

Hospital Birth vs. Home Birth

On August 27, 1770 philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was delivered by the hands of a skilled midwife at his family's home in Stuttgart, Germany. The practice of giving birth in late 18th-century Germany was still done at home and midwives were not medically trained, but highly competent in their field through learned experience and with herbs(1). Other influential German figures of the time were also born at home, such as composer Beethoven in December 1770 at his family's home in Belgium and the poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe at home in the Free Imperial City of Frankfurt, Holy Roman Empire in 1724. So why is the dominant mode of thought in modern society to give birth in the hospital? When I think of the conflicting ideas between hospital birth vs. home birth, I imagine it as a microcosm, perhaps even an offspring of the conflicting ideas during Hegel's time between the Enlightenment and Romantic movements. The Enlightenment era was defined by advancements in the emergence of science, where logic and rationality were used to comprehend the world. The late 18th century marked the height of the logical, Enlightenment way of thinking coming into conflict with Romantic thought, which was defined by its emphasis on emotions and primal instincts as a way to understand reality coming into conflict with Enlightenment thinkers because of their belief in the possibility of deeper forces being behind human nature, which logic and rationality come up short to explain. Hegel found himself on the cusp of these cultural movements and developed a new philosophy, embodying these two ideas.

According to Hegel, the universe is rational while at the same time, it is also driven by primal forces that manifest according to logic. In response to a preceding philosopher of the time, Immanuel Kant and his claim of phenomenal and noumenal worlds, where subjective and objective reality are split, Hegel proposes that subjective and objective reality are not split and

exist within each other as one all encompassing universe containing both objective and subjective realities. In order to comprehend this logical process of the universe, Hegel develops *The Phenomenology of Geist*, where geist is the all encompassing universe. Geist is a rather ambiguous term and translated from German it means ghost or spirit and in regards to Hegel's philosophy, geist is the universe in itself, therefore geist can be considered to be God. This contrasts with Kant's claim that an objective reality exists and is something we can never understand because it will always remain outside of ourselves, he calls this objective reality, *the thing in itself*. Hegel rejects this idea of the universe being *a thing in itself*, because he believed that all philosophers prior to him conceptualized the world through picture thinking. According to Hegel, picture thinking prevents us from understanding reality for how it actually is, because when engaged in picture thinking, we are merely "visualizing rationality as something like a stable and well-defined entity that exists within the universe"**(2)** (Marmysz, 244). Hegel claims that engaging in picture thinking oversimplifies reality and that the universe cannot be a thing, but is more similar to a mind. The only way to fully understand geist is by conceptual thinking, where geist is pure thought, rather than a visual interpretation of an idea, such as in picture thinking. Therefore, this process of conceptual thinking is what geist does through us humans and our worldly existence, therefore, we are part of geist. This process of geist conceptually thinking to understand itself can lead to absolute knowing, according to Hegel. In this sense, Hegel's dialectic is somewhat similar to Socrates dialectic, where Socrates suggests that we already know everything, yet in the process of being born we have forgotten it and philosophizing is the process of returning to remembering our true selves which in turn, can result in absolute knowing.

Since the universe is like a mind, Hegel proposes that its process towards absolute knowing unfolds in an organized, logical way, much like a mind would when it's working something out. According to Hegel, this logical process of conceptualizing happens in a triadic method made up of three stages which eventually loop into a new stage where the triadic method repeats itself but with a new idea, much like the DNA replication during the process of protein synthesis where a new DNA strand is replicated, then goes off and continues to replicate itself from the copy. However, Hegel's dialectic is a synthetic process, rather than a replicated one. The first stage in this logic is the abstract side, followed by the dialectical side, then resulting in the third logical stage of the speculative side. The abstract side of the logical process begins with an idea or a starting point. This first idea unfolds to encounter the second stage, the dialectical side, which is another idea that is seemingly contradictory and negates the abstract side of this logic. Here these two ideas conflict with one another and unfold together into the third stage of this logical process, the speculative side. Here is where these two competing ideas synthesize through the process of sublation, meaning the held contradictions are dissected and found at their core to actually hold a bond of unity within their collective strive for truth. Ideally, it is during the speculative side where these two ideas synthesize into a new, greater level of unity that carries some of both parts of the two conflicting ideas. According to Hegel, this unfolding process, synthesizing into a greater unity is a pattern that can be used to comprehend and understand the history of the world and that geist is the all encompassing force driving this process.

Part of Hegel's philosophy was the result of working to synthesize the Enlightenment and Romantic movements into a greater unity where parts of both ideas of the movements are held in society. Hegel believed that the world is rational, in addition to being driven by deep forces that

unfold according to logic. This makes me think of the debates on the modern birthing practices, where the romantic idea of giving birth at home comes into conflict with the rational idea of giving birth in a hospital. During the last two and a half centuries, the ancient, primal process of giving birth has come into conflict with the modern advancements of medicine and technology, which has become the dominant way of carrying out the birthing process in modern societies today. According to Julienne Rutherford, Ph.D, “For humans, birth physiology—the biological process of labor and birth—has not changed in tens of thousands of years, yet birth practice—the manner in which that biological process is managed and modified by healthcare practitioners—has changed dramatically in just the last few decades.”**(3)** Rutherford’s comment makes me wonder, how has this instinctual, primal, biological process that women have been doing for as long as human existence become the source of heated debate and stigma?

