

G. W. F. HEGEL THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY  
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Hegel's focus here is on the "philosophy of world history" (3), that is, the "nature of history itself" (3). There are, he argues, "three methods of treating history" (3). There is "original history" (3) in which historians such as Thucydides and Herodotus "primarily described the actions, events and conditions which they had before their eyes and whose spirit they shared. They transferred what was externally present to the realm of mental representation" (3). There is "reflective" (5-6) history of which there are four sub-kinds; "universal history" (6) which surveys the "entire history of a people, a country, or the world" (6); "pragmatic" (7) history in which, in "dealing with the past and occupying ourselves with a remote world, there opens up for the mind an actuality which arises out of its own activity and as reward for its own labour" (7) such as "moral reflections and the moral enlightenment to be derived from history, for the sake of which history has often been written" (8); "critical history" (9) in which it is "not history which is presented" (9) but the "history of historiography: evaluation of historical narratives and examination of their truth and trustworthiness" (9); and "fragmentary" (9) history devoted to, "for example the history of art, of law, of religion" (9).

Last but not least, there is "philosophical history" (10). Where in history, "thinking is subordinate to the data of reality" (10), philosophy is supposed to produce "its own ideas out of speculation, without regard to given data" (10) and "not leave it as it is, but shape it in accordance with these ideas, and hence construct it, so to speak, a priori" (10). From this point of view, the "method of philosophy would be in contradiction to the function of history" (10). However, Hegel argues that the

sole thought which philosophy brings to the treatment of history is the simple concept of *Reason*: that Reason is the law of the world and that, therefore, in world history, things have come about rationally. . . . Through its speculative reflection philosophy has demonstrated that Reason – and this term may be accepted without closer examination of its relation to God – is both *substance and infinite power*, in itself the infinite material of all natural and spiritual life as well as the *infinite form*, the actualisation of itself as content. It is *substance*, that is to say, that by which and in which all reality has its being and subsistence. It is infinite *power*, for Reason is not so impotent as to bring about only the ideal the ought, and to remain in an existence outside of reality – who knows where – as something peculiar in the heads of a few people. It is the infinite *content* of all essence and truth, for it does not require, as does finite activity, the condition of external materials, of given data from which to draw nourishment and objects of its own activity: it supplies its own nourishment and is its own reference. And it is infinite *form*, for only in its image and by its fiat do phenomena arise and begin to live. It is its own exclusive presupposition and absolutely final purpose, and itself works out this purpose from potentiality into actuality, from inward source to outward appearance, not only in the natural but also in the spiritual universe, in world history. That this *Idea* or Reason is the True, the Eternal, the Absolute Power and that it and nothing but it, its glory and majesty, manifests itself in the world – this . . . has been proved in

philosophy and is being presupposed here as proved. (11)

Though Hegel claims to not want to personify Reason and turn the concept into the more familiar concept of God, he comes perilously close to doing so.

For Hegel, the question of the relation of reason to the world raises this question: "*What is the ultimate purpose of the world?*" (20). This question implies, he contends, that this "purpose is to be actualised and realised" (20) which leads to two considerations: the "content of this ultimate purpose, the determination as such, and, secondly, its realisation" (20), that is, the process by which it comes to fruition, the *form*, as it were. Turning his attention firstly to the *content* of this purpose, Hegel points out that "world history goes on within the realm of Spirit. The term 'world' includes both physical and psychical nature. Physical nature does play a part in world history. . . . But Spirit, and the course of its development, is the substance of history" (20). For this reason, "we must not contemplate nature as a rational system in itself, in its own particular domain, but only in its relation to spirit" (20). To understand the nature of Spirit, he argues, we need to consider its "direct opposite – Matter. The essence of matter is gravity, the essence of Spirit – its substance – is Freedom" (22). Speculative philosophy teaches us, he asserts, that "*all* the properties of Spirit exist only through Freedom. All are but means of attaining Freedom; all seek and produce this and this alone" (22). "Freedom is the sole truth of Spirit." (22). What exactly does he mean by the 'freedom of Spirit'? He claims:

