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Hegel's Philosophical History

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Abstract

In his *Philosophical History*, Hegel sought to reveal the underlying logic or meaning of history, the essential process lying behind particular events, whether it be the rise and fall of Empires, the outbreak of revolution and war, or the development of art, religion and philosophy itself. He was aiming to provide the key to the human condition as it evolves through time. Once grasped, history will no longer be merely a record of 'sound and fury, signifying nothing.' On the contrary, the 'philosophical approach to history has no other intention than to eliminate the incidental.' Instead, 'the world looks rational to those who look at it rationally.'¹ And what is this rational thread that runs through history, giving it meaning? It was that world history is the record of Spirit's (or Mind's) efforts to gain knowledge of what it is in itself – what it essentially is. History records, says Hegel, 'the Spirit's effort to attain knowledge of what it is in itself.' This paper endeavours to explicate the reasoning behind this rather portentous phrase, explaining the dialectical relationship between the Concept and Idea of Spirit, the Hegelian understanding of Freedom, the role of the passions and the Cunning of Reason, and summarising the evolution of World History as Hegel presented the subject in his 1830 *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1830-31; 1899 edn.), p. 11.

The Dynamic of Concept and Idea

Hegel's central proposition is that History is the progress of the consciousness of Freedom and its Realisation. 'That history is the story of the development of human freedom,' says Kaufman, 'is the central idea of Hegel's philosophy of history.'¹ Obviously, we need to know why is history governed by this process. How does this dynamic begin and how is it sustained over the centuries?

To understand, first, how the dynamic process begins, we must start with the **Concept of Spirit**. Spirit, for Hegel, is ultimate reality. It is the world of conscious experience and this is what ultimately exists. The world is conscious experience and it makes no sense to talk of a world beyond conscious experience for, quite clearly, one can say nothing about it at all. Since we are not conscious of it then it does not exist to us and it is in no meaningful sense whatsoever real. To use the language of Kant, only phenomena exist and all talk of noumena must be discarded. Spirit, or the world of conscious experience, is the symbiotic relation between individual consciousnesses. It is a collective consciousness. It is the 'we' of the human experience formed out of the countless 'I's' of individual subjective minds. As experiencing conscious individuals we are each of us part of it, but it transcends and exists beyond each of us. It is immortal and exists, with no past or future, in a perpetual *now*.² This is Hegel's Absolute Idealism.

So much for Spirit. But what is the Concept of Spirit? The Concept of Spirit is the essential idea of Spirit as such. **A Concept is an unrealised idea.** It is a pure, abstract, idea that has not taken concrete form. It is most essentially and basically what it is, considered abstractly. According to Hegel, the Concept of Spirit is Freedom and Reason. This is the crucial step in the entire argument. What it means is that the essence of our collective minds as thinking conscious humans is Freedom. Spirit as such is radically free. 'Spirit ... is only what it makes of itself, and it makes of itself what it is implicitly'. 'Spirit is this, that it produces itself, makes itself into what it is.'³ Spirit, in other words, is self-creating and autonomous and independent of all external influences. And because Freedom is also Reason, we can equally say that the Concept or essence of our collective minds is Reason.

This, of course, is abstract. It is a formal statement of what the essence (Concept) of Spirit is. To become real, that is, to determine itself concretely, the Concept must become an Idea. **An Idea is the Unity of Concept and Reality** – it is the reality of the Concept. It is a fusion between Concept and Reality. So, while the Concept of

¹ W. Kaufman, *Hegel* (1965), p. 255.

² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 79.

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 259.

Spirit is always absolute Freedom (Reason) and always the same, this is not true of the actual Idea of Spirit. The Idea of Spirit is not always and from the beginning Freedom. *The Concept of Freedom (Reason) is realised in reality as the Idea of Freedom (Reason) through History.*¹

This is why History is so important: it is the story of the progress of Spirit towards the unity of essence and existence.² ‘World history in general’, says Hegel, ‘is the laying out of spirit in time.’³ History is the process by which the essence of the Spirit as Freedom and Reason is realised in reality as the Idea of Freedom: it is the medium through which the collective consciousness realises itself as Freedom (Reason).

