Contemporary Philosophy

Hegel and History

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One salient characteristic of our (post)modern era seems to be an acute awareness of history. The emergence of historical consciousness has forced upon us an awareness of plurality and ambiguity in the world. Among the concomitant results have been flights into relativism and fundamentalist reactions. If this is an accurate sketch of certain aspects of our contemporary situation, then a basic question might be: What *is* history? In other words, if historical consciousness shapes our current culture, then the question of what it *means* to be historically conscious should be fundamental to understanding ourselves. Yet this question may be as basic and as ignored as Heidegger's question about Being. Just as Heidegger thought that human beings constantly invoke the concept of Being without ever really questioning it, so we often invoke the idea of history (or historicity) without examining what we mean by it. What is the *meaning* of history? Or, to put it in more Heideggerian terms, what does it mean to *be* a historical being?

These questions broach a wide field of investigation, but I propose to narrow our field of vision by concentrating on Hegel's philosophy of history as he presents it in the introduction to his lectures on the philosophy of history. This will allow us to see how one thinker attempted to deal with this complex of problems. Furthermore, I will focus on the question of what it means to *be* historically. In order to answer this question, however, we must start with Hegel's understanding of history and its ultimate meaningfulness. Once I have delineated Hegel's system, I will argue it is clear that for him individual human beings are simply determinate realizations of Spirit. Hence, for Hegel, being historical means appropriating the substance of Spirit at its particular stage of development, and humans are bounded by their position within the dialectical process of history.

History for Hegel is the rational, progressive development of truth in time. That is, history is ruled by reason, it is a progression from one level to the next (though not necessarily in a linear, straightforward manner), and its end is the realization of the union of the universal and the subjective, which is truth. Each of these elements, especially the last one, requires explanation.

The central proposition of Hegel's philosophy of history is "that Reason rules the world, and that world history has therefore been rational in its course." This idea is no more than a conclusion of Hegel's speculative philosophy, which he has imported into his consideration of history. It is also at least implicit in his definition of philosophy of history as "nothing other than the thoughtful consideration of history–[that is, the application of philosophic thought to history]" (10). In this respect, Hegel epitomizes the type of philosophy of history "the main tenet of which is an *a priori* theory, in the sense that the theory is brought ready-made to the study of history." Hegel also insists that one could come to this conclusion about the rational nature of the historical process equally well through empirical investigation: "Thus it is the consideration of world history itself that must reveal its rational process" (13). Whether one believes this assertion or not, the important point for understanding Hegel is that everything in

the course of world history is a result of the dictates of reason. Nothing occurs that does not in some way contribute to the realization of its grand design.

Put another way, the basic structure of reality itself is rational, thus the task of the philosopher of history is to understand how reason underlies what on the surface is so chaotic and irrational. Hegel does acknowledge that on first inspection history comprises a series of catastrophic events, hence the claim that history has an ultimate goal and meaning appears absurd. “But as we contemplate history as this slaughter-bench,” he argues, “the question necessarily comes to mind: What was the ultimate goal for which these monstrous sacrifices were made?” This question leads Hegel back to his original starting point, i.e. the ultimate rationality of reality. From this point of view, the vicissitudes of history are “the *means* for what we claim is the substantial definition, the absolute end-goal, or, equally, the true *result* of world history” (24). For Hegel, then, the rise and fall of states, the flowering and decay of civilizations and cultures, the lives and deaths of individuals all serve as means to an end–which, we shall see, transcends and subsumes them.