Spirit . . . is that which has its centre in itself. It does not have unity outside of itself but has found it; it is in itself and with itself. Matter has its substance outside of itself; Spirit is Being-within-itself (self-contained existence)s. But this, precisely, is Freedom. For when I am dependent, I refer myself to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free when I am within myself. This self-contained existence of Spirit is self-consciousness, consciousness of self. (23)

Hegel explains that there are two things which "must be distinguished in consciousness, first, *that* I know and, secondly, *what* I know. In self-consciousness the two coincide, for Spirit knows itself. It is the judgment of its own nature and, at the same time, the operation of coming to itself, to produce itself, to make itself (actually) into that which it is in itself (potentially)" (23). From this point of view, "world history is the exhibition of spirit striving to attain knowledge of its own nature" (23). Just as the "germ bears in itself the whole nature of the tree, the taste and shape of its fruit, so also the first traces of Spirit virtually contain the whole of history" (23), he claims.

Hegel then proffers an account of the history of humankind designed to stress "various grades in the consciousness of freedom" (24) and argue ultimately that in his own Enlightenment Germany, Spirit has realised itself (become aware of its freedom) fully. The Orientals "do not realise that Spirit – Man as such – is free" (23). Rather, "consciousness of freedom first arose among the Greeks" (23) but "they. and the Romans likewise, only knew that some are free – not man as such" (23), hence, their retention of slaves. "Only the Germanic peoples came, through Christianity, to realise that man as man is free and that freedom of Spirit is the very essence of man's nature" (24). Only "we know that *all* men absolutely, that is, as men, are free" (24). This realisation first arose in religion but "slavery did not cease immediately with the acceptance of the Christian religion" (24) and liberty "suddenly predominate" (24). Rather to introduce freedom "in the secular world was a further task which could only be solved and fulfilled by a long and severe effort of civilisation" (24). The "application of the principle to secular conditions, the thorough molding and interpenetration of the secular world by it, is precisely the long process of history" (24). "World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom" (24).

“Spirit’s consciousness of its freedom, and thereby the actualisation of this freedom” (24) is the ultimate purpose of the world” (24) for the simple reason that the “spiritual world is the substance of reality, and the physical world remains subordinate to it” (24). This is how Hegel sums up his point:

Freedom is itself its own object of attainment and the sole purpose of Spirit. It is the ultimate purpose toward which all world history has continually aimed. . . . Freedom alone is the purpose which realises and fulfills itself, the only enduring pole in the change of events and conditions, the only truly efficient principle that pervades the whole. This final aim is God’s purpose with the world. But God is the absolutely perfect Being and can, therefore, will nothing but Himself, His own will. The nature of His own will, His own nature, is what we here call the Idea of Freedom [called elsewhere simply the Idea for short]. Thus we translate the language of religion into that of philosophy. (25)

Notwithstanding the idealism inherent in such claims, which would have been anathema to materialists like Marx, it ought to be clear that Hegel was at the same time, not least in his pronouncements on freedom, an inspiration to Marx who made it his aim to translate the language of idealism into that of materialism by ‘standing Hegel on his head.’

Hegel then turns his attention to the precise *means* and *form*, as opposed to the content, of the purpose of the world, that is, the precise process by which this purpose is realised. What, he asks, “are the means the Idea uses for its realisation?” (25). Briefly, the means which the Idea (Spirit, Reason, God) uses to realise itself, to know its own inherent nature (that of freedom) is the individual human being. The “material in which the final end of Reason is to be realised” (49) is the “subjective agent itself, human desires, subjectivity in general. In human knowledge and volition, as its material basis, the rational attains existence” (49). Through the actions on a microcosmic scale of humans as they confront the dialectic of freedom and necessity (the fact that our yearnings, our desire, inevitably come into conflict with the constraints necessarily imposed upon our volition), Spirit on a macrocosmic scale comes to know itself. (From this perspective, Spirit, in its universality, is the thesis, man in his particularity the antithesis through whom, given what Hegel says about the dialectic in The Science of Logic, Spirit comes to know himself.) The State, the political and legal system in which humans cohabit with one another, is the form which this realisation of freedom takes: “law, morality, the State, and they alone, are positive reality and satisfaction of freedom. The caprice of the individual is not freedom” (50). Rather, through the State, Reason is made to prevail in the “actual doings of men and their convictions” (50). Responding to Rousseau who argued that civilisation is a terrible thing and that man is free only in the natural environment, that is, once he has cast off the shackles of the social, Hegel contends that it is only in the law, those codes imposed by Reason on human conduct, that man paradoxically finds the freedom which is the destiny of the universe.

