

The Spirit's Historical Consciousness in Hegel A Few Considerations*

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NOT ONLY because of the notoriously difficult style of his texts, but because his fundamental ideas are exhaustively put to their work as to reveal their inner substance, is the reason for which Hegel's work is often cited as an obscure or absconded narrative. Usually, the next step for the common reader is to dismiss it without appeal as nonsense or to interpret it in various ways¹ which make nothing but to contribute even worse to a greater distortion of its real meaning and significance. That is the case with famous interpreters or readers who do not give justice to the Hegelian text, sometimes not having even the good intention to judge it without prejudice.²

However, let us proceed into the Hegelian text of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* in such a way as to give Hegel the occasion to express his own words and concepts as he has originally intended:

*The first thing I wish to say about the provisional concept of philosophy of world history is this. As I have already remarked, the main objection brought against philosophy is that it approaches history, and reflects on it, with thoughts and conceptions (Gedanken). However, the sole conception that it brings with it is the simple conception of reason—the conception that reason governs the world, and that therefore world history is a rational process. From the point of view of history as such, this conviction and insight is a **pre-supposition**. Within philosophy itself this is no presupposition: by means of speculative cognition it is **proved** that reason—and we can adopt this expression for the moment without discussing more precisely its connection and relationship to God—is **substance***

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and infinite power. [It is] itself the infinite material of all natural and spiritual life and the infinite form that activates this its content (sic!). [It is] the substance whereby and wherein all actuality has its being and subsistence. [It is] infinite power, for reason is not so impotent as to yield only an ideal or a moral ought, and only outside the bonds of actuality, or who knows where—perhaps merely as something particular that exists in the heads of a few individuals. [It is] the infinite content, all essentiality and truth, itself constituting the material on which it operates by its own activity. Unlike finite action, it does not require the limiting factors of external materials or a given medium from which to derive its sustenance and the objects of its activity. It feeds upon itself; it is itself the material that it labors on. Just as it is itself its own presupposition, its own end, the absolute final end, so it is itself the activation and the bringing forth, out of inwardness into appearance, into world history, not only of the natural universe, but also of the spiritual realm.³

At first glance, this fragment only emphasizes the impression that, by pretending to underlie certain presuppositions, and especially that of a certain reason that would maintain itself as a substrate of the world history—where reason is understood here as being the equivalent of soundness and logical coherence—, Hegel deceitfully and presumptuously transforms the mere factuality of world's history events into an arena of euphony and deliberate rational arrangement. Thus, we would hastily arrive at a vision of history that would be such a distortion that not only this presupposition would constitute an obvious circular argument, a *petitio principii* where that which is required to be demonstrated is already proclaimed as found supposed, but the sheer consequences would be that we would have the image of a history devoid of meanness and evil; whereas the world is instead fully depictable in terms of a “slaughter-house” where centuries upon centuries of wars, conflicts, killings etc. would be obliterated by such preposterous utopia.

But, if we want to have a serious approach on what Hegel is intending to underline, we should observe more closely the matter that Hegel is naming here with such surprisingly eminent properties: the **reason** itself.

Indeed, for the philosophically educated person it becomes obvious very quickly that what the author of the *Lectures...* means by **reason** is no less than what makes the object of the very well known **principle of identity**. In fact, when Hegel is saying that reason presupposes itself, he is deliberately referring to an entire tradition of thinking where the principle of identity has been all the time the fundamental referent for everything that there is.

One of the most concise philosophical authors that have come to express a coherent idea on the matter of the principle of identity is Spinoza in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. Here he chiefly discusses which are the most suitable methods for knowledge, more precisely, for certain knowledge. The following paragraphs provide answers to this inquiry:

. . . to find the best method of seeking the truth, there is no need of another method for seeking the method of seeking the truth and there is no need of a third method to seek the second method, and so on to infinity. For in that way we should never arrive at knowledge of the truth, or indeed at any knowledge.

...

Hence it is evident that certainty is nothing than the objective essence itself; that is to say, the way in which we become aware of the formal essence is certainty itself. And from this again it is evident that for the certainty of truth no other sign is needed but to have a true idea. For, as we have shown, in order to know, there is no need for me to know that I know. From this, again, it is clear that no one can know what the highest certainty is unless he has an adequate idea or the objective essence of some thing.

