

Hegel or Nietzsche? – The Concept of Truth in the Finnish Philosophical Discourse at the Turn of the 20th Century

Marja Jalava*

“The death of God”, the fact that the faith for Christian God had lost its credibility, was, according to the famous sentence of Friedrich Nietzsche, the greatest novel event, which had already started to cast its first shadow over Europe. “And what all must collapse together with this faith, for it has been built on it, has leaned on it, has been fastened to it: for example, our whole European morality”, said Nietzsche in his *Gay Science* (published in 1882, § 343). [translation by M.J.]

With this rather dramatic sentence, Nietzsche was pointing to the development which at that time had been going on in Europe for more than hundred years. In textbooks, it has been usually described with the in itself rather obscure term “secularization”.

To be sure, Nietzsche was not alone with this heavenly homicide he claimed to have taken place. According to Jürgen Habermas, G.W.F. Hegel was actually the first for whom modernity had become a problem. In his philosophy, Hegel proclaimed that there were no eternal truths. For him, even his own philosophy was nothing else than the thought of its age – although the best his age could do. In other words, his philosophy was conscious of its own historical, time-bounded nature.

At the same time, Hegel deeply felt that the modern age was something totally new and different than any previous period in the history of humankind. Thus, it could not borrow its legitimation from another epoch but had to create its normativity out of itself. From this point of view, we may generalize that both Hegel and Nietzsche were trying to find a new way of being directed in the world left without any absolute and eternal authority of knowledge.

In my paper, I focus on the debate between the supporters of Hegel and Nietzsche in Finland at the turn of the 20th century. The main arena for this debate was the Finnish cultural journal *Finsk*

* Marja Jalava is a researcher at the Department of History, University of Helsinki. marja.jalava@helsinki.fi

Tidskrift, but it also went on inside the narrow academic circle of The Philosophical Society of Finland. The loudest advocate of Nietzsche during this debate was Rolf Lagerborg (1874–1959), the young Master of Arts and the future professor of philosophy at Åbo Akademi, who is also the main character of my ongoing doctoral thesis.

The Hegelian system had become dominant at the Imperial Alexander University of Finland (the modern University of Helsinki) from the 1820s. It managed to achieve an extraordinary position in the Finnish intellectual world mostly because of its connection with the Finnish-nationalist movement, and the strong personal influence of Johan Vilhelm Snellman (1806–1881), honoured as "the national philosopher of Finland" by the succeeding generation.

The Finnish Hegelians were ready to admit that there were no eternal truths, if truth was considered as a statement, the content of which is valid always and everywhere. For them, the only eternal 'thing' was the movement of Spirit (Geist), understood as a continuous process of rational thinking, "the living Concept itself" (der lebendige Begriff selbst), as Snellman put it. In spite of this relativism, however, there were concrete historical communities or peoples which were seen as temporal embodiments of Spirit, Volksgeister. Thus, at the given moment within a certain community, the truth was to be found in its Sittlichkeit, or, in Swedish, sedlighet, a special Hegelian term, which referred to the moral obligations people had to an ongoing community of which they were part.

According to Hegelians, these obligations were based on established norms, uses, and a set of institutions and practices with which people could – and they had to – identify themselves. So, instead of the absolute truth, Hegelians like Thiodolf Rein (1838–1919), Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at the Imperial Alexander University of Finland, were offering an "objective truth", considered to be valid for every member of a given nation at the given moment.

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche landed in Finland at the beginning of 1890s. An important mediator was Georg Brandes (1842–1927), the well-known Danish intellectual, who at that time introduced the Nietzschean philosophy to whole Scandinavia under his concept of "aristocratic radicalism".

In Finland, the debate over Nietzsche started in April 1896, at the meeting of The Philosophical Society of Finland. According to the record kept by the Society, for example Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939), the best-known Finnish social anthropologist, showed some understanding towards Nietzsche. Westermarck said that Nietzsche's scorn for mediocrity and his sensibility to individual differences had to be understood in the context of modern democracy which, according to Westermarck, was trying to turn everyone alike. "We must enlighten the masses instead of letting them rule us", said Westermarck.