Having “learned the abstract characteristics of the nature of Spirit, the means which it uses to realise its Idea, and the form which its complete realisation assumes in external existence, namely, the State” (68), Hegel then turns his attention to mapping the course of world history and outlining the principle of its development. Historical change, he points out, “has long been understood generally as involving a progress toward the better, the more perfect” (68). “Change in nature, no matter how infinitely varied it is, shows only a cycle of constant repetition. In nature nothing new happens under the sun” (68). By contrast, only the “changes in the realm of the Spirit create the novel” (68). The essential characteristic of Spirit – the “desire towards *perfectibility*” (68) – differentiates it from Nature. The “principle of development implies further that it is based on an inner

principle, a presupposed potentiality, which brings itself into existence. This formal determination is essentially the Spirit whose scene, property and sphere of realisation is world history. It does not founder about in the external play of accidents" (68-69). Though they are similarities between the unfolding of Spirit and the development of natural organisms, there are also important differences. The latter "proceeds from an inner immutable principle, a simple essence, which first exists as a germ," (69) and thereby "makes itself actually into that which it is in itself (potentially)" (69). The "development of the organism proceeds in an immediate, direct (undialectic), unhindered manner. Nothing can interfere between . . . the inherent nature of the germ and the adaptation of its existence to this nature" (69). It is different with Spirit, however, because its "transition of its potentiality into actuality is mediated through the consciousness and will" (69) of individuals. Thus, Spirit "is at war with itself. It must overcome itself as its own enemy and formidable obstacle. Development, which in nature is a quiet unfolding, is in Spirit a hard, infinite struggle against itself. What Spirit wants is to attain its own concept. But it hides it from itself and is proud and full of enjoyment in this alienation from itself" (69).

World history, Hegel argues, "represents the phases in the development of the principle whose *content* is the consciousness of freedom. The analysis of its stages in general belongs to Logic. That of its particular, its concrete nature belongs to the Philosophy of Spirit" (70) (Hegel is alluding here to his Phenomenology of Spirit [1807]). The first stage consists in the "immersion of Spirit in natural life, the second its stepping out into the consciousness of its freedom. This first emancipation from nature is incomplete and partial. . . . The third stage is the rising out of this still particular form of freedom into pure universality of freedom, where the spiritual essence attains the consciousness and feeling of itself. These stages are the fundamental principles of the universal process" (70-71) and follow what he terms a "dialectic of transition" (71). It is the "urge, the impulse of spiritual life in itself, to break through the hull of nature, of sensuousness, of its own self-alienation, and to attain the light of consciousness, namely, its own self" (71). World history

represents the development of the Spirit's consciousness of freedom and the consequent realisation of that freedom. This development implies a gradual progress, a series of ever more concrete differentiations. . . . The logical and, even more, the dialectical nature of the concept in general, the necessity of its purely abstract self-development, is treated in Logic [his Science of Logic]. There it is shown that it determines itself, posits its own determinations and in turn abolishes them (transcending itself), and by this very process of abolition and transcending, gains an affirmative, ever richer and more concretely determined form. . . . [E]ach stage, being different from the other, has its definite, peculiar principle. Such a principle is in history the differentiation of Spirit; it is a particular national spirit. In this particular form a national spirit expresses concretely all the aspects of its will and consciousness, its whole reality. This principle defines the common features of its religion, its political constitution, its morality, its system of law, its mores, even its science, art and technical skill. These special particularities must be understood in the light of the universal particularity, the special principle of a people. Conversely, the universal may be detected in the historically present factual detail of the particulars. (78-79)