Hegel makes no claim for the originality of his idea that reason rules the world, but he does develop it in a distinctive direction. He points out that the Pre-Socratics already entertained the idea, specifically in Anaxagoras’s belief that *nous* governs nature. Furthermore, the Christian idea that God, in the form of providence, rules the world “corresponds to the stated principle: for divine providence is wisdom with infinite power, realizing its own ends, i.e. the absolute, rational end-goal of the world, while Reason is Thought, quite freely determining itself” (15-16). Rather than authoring the idea, Hegel provides a fuller elaboration and more concrete determination of it. Neither Anaxagoras nor Christian theology followed their ideas to their logical conclusions. Instead of explaining nature in terms of *nous*, Anaxagoras fell back on the four elements, while Christian belief in providence asserted the existence of God’s plan, but also put it beyond the reach of human understanding. In contrast, Hegel argues that “we must seriously try to recognize the ways of providence, and to connect its means and manifestations in history–relating these to that universal principle [i.e. God]” (16). In short, we must endeavor to know God as God has manifested Godself in and through the course of human history. “To that extent,” Hegel admits, his philosophy of history is “a theodicy, a justification of the ways of God” (18). Whereas previous attempts to develop a philosophical theodicy aimed at reconciling humans to the existence of evil, Hegel seeks to show that evil is not really evil at all. In fact, the “insight to which philosophy ought to lead . . . is that the real world is as it ought to be . . . God governs the world: the content of His governance, the fulfillment of His plan, is world history” (39). At first glance, this conclusion is simply a consequence of Hegel’s belief that what is real is rational, and what is rational is real.

On further inspection, however, Hegel’s form of theodicy is distinctive because it goes beyond the usual attempt to justify God’s ways by an appeal to God’s inscrutable wisdom. In such theodicies, God’s justice will become clear at the *eschaton*, that is, at the end of time. In other words, there is a final judgement outside of history. For Hegel, because of his dynamic conception of Spirit, there is nothing beyond time, hence God’s judgement must occur within history itself. This is the point of his infamous dictum that world history is the world’s court of judgement (*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*). As one commentator points out, in such a view

"it may appear that all that occurs is justified by the very fact that it occurs." Or more simply, might makes right.

At this point, a digression is in order. If Hegel's philosophy of history is a theodicy, then what relationship does it bear to the Christian view of history? Is Hegel simply transposing Christian theology of history into idealist philosophical terms? There seem to be three ways of answering this question. The first is to deny that Hegel's approach to history is a theodicy or a philosophical theology of history at all. This is the argument of R.G. Collingwood, who believes it is "clear that what Hegel wanted to do was to get away from this view." Given the passages from Hegel cited earlier, this seems a rather ridiculous position. Especially when we consider that Collingwood's argument for it is that the "reason whose plans are executed in history is . . . human reason, the reason of finite persons." As should be clear by now, "Reason" in Hegel's terminology most certainly does not refer to human reason, and we shall see below that it also does not apply to anything finite.

A second approach to answering this question is to say that Hegel develops what lies dormant in the Christian tradition. Karl Löwith points out that the very fact that Hegel feels the question regarding the ultimate meaning of all the sacrifices of history is necessary betrays his debt to the Christian tradition, which "is not satisfied with the pagan acceptance of fate." Rather than view the events of history as an endless, repetitive cycle, Christians (and Hebrews before them) saw history proceeding to a final judgement. Furthermore, prophets often saw the judgment of God in certain historical events around them, such as the Babylonian Exile. As Löwith argues, the idea that world history is the world's own judgment is "religious in its original motivation," but he himself points out that it is "irreligious in its secular application." Seeing God's judgement in particular historical events was certainly part of the prophet's calling, but transposing that judgement into the historical process itself goes beyond traditional Christian belief.

This brings us to our final answer: Hegel may start from a Christian base, but his metaphysical presuppositions push him to a conclusion beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. This is Frederick Copleston's view. Hegel begins with the idea of divine providence, but once he adopts a pantheistic view of God, that is, that God is immanent in human history, the only conclusion left is that all events are justified. Not only that, they become necessary. As Copleston trenchantly comments, in Hegel's teleological view of history, "what Stalin accomplished *had* to be accomplished, and . . . the Russian dictator . . . was an instrument in the hands of the World-Spirit." This position, however, is absurd from a Christian point of view because it makes questions of personal morality irrelevant. Hegel's metaphysical commitments push him to a conclusion that no Christian theologian would feel compelled to make. In the end, we can say that Hegel certainly aims at replacing the traditional Christian view of history, but he does so with a doctrine that is ultimately heterodox. One result of this doctrine is, as we shall see below, that Hegel completely abandons the traditional Christian valuation of the individual person.