...

Again, method must necessarily be discourse about reasoning and intellection. That is, method is not reasoning itself which leads to the understanding of the causes of things, and far less is it the understanding of the causes of things. It is the understanding of what is a true idea, distinguishing it from other kinds of perception and examining its nature, so that we may thereby come to know our power of understanding and may so train the mind that it will understand according to that standard all that needs to be understood, laying down definite rules as aids, and also ensuring that the mind does not waste its energy in useless pursuits.⁴

All this being said, it is already quite clear what it means that reason presupposes itself: in order to know what the criteria of truth would be, we already possess that criteria by the mere question of what it is because by that question we already suppose that we must differentiate between something that conforms to some criteria, and something that does not. Therefore, we already have the idea of truth within our pure need for criteria: the idea of truth comes out by the very need to ascertain a sentence or a fact by its comparison towards something priorly established. But, even if we are not to accept anything priorly established, we would already presuppose the criteria that we must not presuppose anything as priorly established as something priorly established. That is what designates that we must have criteria at every level of our position and for every position that we might adopt, and that criteria always posits itself within the realm of truth. Therefore, we appeal again to the truth itself. Moreover, if we would be to say that there is no fundamental truth against which we would be held to ascertain our sentences about facts—historical facts, in this case—, than we already make use of the idea of fundamental and irreducible truth by establishing that very lack of. . . truth.

Thus, the idea of truth reveals itself, by that, as a concordance or, better said, as an identity between the inquired fact or sentence and its criteria or touchstone.

History, therefore, cannot escape the problem of truth or of identity because the very nature of the enquiry already supposes the criteria of truth or the principle

of identity: the historian already has as scope the need to discern between fact and hearsay, between real tradition and mythology, between real course of history and propaganda or ideological tenets. Therefore, history aspires to the consistence of science and already makes an appeal to the fundamental principle of identity by the simple choice of researching facts and studying factual realities and possibilities.

The conclusion that shortly follows all these considerations is that there is no piece of history that would be deprived of reason, as far as reason is understood as the fundamental and irreducible reference of all that there is.

And that is Hegel's position about the matter, as he expresses it explicitly in the text that has already been cited above:

*... reason governs the world, and that therefore world history is a rational process. From the point of view of history as such, this conviction and insight is a **presupposition**. Within philosophy itself this is no presupposition: by means of speculative cognition it is **proved that reason**—and we can adopt this expression for the moment without discussing more precisely its connection and relationship to God—is **substance and infinite power**.⁵*

Of course, there would be many who would ask if what we have discussed above is not merely the evidence that in history we are to follow these precepts as methodological steps. And that, in reality, we never come to fully know the mere truth about a fact or about the inner intentions of a historical character or about the real conditions of a certain community or society. Therefore, we may not know every time or maybe never what lies behind the millennial historical scene. In fact, the only reason that we would come to find within, would be the reason that we are inclined to find.

Hegel would reply to such objections by the principal tracks of his philosophy where he has developed extensively the dialectics of thinking and being. Actually, he would reply that what is to know from every context of history is that which has remained for the future as the most enduring outcome. History's task is not to fully and exhaustively comprise the empirical object, or the empirical biography, or the empirical society and institutions.⁶ History's task is to comprehend their significance, the symbolic image that has been drawn and that has survived for the following generations. Even if, for example, a historical character would be proved for having lured his contemporaries in believing such or such motive over his/her true interest in certain actions or would have arrived to the position where he or she would have counterfeited historical evidence, there we still are in the position to infer what would be the real significance of that character's deeds and what are its real and symbolic repercussions or follow-ups. Not to say that that character's deeds, even if deceptive, they enclose within themselves the fundamental principles or the contexts that they betray. We may never fully find the complete and exhaustive evidence about historical facts — and that is expected to happen in such way