I don't have kids, so I can't speak on giving birth from direct experience, but I've done my own research and developed a stand on the matter and have engaged in discussions on hospital birth vs home birth with my sister, who has two kids. When my sister became pregnant, I asked her if she was considering a home birth. She was strongly opposed to the idea because of her concern for safety. My sister's idea that the practice of giving birth should be done in a hospital for the sake of safety can be considered the abstract side of Hegelian dialectic, sometimes referred to as the thesis. The abstract side of this logic is valid and the dominant mode of thought in modern society. We’ve been taught that when a woman goes into labor, she checks in at the hospital and carries out the birth there, no question about it. This logic makes sense, because the hospital provides the mother and baby with access to experts and modern medicine and technologies that can help them in case a challenge arises. But why the sudden switch from carrying out this practice at home for thousands of years to the hospital in modern times? There

can be many reasons to explain this and one idea I think of is that giving birth is just another process that has shifted to modern industrialization. Roughly over the last two centuries, modern society has industrialized many of the previously traditional, hands-on practices such as food and garment production. It's common for the modern individual to be removed from the process of growing and processing our food and growing and processing crops to make textiles to turn into clothes. I see this shift of removing ourselves from these processes reflective in the way we manage birth. However, it is important to acknowledge the benefits that modern advancements in medicine and technology have given us when it comes to the birthing practice. Despite Hegel surviving and thriving after his birth, this was not the norm. Europe in the 18th and 19th century experienced a high infant mortality rate due to malnourishment and care(4). We would not have our current modern society if it weren't for evolving the birthing process to what it is today, hence why the abstract side of this debate of hospital birth vs. home birth is so prevalent. Some may argue that having a home birth is reckless and is not worth putting the mother and baby's safety at risk. I also know of women who intended to have a home birth, but ended up having to carry out the birth at the hospital at the last minute. During Hegel's time, I imagine there would be strong rejection to giving birth outside the home. Hospitals at the time were for the extremely ill and injured, why would you want to leave the comfort of your home to give birth in a hospital? Also during Hegel's time there was already a stigma around male-midwives and physicians, for it was common for a male-midwife or physician to be called to a birth in the event of an emergency, often having to remove a stillborn fetus from the mother, therefor associating male-midwives and physicians with death(5). Fast forward to mid-20th century America, where the practice of postpartum maternity care entails separating newborn babies from their mothers in a nursery to be overlooked by a nurse. These nurseries are often built with

a window on one side for relatives to visit. According to a Smithsonian article by Hannah Fagen, “the ubiquitous nursery window served a primarily social function”(6) and became the socially acceptable norm which represented hope for the future. I see it as a symbol of the advancements in modern medicine and growth in population in human society, however it is an illusionary and superficial sense of hope because there is extensive research showing the importance of touch and skin to skin contact and the adverse effects isolation can have on a baby’s development.(7)

My pro-home birth ideology is the dialectical side, sometimes referred to as the antithesis. Home birth is the antithesis of hospital birth and negates the rational idea that birth should be done in a hospital. I can’t help but think of how part of the reason why the average person does not even consider home birth might be rooted in the religious belief, straight out of the bible from, “Leviticus 12, we read that a woman who has given birth to a child must be ritually purified lest her ‘uncleanliness’ contaminate other.”(8) (Eisler, 101-102) This is a disempowering belief that I think society has internalized over millennia and it has influenced us to develop a negative story about the natural process of birth. I see this belief morphing itself in modern media in feminine-hygeine product ads (even the term “feminine-hygeine” is rooted in this belief). It even shows up in a Saturday Night Live skit (albeit, a hilarious one) where a group of pregnant women and their partners are watching a video of a home birth. The attitudes portrayed through these characters reflect the existing social stigma on the matter, as seen in Tina Fey’s lines, “Did the devil make this movie? Does this play on a flatscreen in the lobby of hell?”(9) Although this is a satirical comedy, it still implies that a home birth is for unhygienic hippies in yurts and that a pregnant woman’s primal process of giving birth makes her behave oddly and is akin to devilry. This makes me think of Plato and how he criticized art and artists for their ability to imitate real life and have a powerful influence on the masses. If we are

programmed to think that a woman giving birth is dirty, it makes sense that the default mode of thinking would be to give birth in a sterile environment such as the hospital. I also recognize there is something idealized and romantic about the idea of giving birth in the comfort of your own home and that it may not be accessible to most of society due to lack of education on the matter and a lack of financial resources. However, I believe in the significance of setting for a baby entering the world and the importance of mother-baby bonding upon birth and the positive effect that touch, skin-to-skin contact and being held has on the development of an infant, which is the antithesis of the newborn care nurseries being put on display in hospitals.

Hegel's system sheds light on the structure of the unfolding of these two ideas of hospital birth vs. home birth. However, in true Hegelian fashion, at the core of these two seemingly contradictory ideas a commonality can be found. This commonality is the need for truth on how to execute the highest care for mother and baby. We see trickling in today as these two ideas sublimate to form a new idea of something greater than the sum of their parts. An example of this synthesis can be seen in BC's Women's Hospital in Vancouver where a new wing of single-patient NICU rooms have been developed(10). This provides a dramatic departure from industrial, factory-style window displays of newborns, isolated in a row of incubators. Keeping the mother and baby close, especially the most vulnerable ones needing NICU care, allows the mother her rightful opportunity to be with her newborn. This is a profound leap in modern postpartum care and NICU care and a logical solution to the issue of mother-baby separation. I truly believe we would not be here if it weren't for the advancements of modern medicine and I trust that geist will continue to progress for the highest good of humanity and I hope to see a continuation of synthesis on this topic, where mothers and babies are kept together in addition to having access to the benefits of modern medicine.

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