The goal of world history is that Spirit come to a knowledge of what it truly is, that it give this knowledge objective expression, realize it in a world which lies before it, in short, produce itself as an object for itself.⁴

What does realising the Idea of Freedom (Reason) mean? The point is essentially this. Although the essence of the collective Spirit is Freedom and Reason, the collective human consciousness (Spirit) does not, initially, grasp this truth about itself. It is not fully self-conscious and does not properly know what it is. The human mind does not yet know that the essence both of humans and the world is Freedom and Reason. ‘Reason is the substantial basis of Consciousness as well as of the External and Natural’ – but human consciousness does not, initially, know this. The element within which Spirit becomes self-aware is Time. History records the process by which human minds come to know their essence as Freedom and Reason. It is the development over time within human minds of ever higher levels of consciousness and self-consciousness. It is the growth of mind’s awareness of the world, of itself, and its relationship to the world. As the Idea develops towards the full self-realisation of Freedom, then Spirit, whose essence is Freedom, finds itself ever more at home in the world. The alienation between the freedom of the Concept and the unfreedom of objective external reality is broken down. Reality and the Concept of Spirit are brought into alignment, they become one and the same. The other becomes oneself. This is the end-point to which history inevitably tends. The below diagram maps the basic outlines of Hegel’s model of the historical process, starting from the left, where the Concept and Idea of Spirit diverge, and moving towards the right over time, with the disjuncture between Concept and Idea gradually narrowing, until the two converge in the Absolute Idea and History ends.

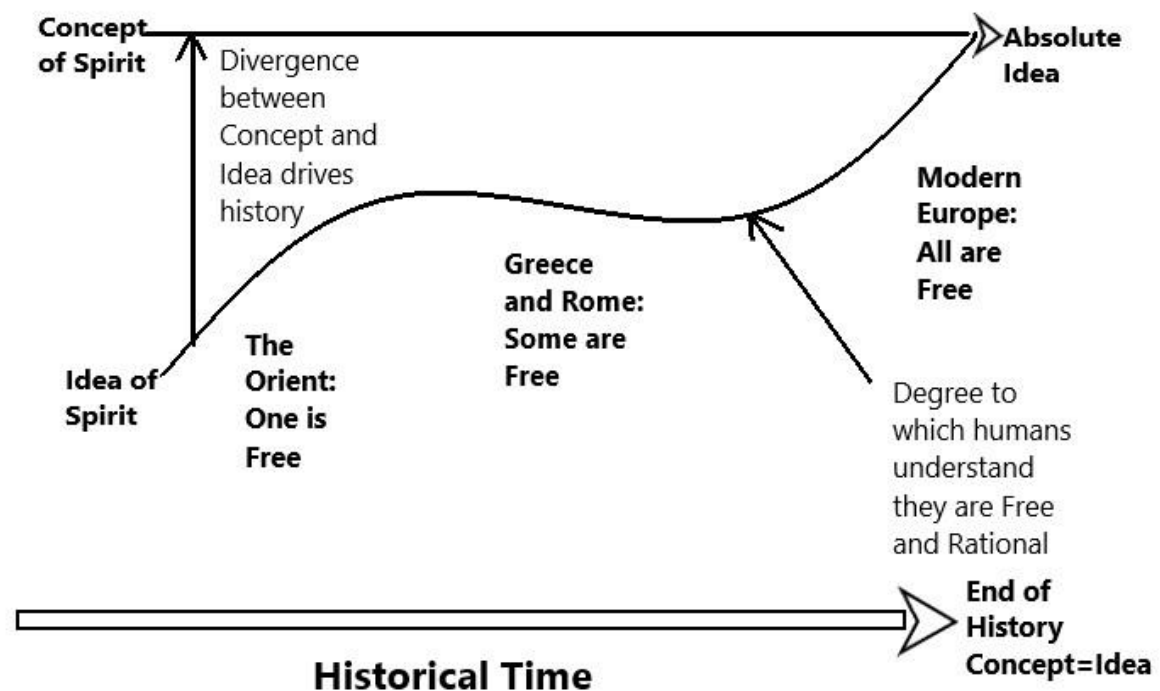
¹ C.f. J. McCarney, *Hegel on History* (2000), pp. 51-53.