The first time Rolf Lagerborg was present at the meeting of The Philosophical Society of Finland was in November 1897. There he, according to the official records of the Philosophical Society, kept a lecture on Nietzsche presenting, as the record put it, "his Nietzschean opinions in somewhat rigorous form". The main thing in Lagerborg's speech was to oppose the utilitarian point of view and defend the aristocratic radicalism which, for Lagerborg, represented the highest level of morality open for those few "supermen" who were ready to sacrifice themselves to abstract aspirations and noble ideals, science and art. As Lagerborg crystallized it in one of his publications during the same year: "Let there be darkness in the deep ranks, if only the peaks are bathed in light".

We may understand this attitude as an expression of superiority felt by the representative of the traditionally privileged upper class, but behind it we may also sense a basic experience of aesthetic modernity: an attempt to present science in the context of art, to look at science in the perspective of the artist. For Lagerborg, Nietzsche was basically an artist and a poet, who had transformed philosophy into music, and even more than that, into "pure pleasure".

In the beginning of year 1901, the debate over Nietzsche spread from the narrow circles of The Philosophical Society of Finland to the pages of the leading Finnish cultural journal *Finsk Tidskrift*. The initiative was taken by Thiodolf Rein, who in his article "Friedrich Nietzsche – a prophet or a humbugger?" expressed his concern over Nietzsche's popularity in Finland. Rein acknowledged that Nietzsche was a man of genius, as the Finnish Nietzscheans such as Lagerborg claimed, but, he added, the mistakes made by such men were often the most dangerous ones to all mankind. In his exaggerating individualism, Nietzsche had abandoned the Western ideas of freedom, human rights and equality as well as the value of nationality and patriotism, said Rein.

The core problem of the Nietzschean way of thinking was, according to Rein, the inability to tell the difference between the absolute truth and an objective truth. Because of this error, Nietzsche and his followers were declaring all moral obligations to be pure human inventions without anything that could be called "higher" foundation. The Nietzschean "superman", who called all established norms and uses into question and made his own values for himself, was for Rein a dreadful pseudo-God, who was ready to crush others weaker than himself under his feet.

It seems clear that Rein felt deeply the same anxiety that Fjodor Dostojevski had crystallized by asking: "If God does not exist, doesn't that mean that everything is allowed?" From Rein's point of view, it was seemingly impossible to articulate the rights of an individual against his or her community or imagine a situation where the established norms and uses of a given community might have been harmful for most of its own members (for example, in a totalitarian state).

The Nietzschean defense was led by Rolf Lagerborg and Gerda von Mickwitz (1862–1948), the Finnish authoress and women's rights activist. For Lagerborg and Mickwitz, Nietzsche was the real defender of truth just because he did not pretend that there was One Truth, be it considered as "absolute" or "objective". As Nietzsche claimed, the truth was always a relative and subjective matter, at bottom only "my truth" – even if members of some religious group, metaphysical school or historical community imagined that just they were the only ones who had found it. Actually, these people were the real danger to humankind, since while claiming their truth to be objective, they were also demanding others to submit to it.

As an alternative to Rein's collective ethics, Lagerborg and Mickwitz were thus offering moral pluralism and the recognition of actual diversity of ethical outlooks. As Rolf Lagerborg put it, "the truth itself was an error that was extremely difficult to show untrue". Gerda von Mickwitz even argued in the best premature post-modern style that "everybody had her or his own truth that others had to respect". In their enthusiastic praise of individuality and individual rights, they did not pay any serious attention to Rein's anxiety about the disappearance of common moral standards in the modern Western societies.

On a general level, the both lines of thought – the Hegelian and Nietzschean – can be seen as different attempts to answer the same question, which we may even call as the key problem of the modern man: How can we justify our conception of human being, our outlook on the world, and our

ethical commitments, if we consider ourselves as independent actors released from God and all other constitutive goods external to man? For once we recognize the pervasive temporality of our own being, it is hard to deny the relativity of our ethical views and other ideas. In the face of rapid globalisation and the growing need for global ethics, this issue is today probably even more urgent than it was a hundred years ago.

It is not my task here – nor in my doctoral thesis – to solve this problem which, we may dare to say, is built in to the whole Western way of thinking. More modestly, I would just like to point out the problems with which people have ended up, if they place one particular good over others and submit other valuable things as mere instruments for reaching this one supreme value, be it “the common advantage”, “the individual freedom”, or “the financial profit”. I would also like to point out that the idea of ethical relativism or pluralism is not a late “post-modern” invention but an inherited part of our culture, the roots of which penetrate at the very foundation of our entire being as modern Western individuals.