As I said above, Hegel defines history as the rational, progressive development of truth in time. This development is determined not just by reason, but also by the nature of Spirit. For reason rules history, but "it is Spirit, and the process of its development, that is the substance of history" (19). Put simply, Spirit is freedom. For

Hegel, this means that Spirit is "autonomous and self-sufficient, a Being-by-itself (*Bei-sich-selbst-sein*)," and "this self-sufficient being is self-consciousness, the consciousness of self" (20). This, however, is merely an abstract definition of the nature of Spirit. Until Spirit actualizes itself in particular, concrete determinations, it is merely potential, a possibility. Such an ideal state would not be fully Spirit, for Spirit's self-consciousness means that it "knows itself: it is the judging of its own nature, and at the same time it is the activity of coming to itself, of producing itself, making itself actually what it is in itself potentially" (21). In other words, Spirit is dynamic, not static. It must act in order to realize itself, and only then, in the form of a concrete determination, can it come to know itself. The essence of Spirit, though, is freedom; therefore Spirit's self-consciousness is nothing other than consciousness of its own freedom. The dialectical process of Spirit coming to full self-awareness of its own freedom is history. Hence, Hegel concludes that "world history . . . is the exhibition of the Spirit, the working out of the explicit knowledge of what it is potentially." Since freedom must actualize itself to become aware of itself, this means that freedom must become a reality in the world, and this "application of the principle of freedom to worldly reality–the dissemination of this principle so that it permeates the worldly situation–this is the long process that makes up history itself" (21). In short, world history is the "the progress in the consciousness of freedom–a progress that we must come to know in its necessity." History, then, is the ineluctable spread of freedom across the globe. At the end of this triumphant march lies the "final goal of the world, . . . Spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom" (22).

To this end, the realization of freedom, reason makes use of the passions, self-interests, and desires of individual human beings. The "imponderable mass of wills, interests, and activities–these are the tools and means of the World Spirit for achieving its goal, to elevate it to consciousness and to actualize it" (28). The historical process, according to Hegel, receives it impetus especially from those great men, the "world-historical individuals," who act upon their own particular motives, yet "whose own particular aims contain the substantial will that is the will of the World Spirit" (32). These heroes are not aware of the Spirit using them at all, nor are they able to foresee the consequences of their actions. Rather, the unintended results of what they do fuel the actualization of the idea of freedom in history. They are part of something more universal than their immediate interests are. As Hegel puts it, the "outcome of human actions is something other than what the agents aim at and actually achieve, something other than what they immediately know and will . . . [and] something further is thereby brought into being" (30). This is the infamous "*Cunning of Reason*," the ability of reason to use the particular to achieve the universal, and to use the passions to promote the advancement of reason (35). The ultimate end of this process is the state, in which the passions of the individual actor coincide with the universal dictates of the laws, and the union of the universal with the subjective is complete.

What is the place of the individual human being in this grand scheme of history? On the one hand, certain individuals, the "world-historical" ones, play a crucial role in the way Hegel conceives the dynamics of history. On the other hand, however, and this is the predominant strain in Hegel's thought, individuals are irrelevant–except in so far as they embody Spirit, especially their national Spirit (*Volksgeist*). The latter are the important individual units of world history, as far as Hegel is concerned. From his

perspective, world history could "leave individuals entirely out of view and unmentioned. What world history has to record, rather, are the actions of the Spirit of the peoples [*Volksgeist*]" (71). One presumes, of course, that Hegel would make an exception for certain outstanding world-historical figures, such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar–whom he happens to mention himself (32, 34). In this regard, we should note that Hegel first refers to men such as Alexander and Caesar as the "historical men . . . whose aims embody a universal concept" (32). The implication is that even these "great men" would not be historical, that is, would have no real being, if their particular interests and passions had not coincided with the purposes of reason. By extension, we might say that is true of all human beings: In so far as they have any being or reality, it is to the extent that they participate in the dialectic of Spirit.

At this point, we can begin to see the implications of Hegel's doctrine that particular interests and passions are the means and the material for the actualization of the universal. Individual humans have being, only in so far as they participate in and are realizations of the universal. Put another way, my personal existence is an instantiation of some greater universal principle, which is trying to come to full awareness of itself. Hence, Hegel can say that the "particular interest linked to passion is thus inseparable from the actualization of the universal principle; for the universal is the outcome of the particular and determinate, and from its *negation*" (35, emphasis added). We cannot view individuals as anything more–or less–than concrete determinations of the universal. Furthermore, the universal is the "really real," therefore its needs trump all other claims. In other words, despite the fact that Hegel speaks of the union of the universal and particular, he clearly gives the universal unconditional precedence.