Arguing that world history is the "development of Spirit in *Time*, just as nature is the development of the Idea in *Space*" (87), Hegel contends that a glance at the history of humankind convinces one of only one thing: it offers a

tremendous picture of transformation and actions, an infinite of varied formations of peoples, states and individuals, in restless succession. Everything that can enter and interest the mind of man, every sentiment of goodness, beauty, greatness is called into play. . . . In all these events and accidents . . . Everywhere our interest takes sides for an against. At times we are attracted by beauty, freedom and richness, at others by energy, by which even vice knows how to make itself important. . . . This restless succession of individuals and peoples, who exist for a time and then disappear, presents to us a universal thought: that of *change* in general. (88)

From one angle, one can view change in a very negative light as ruination and decay. However, there is another more positive perspective: "Ruin is at the same time the emergence of a new life, . . . out of life arises death, but out of death, life" (88). Civilisations in all their various particularities come and go, but Spirit "devouring its worldly envelope, not only passes into another envelope, not only arises rejuvenated from the ashes of its embodiment, but it emerges from them exalted, transfigured, a purer spirit. . . . Its embodiment becomes material for its work to elevate itself to a new embodiment" (89). This is how, Hegel argues, we need to view Spirit: its transformations are not merely rejuvenating transitions, returns to the same form. They are elaborations upon itself, by which it multiplies the material for its endeavours. Thus it experiments in a multitude of dimensions and directions, developing itself, exercising itself, enjoying itself in inexhaustible abundance. . . . The abstract thought of mere change gives place to the thought of Spirit manifesting, developing, and differentiating its powers in all the directions of its plenitude. What powers it possess in itself we understand by the multiplicity of its products and formations. (89)

In this way, Hegel argues, we realise that the "very essence of spirit is *action*. It makes itself what it essentially is; it is its own product, its own work. Thus it becomes object of itself, thus it is presented to itself as an external existence" (89).

This is also true of the spirit of a people: it is a definite spirit which builds itself up to an objective world. This world, then, stands and continues in its religion, its cult, its customs, its constitution and political laws, the whole scope of its institutions, its events and deeds. This is its work: this *one* people! People are what their deeds are. Every Englishman will say, we are the ones who navigate the ocean and dominate world commerce, who owns East India and its wealth, who have a parliament, juries, and so on. The function of the individual is to appropriate to himself this substantial being, make it part of his character and capacity, and thus to become something in the world. For he finds the existence of the people as a ready-made, stable world, into which he must fit himself. . . . The people is moral, virtuous, strong when it brings forth what it wills. It defends its product against outside powers through the work of its objectification. The tension between (its potentiality and its actuality) what it is in itself, subjectively, in its inner purpose and essence, and what it really is (objectively), is abolished. It is with itself (actualised), it has itself objectively before itself. (89-90)

The "highest point of a people's development is the rational consciousness of its life and conditions, the scientific understanding of its laws, its system of justice, its morality. For in this unity (of subjective and objective), lies the most intimate unity in which Spirit can be with itself. The purpose of its work is to have itself as object" (92). It was, for

example, in "Sophocles and Aristophanes, in Thucydides and Plato" (92) that the Greek spirit grasped itself in thought and representation. This is its deeper satisfaction (its consummation)" (92).

Hegel concludes that just as an "individual as unity traverses various stages and remains the same individual" (94), so too does a people "up to the stage which is the universal stage of its spirit. In this consists the inner, the conceptual necessity of its change. Here we have the essence, the very soul of the philosophical understanding of history. . . . Spirit is essentially the result of its own activity. Its activity is transcending the immediately given, negating it, and returning to itself" (94), much like the "seed of a plant, which is both beginning and result of the plant's whole life" (94). For the "life of a people brings a fruit to maturity, for its activity aims at actualising its principle" (94). The "principles of the national spirits progressing through a necessary succession of stages are only moments of the one universal Spirit which through them elevates and completes itself into a self-comprehending *totality*" (95). The "present stage of Spirit contains all previous stages within itself. These, to be sure, have unfolded themselves successively and separately, but Spirit is still what it has in itself always been. The differentiation of its stages is but the development of what it is in itself. The life of the ever-present Spirit is a cycle of stages. . . . The moments which Spirit seems to have left behind, it still possesses in the depth of its present" (95).