² S. Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State* (1972), p. 221.

³ Quoted in McCarney, *Hegel on History*, p. 56.

⁴ Quoted in C. Taylor, *Hegel*, (1975), p. 366.

Diagrammatical Representation of Hegel's Model of History



Freedom and Reason

What is Freedom? Hegel's understanding of Freedom is a Positive rather than Negative one, focusing on the objects and aims of action, rather than the existence or otherwise of formal restraints. **To be free is to realise the essence of what it means to be human, namely to be self-determining and to act according to Reason.** I am free when I consciously act according to my own resolution. Freedom is self-determination. Not all human action is free: I am NOT free when I act under the direction of desires or impulses or outside contingencies, or when I realise some supposed human essence given to me by race or nature. Then I am not self-determining. 'The Will is only Free', wrote Hegel, 'when it does not will anything alien, extrinsic, foreign to itself (for as long as it does so, it is dependent), but wills itself alone – wills the Will. This is absolute Will – the volition to be Free.'¹ Human freedom is the activity by which humans consciously self-construct and self-determine their

¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 442.

world, and to do this means to make their world according to their ideas and thoughts, and these thoughts and ideas constitute Reason. ‘Man is not free’, said Hegel, ‘when he is not thinking; for except when thus engaged he sustains a relation to the world around him as to another, an alien form of being.’¹ The will, Hegel argued, is the practical expression of thought, and thought is essentially rational. Hence the Free Will is the Rational Will. As Hegel writes:

Freedom is precisely thought itself; whoever rejects thought and speaks of freedom doesn’t know what he’s saying. The unity of thought with itself is freedom, the free will ... The will is only free as thinking will.²

So Freedom is, in the words of McCarney, ‘determination through the power of reason’, and is thus Reason in action.³

Thus, when we say that the essence of the Concept of Spirit is Freedom, we also mean that the essence of the Concept of Spirit is Reason. That is, the essence of the human collective consciousness is Reason. This is essentially what defines humans. In summary, the Concept of Spirit as Freedom and Reason is realised as the Idea through History, and this realised Idea of freedom and Reason is the **Absolute Idea**.

How the Concept of Reason and Freedom becomes Realised in the World

The key to this is the development of the human consciousness. The Spirit, as noted, is the collective consciousness formed out of the individual consciousnesses of men and women, and therefore the development of human consciousness *is* the development of the Spirit. To quote Charles Taylor:

The goal towards which everything tends is the self-comprehension of Spirit or Reason. Man is the vehicle of this self-comprehension. Hence that Spirit knows itself requires that man come to know himself and his world as they really are, as emanations of Spirit.⁴

The Spirit has three aspects:

- i. *Subjective Spirit* – the spirit of individual consciousnesses.
- ii. *Objective Spirit* – Spirit as it is embodied socially – as laws, customs, and institutions.
- iii. *Absolute Spirit* – spirit as apprehended through higher forms of thought – philosophy, religion, art etc.⁵

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

² Quoted in Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 370.

³ McCarney, *Hegel on History*, p. 68.

⁴ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 366.

⁵ McCarney, *Hegel on History*, p. 63

In history these three forms of spirit or reason simultaneously converge and become one as the Idea becomes adequate to the Concept. As Subjective, Objective, and Absolute Spirit become one, so does alienation end. The individual consciousness becomes at home in the world, as does Spirit, its Concept of Freedom and Reason being realised in the Idea. The Concept of Spirit as Reason becomes realised in the Idea of Reason in the world. Reality now conforms with the Concept – there is no dissonance between the two. Concept and Reality become one: the other becomes myself.