Everything else is subordinated in relation to this universal and substantial Reason, in and for itself; it serves that Reason as its *means*. Moreover, this Reason is immanent in historical existence, and fulfills itself in and through it. . . . Compared to the universal, the particular is for the most part too slight in importance: *individuals are surrendered and sacrificed*. The Idea [of freedom!] pays the ransom of existence and transience–not out of its own pocket, but with the passions of individuals. . . . The claim of the World Spirit supersedes all particular claims (28, 35, 40, emphasis added).

I should add that "particular" here could refer either to individual persons or to individual national Spirits. The larger point is that, for Hegel, the universal uses the particular to achieve a concrete determination, but then must overcome this determination in the dialectical process in which its essence works itself out. In this process, the particular is merely a means, the material for Spirit's self-expression. From the speculative heights on which Hegel perches, his own individual existence has little import unless it is part of Spirit's own process of overcoming itself.

Finally, what does it mean to be an historical individual in a Hegelian world? In essence, human beings are historically conditioned, that is they are limited by their position within the stages of Spirit's development. More precisely, they are limited by the stage of their particular national Spirit's development. To "the Spirit of one people . . . belong the individual citizens: each individual is the child of his [or her] people, and likewise the child of his [or her] time . . . No one is left behind by his [or her] time, nor can he [or she] overstep it. This spiritual entity is his [or her] very own, and

he [or she] is its representative. It is that context in which he [or she] stands, and from which he [or she] goes forth" (55). In Heideggerian terms, we might say, the national Spirit is the "world" into which we are "thrown." Once thrown into our particular situation, one could say that Hegel gives us two choices: to be or not to be. Since, in Hegelian terms, to be is always in one way or another to be rational, that is, to participate in reason, this means to appropriate the world in which we find ourselves as our own. Thus, Hegel says that the "relation of the individual to the Spirit of a people is such that he [or she] appropriates to himself [or herself] this substantive being, so that it becomes his [or her] character and capability, enabling him [or her] to be *something* in the world. The individual discovers the being of his [or her] people as a firm world, already there, into which he [or she] must incorporate himself [or herself]" (77). Those who do not engage in such appropriation do not exist; that is, they have no substantive being. Or, again to put it in Heideggerian terms, such an existence would be inauthentic.

In conclusion, Hegel's philosophy of history resolves the age-old problem of the relation between the universal and the particular by emphasizing the ultimate reality of the former. From a historical point of view, however, this is an inadequate solution. The historian is nothing, if not interested in particular people and events. Hegel certainly evinces such an interest, but his constant tendency is to downplay the integrity of such factors in favor of their role as means in the dialectic of Spirit. In addition, the historian usually stresses the contingency of persons and events. Hegel is certainly aware of the former, as his depiction of the individual's situation indicates, but the implication of his teleology is that every event had to occur just as it did. Freedom drops out in favor of necessity; or better, Hegel redefines freedom as the acceptance of necessity. What is particularly missing in Hegel is any sense that things could have turned out any other way. Everything is as it should be; hence there is no reason to grieve, no real tragedy. There is also no reason to hope. With no judgement at the end of time, each of us is left to live out whatever existence the exigencies of Spirit have allotted us. And that is it. Hegel apparently felt nothing missing in this view, but I think few of us today will share his sanguinity.

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Frederick Charles Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 6, *Modern Philosophy: From the French Enlightenment to Kant* (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1994), 424.

This seems the sense of Hegel's comment that to one "who looks at the world rationally, the world looks rational in return. The relation is mutual" (14).

Frederick Charles Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, Vol.7, *Modern Philosophy: From the Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche* (New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1994), 223.

R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 117.

Ibid.

Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 53.

Ibid., 58.

Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 7, 223.

Ibid., 224-25.

Hegel’s notion of the state encompasses more than just government. He seems to be trying to designate a level of cultural development, at which a people has developed certain forms of self-consciousness, such as religion, art, and philosophy (cf. 40-42, 48-48, 52-53).

“Thus Reason is the *substance* [of our historic world] in the sense that it is that whereby all reality has its being and subsistence” (12).