because empirical facts are, by their very nature, impossible to verify in their completeness. But what matters for history is that the universal truth is recognizable even through very small, but significant details. And those who are that scrupulous as to try to verify the slightest historical facts in correspondence with the notion of world history's reason, will find themselves in the very odd and paradoxical situation where they will not be able to do so because not every detail corresponds in a functional—univocal and syntactic—manner to the idea of reason. And the very same people will appeal to the idea of reason in order to say that there is no fundamental reason in history while having the privilege to compare the empirical historical facts with the historical and semantic notions of sense and reason in order to declare by the very reason that they reject that reason is there. Because the scientific criteria used by the historian in order to evaluate the existence or the inexistence of a certain truth is fundamentally the idea of identity or, which is the same, that of fundamental indeterminacy that every reason or thinking needs in order to discern the truth from false or to tell a determinacy from another determinacy.

Of course, for that, we must not fall too short when it comes to taking into consideration the proper details, and after we have done that, when we have to interpret them in the precise manner. For, certain facts, or situations, or contexts could more or less easily be looked at from different positions, even opposites, and there lies the great test for historical coherence. But perspectives upon certain details in history may be many; the relevance of the background of the facts and that of the general significance is that which carries out its actualizations, even through contingencies that manifest certain perspectivism. The means may be many, but the scope is always indeterminately present.⁷

From Hegel's standpoint it is obvious that, before writing history, one must be akin to a broad and precise perspective over the fundamental positions that one might feel entitled to adopt in relation to such and such facts. That is why he does not hesitate to pronounce already, from the very beginning, that his position is that:

Whoever looks at the world rationally sees it as rational too; the two exist in a reciprocal relationship.

...

Above all, however, I have referred to the first instance of the conception that reason rules the world and also discussed its inadequacy because the complete application of this conception has assumed another shape, one we know full well as our own conviction—namely the form of the religious truth that the world is not given over to chance and external, contingent causes, but is ruled by providence. . . to express the point in a different way, it is because the discipline with which we are engaged must first of all furnish the proof, if not of the truth, then of the correctness of this principle. The truth that a providence, indeed divine providence, presides over the events of the world

*is consistent, then, with the indicated principle because divine providence is the wisdom that has the infinite power to actualize its purposes, that is, the absolute, rational, final purpose of the world. Reason is **thinking** that determines itself wholly freely: nous.⁸*

TWO CONCLUSIONS can be drawn from this fragment:

Firstly, the reason that governs the world is not the formal logical reason that we use in order to judge empirical facts. This reason transcends historical order even if actualizes itself within that very order. Therefore, the philosophy of history may not satisfy itself with merely reproducing the information about the found facts and not even to interpret them as empirical objects, but its fundamental principle is to investigate where the fundamental truth has emerged in history, taking into account the indeterminacy and the actual infinity of this fundamental truth.

Secondly, because identity is one and absolute—as we have shown, there is no possibility of escaping the fundamental unity even when we tend to negate it—, then there must be only one fundamental reason and significance of world history, one that reveals itself as a fundamental reference of every human endeavor. Because human rationality and consciousness is already beyond any naturalistic process, human history can be overlooked as having significance only in regard with this reference. Every deed or fact becomes historical only if it makes reference to the world of signifiers, therefore, only if it indicates that transcendent identity is the fundamental principle that governs it.

Therefore, the reason that governs world history is not a determined logic or reason that seeks to introduce within historical facts a certain way of interpretation that always denies itself by the very lack of fundamentality or indeterminacy. But this world's reason or principle is that which reveals itself at the very end of history; the pure indeterminacy of reason qualifies it for its infinite actuality. Then, there is no ecstatic relation between historical facts and their reason. The latter does not come to impose itself on the first. Rather, the first comes to actualize itself within the horizon that the latter not only opens, but eternally assures for the first.

There is no historical consciousness outside the idea that there is something significant and immutable in the heart of every change that ridges the face of the world. Indeed, how could we speak again of history, meaning the transformations that acquire a certain direction, certain significance, a certain sense within human life and society if we would be to abolish every fundamental reference to the reason that governs the world? How could we make possible the knowledge of the signification of the human time acts, if we are to eliminate significance from within it altogether? It is evident that there can be no such thing and, without the fundamental presupposition that there is meaning in history, the very concept of history is to be fundamentally suppressed too.

