself...Your own [the rationalistic] tactic is to train yourself in the art of becoming enigmatic to everyone” (Kierkegaard 164).

Rather than moving with all ‘others’ through a series of dialectical stages, the Kierkegaardian individual exists as a personality. Again, the individual is not a compilation of externals, but a self-contained, autonomous being motivated only by internal passions and energy. The romantic individual can only be understood as separate from rather than integrated and associated with all other individuals. Based on this notion, Kierkegaard classifies all individuals as beings with the potential to exist aesthetically, ethically, or religiously, and it is from this particular emotional type that individuals freely create their own isolated existence.

The romantic consciousness is epitomized in the Kierkegaardian description of the aesthetic personality. The aesthetic individual is primarily a narcissist and a pre-rationalist who creates consciousness and self-existence through satisfaction and pleasure. Furthermore, the aesthetic individual lives in an immediate present, the ‘Here’ and ‘Now’, which always has the potential for an erotic satisfaction. Most essential to the aesthetic personality, as it is characteristic of romantic consciousness, is its lack of concern in distinguishing what is real. Aesthetic individuals by-pass a rational and thinking concern for that which they are presently enjoying, for happiness and satisfaction can neither be understood nor experienced rationally. The aesthetic, like the romantic, will not reduce enjoyment to some categorical and rational interpretation in which it becomes common and stupefacient. Aesthetic individuals “are very close to the truth and feel the eternal validity of their personality...even though they have refrained from giving voice to this perfectly abstract expression for the gladness of being themselves rather than anybody else” (Kierkegaard 218). In short, the romantic and aesthetic individuals make things real with passion, energy and internal responsiveness, rather than verifying reality through abstractions.

The aesthetic individual lives in a rotating cycle of seeking pleasure, not obtaining it and trying to compensate for this loss only by continuing a search for pleasure. The aesthetic lives in a world of unlinked personal events, creating no self-history or self-definition and without any continuity or unity of action. So while rationalism tries to discern the connectedness and purpose of one’s existence, the aesthetic individual lives in undifferentiated passion, a world void of principle and hesitance. Aesthetic individuals, Kierkegaard notes, fall into unhappy consciousness when they begin to recognize
the repetition of their unfulfilled yearnings for satisfaction. What is crucial, however, is that the romantic life is thrown into despair and unhappiness only if rational consciousness intervenes. There is, in short, no unhappy consciousness when there is no consciousness at all. The Nietzschian romanticism, which follows the Kierkegaardian philosophy chronologically and in spirit, claims a necessity to return to the naturalness and spontaneity of the aesthetic personality. The Nietzschian romanticism can be referred to, in this sense, as a philosophy against philosophy and a deconstructionalist philosophy in its condemnation of rational consciousness, philosophical seriousness, and all other culturally imposed ideologies. The individual, for Nietzsche, must be “carved” free from all the “layers” of abstractions and return to raw instinctiveness, the power of the will. Nietzsche claims, like Kierkegaard, that “all credibility, all good conscience, all evidence of truth comes only from the senses” (Nietzsche 88), while for Hegel “even an immediate intuition is held to have genuine value only when it is cognized as a fact along with its reasons” (Hegel 24).

Just as Kierkegaard maintains that an aesthetic individual is led into unhappiness by the interference of consciousness, Nietzsche similarly contends that humanity at large has fallen into a “herd” mentality, bound by reason and arbitrary morality, and is, therefore, necessarily leading itself toward a neurotic and painful castration. In other words, humanity is already too far removed in the abstraction of thought to once again ground itself in the powers of the mundane and natural. From a cowardice to face the complexities of existence, man stifles the individual with a series of controls, of ‘Thou Shallts’ and ‘Thou Shalt Nots’. Nietzsche complements Kierkegaard in asserting that rationalism and philosophy are, in actuality, a means of evading truth, for truth lies in the incomprehensible inner turmoil and ecstasy of the bodily individual. “The more abstract the truth is that you would teach,” Nietzsche writes, “the more you have to seduce the senses to it” (Nietzsche 24). Again, our original spontaneity and vitality are suspended and stupefied by the disease of reason.

The shift in emphasis from rationalism, the abstraction of thought, to romanticism, a passion for the immediate and concrete, should be regarded as a necessary transitional movement in philosophy. For philosophy itself to progress, even the Hegelian philosophy, the zenith of rationalism, had to create its own antithesis, the growth of romanticism. From this perspective, rationalism and romanticism must not be viewed as entirely incompatible with one another, but rather as mutually supplanting one another as unique and valuable explanations of our human condition. While rationalism unifies the “parts” of a system into a mechanical and orderly process, romanticism recognizes the spiritual and emotional levels of the individual, preaching subjectivity rather than cold objectivity. Regardless of their philosophical claims, both rationalism and romanticism want philosophy to be applicable and compatible with the human situation. But if we are unities, compilations of both reason and emotion, and if philosophy aims at understanding and being compatible with our total humanness, then rationalism and romanticism must also co-exist as complementary perspectives on our human condition.
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