Actually, what Hegel tells us is that because reason finds purpose within human deeds, than, even if there is no explicit consciousness of the reason that makes the actuality of certain acts in history, these are caught within reason itself even un-

consciously and their relevance becomes of a totally different order than the one that empirical facts could ever assure. It only means that the fundamental identity manifests itself in purpose even in the occurrences where deeds, facts, empirical data are at odds with the very idea of determined reason. The purpose implies that the world of reason is the world of spirit, the very spirit that allows that the significance of a certain fact may come to knowledge only from a terminal or eschatonic perspective.⁹ The very idea and significance of history becomes obvious only when there is a fundamental point of transcendence that gives the indeterminacy position privilege to the observer that makes the assertions about the sense of history—in other words, history is, simultaneously, possible and engraved in reason only because it contains its very end and the end of history¹⁰ is breathed through every second of it. **The sense of history is its very end.**¹¹

Thus, the idea of freedom and that of the fundamental satisfaction of the spirit become the central tenets of this philosophy of history: as we have just seen, Hegel's claims are just as sound and reasonable about the reason of history as history itself is. And he is again right to affirm that the entire course of the world history is nothing more than this:

... we can say that world history is the portrayal of the labor of spirit to arrive at knowledge of what it is intrinsically.

*...
The application of this principle to actuality, the penetration and transformation of worldly conditions by the principle of freedom, is the long process that is history itself.*¹²

The next step in the understanding of the intimate tenets of historical perspective and analysis is to see how one could find sense or reason within history in cases of radical descent in the abyss of absolute negation of reason and of identity. Can history maintain the demand for reason when horrific events as Auschwitz or Gulag occur? How can someone still find any meaning in such utterly, deliberately and specifically annihilation of human nature? Where can there still lay the truth in such boundary experiences?¹³

The entire problem, of course, comes down to the problem of evil in history: is evil capable of disposing of every concept of good or of the entire theodicy? Can we speak about the irreducibility of evil in history?

We do not believe so. First, when one considers what happened during the Holocaust and the Gulag, then that one is to evaluate both mass graves by a standard. And that standard is that of good, or of justice, or of sense. But, when we compare these events with these touchstones of humanity we find that in these catacombs the criteria for humanity has fallen under every possible threshold of sense, justice or goodness. But, by that very and single failure, are we justified to speak of a fundamental lack in these universals? Do we have the legitimacy to deny the sense, the justice or the goodness? Can we deny the sense of history?

If we take a closer look, we observe the following: if we admit that in the Holocaust or in the Gulag there is no sense at all, that by these two events history as fundamental and significant unity between disparaged facts, has succumbed, that goodness and justice have no more ground to claim in the world, then the significance of the Holocaust and of the Gulag is also vanished. Then these two horrific events are also invalidated and purely evacuated in the impiety and criminal indifference that may always be responsible for another Gulag or for another Holocaust. If there is no more sense, no more reason in history, how could one still know that the Holocaust and the Gulag are the very denials of that reason? How could one still appreciate the horrific, the monstrous dimension of these two hecatombs? If there is no more justice, how could one invoke justice in front of Auschwitz?

Hegel answers very well to these dead ends. The reason of the spirit that steers the world is transcendent to all determinate reasons and is a fundamental case of identity between identity and alterity. Therefore, the reason that the spirit provides for the two totalitarian monstrosities is of a different kind that every kind of reason one might come to think about. If we would be to offer such a sign we could easily mention that both totalitarian crimes have been possible on the background of a mass desacralization that has culminated in the total rejection of every kind of transcendence. In other words, the transcendence of the world reason is denied by the two totalitarian regimes while they wanted to actualize another kind of reason within history itself. Looked in this light, the two crimes confess against themselves and demonstrate that they cannot simply deny the sense of world history.

A second part of the answer is founded in the idea of alterity itself. As it has been shown,¹⁴ the Hegelian ontological principle is founded on the identity of identity and difference or otherness.¹⁵ Therefore, there is no possible otherness that the Holocaust or the Gulag could touch in such a way that a fundamental reason would be unable to unify them. This unity is not maintained as determined and the reason that Hegel provides for evil in history has a fundamental super rational nature—that means that Hegelianism is not a justification of evil. But this super rationality is undeniably immutable and there is no possibility that history's reason should fall within the category of some determined representation that we would fetter ourselves with while we would believe that we have the right dimension of the sense of the history.

In fact, what we acquire with Hegel is the absolute movement of the consciousness by which it reflects itself within itself, it gives itself legitimacy or it denies it and the fundamental sense is present, is a witness to this very reflection in itself that constitutes the very truth of the Hegelian movement of knowledge and of speculative practice.

Therefore, the Hegelian philosophy may not be regarded as some circular sophistry that would tend to impose its own tendencies upon facts. But a reflection upon the absolute principle that offers the indeterminacy and the absolute, through which history begins, develops and ends at the same time. In other words, Hegelian phi-

osophy of history is nothing more but the reflection of the history's spirit within itself, the fundamental vision through which humanity's deeds may be understood, finally, as revealing themselves through themselves.



Notes

1. See Richard Gervais, "Difficulté de l'hégélianisme. À propos d'un ouvrage de Jean-François Kervégan: Hegel, Carl Schmitt: le politique entre spéculation et positivité," *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol. 51, 2 (1995): 405.
2. We have in mind particularly two authors who distinguished themselves by an incredible obtuseness and a relentless passion for being at the same time silly, naive and obnoxious towards any form of hegelianism: Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster) pages 697, 701, 703, 704, 721, and ultimately pages 730-746; and Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1966), where he devotes himself in closely following the main points of Russell's garbled ignorance.
3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of World History. Volume 1: Manuscripts of the Introduction and The Lectures of 1822-3*, edited and translated by Robert E. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson with the assistance of William G. Geuss, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 79–80.
4. Spinoza, *Complete Works. Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect*, translations by Samuel Shirley, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 10–11.
5. G.W.F. Hegel, 79.
6. *Idem*, 80: "And we must surely assume that a desire for rational insight and knowledge, and not just a collection of information, is the subjective need [that drives] the study of the scientific disciplines."
7. These contingencies appear in Hegel's *Lectures...* in the introductory chapter that deals with "The Means of Spirit's Actualization: Passions, Interests, Ideals." See G.W.F. Hegel, 89–100.
8. *Idem*, 81, 83.
9. Vlad Mureșan, "L'eschatologie de Hegel," *Studia Theologica* IV, 4 (2006): 422–424.
10. See also Joseph McCarney, *Hegel on History* (Routledge, 2000), 169-194.
11. G.W.F. Hegel, 86.
12. *Idem*, 87–88.
13. It is the question that is raised by thinkers like Emile Fackenheim—see *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought*, 1982—who have asserted that, in a post-Auschwitz world, we may never have the legitimacy of speaking about the reason or about the sense of what happened in the Holocaust because in that horrific event the very notion of sense and of identity or of reason has fundamentally and irremediably collapsed. Of course, we might, just as well, add to the Holocaust, the Gulag in order to give the picture its full extent.
14. David Bronstein, "Hegel and the Holocaust," *Animus*, 10 (2005): 6–8.
15. See also Bernard Bourgeois, "Time and Eternity," *The Philosophical Forum*, XXXI, 3–4 (December 2000).

Abstract

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A usual misunderstanding about Hegel's philosophy is that his system is an aprioric design of thought where there is no place for empirical knowledge and where the premises of the system are already drawn into conclusions before any kind of research is done. There is nothing more false about Hegel than this. However, it has become a widely-held idea that this characteristic would be traceable in all his philosophy. Another common misrepresentation is that Hegel imposes from outside an arbitrary reason for historical development and that he begs the question for finding facts that would suite his allegations. We will proceed to show, by following a few tenets of his *Lectures on World History*, how the entire central concept is totally different and that philosophical knowledge has an aprioric grasp at another level of his speculative constructions.

Keywords

Hegel, Spirit, History, Identity, Difference, Eschaton, Contemplation, Absolute Knowledge.