How the Concept of Spirit is Realised

1. *First, and most essentially, it happens through the development of human consciousness.* Remember, for Hegel human consciousness experience is reality. Over time human understanding of this experience evolves progressively – i.e. it attains to ever fuller and more comprehensive and deeper and truer understanding of reality. The mind arrives, through time, at ever more adequate forms of cognition. Our understanding of the world and ourselves becomes ever more sophisticated. History is the unfolding of the process through which human minds arrives at an ever-fuller conscious awareness of their own experience – which is to say, reality. There is an end to this process – namely a full realisation that:
 - a. The human being as such is **Free**.
 - b. The substantial basis of consciousness and external reality is **Reason** – reason is the substantial essence of reality.
2. *Second, this development of consciousness is a logical necessity.* Consciousness, left to itself, will exhibit a pattern of development which is determinate. Consciousness necessarily moves by an inner logic towards self-understanding as freedom and reason. History enshrines the logic of the Spirit.
3. *Third, what drives this logical development of the Spirit is the Dialectic of Ideas.* For Hegel, consciousness exists in a state of absolute dialectical unrest and it is this that drives the development of ideas. This unrest exists because there is a gap or difference between what is true about reality and what consciousness *thinks* is true about reality. So long as the two are different then the Spirit and Idea diverge and history occurs. Consciousness forms Ideas about reality, and each Idea generates its opposite Idea which is its Determinate Negation. The Negation reacts back upon and challenges the Idea and forces a process of reflection which leads, through Reason, to the development of a further Idea. This Idea transcends the initial Idea and its negation and represents a genuine advance in the richness of consciousness – and crucially it retains within it the initial insights of both the Idea and its Negation. In this way the collective mind arrives at an ever fuller understanding of experience.¹ What keeps the Dialectic operating is contradiction. So long as any Idea fails to fully realise, as Subjective and Objective Spirit, the Concept of Spirit as Freedom and Reason, then there is a dissonance between the truth of Spirit and

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

mind's perception of reality, and it is this clash which drives the development of consciousness onwards to an ever fuller, ever truer, understanding of reality.¹ Thus, Spirit struggles within itself to arrive at Absolute Truth and Freedom through the dialectic of Ideas.

4. *Fourth, the evolution of the Idea through history takes place within the context of Peoples.* The Spirit is a collective phenomenon – the symbiotic interaction of minds within society. Hence the Spirit exists and progresses within the context of organised societies – what Hegel calls Peoples. ‘The Spirits of peoples are the elements of the process whereby spirit comes to free knowledge of itself.’² It is in the Spirit of Peoples that the material of history is encountered. The Spirit of Peoples is crucial as:
 - a. The Spirit of a people is the particular determination of the absolute universal Spirit. It is a particular manifestation and as such is a Concrete Universal.
 - b. The Spirit of a people gives them their character and determines their art, religion, philosophy and culture.
 - c. The Spirit of a people determines the character of each individual member of the society.
 - d. World Historical Individuals grasp the Spirit of a people and use it to shape the future.

It is here that the distinctively historical dimension of Hegel's thinking can be seen most clearly. Hegel argued that all ideas are specific to, and located in, a particular context in time, namely the particular stage reached in the development of the Spirit. Ideas exist *in* time, not out of time as writers like Kant and Descartes believed. The ideas that people think determine how they understand experience and is thus located at a particular stage in the evolution of human thought. Hegel called this system of ideas Metaphysics. Metaphysics provides the framework of categories through which we understand experience, and since these systems of ideas are rooted in a particular time, it follows that we cannot think out of a time – above all, we cannot think the future. Indeed, any given time can only be truly understood at the end of it, at the end of the epoch. Hence Hegel's famous remark:

Only one further word more concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be. For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready. History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it

¹ C.f. Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 391.

² Quoted in McCarney, *Hegel on History*, p. 138.

cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.¹

The idea that experience is mediated by concepts and categories comes from Kant. The difference is that Hegel doesn't see these categories as known and given *a priori*. He sees them as emerging and evolving through history. The metaphysics through which we understand the world changes. To quote Houlgate:

All concepts – those which are universal and those which are not – are conceived and understood by different ages and civilisations in different ways. The categories of thought are not fixed, eternal forms which remain unchanged throughout history, but are rather concepts which alter their meaning in history. The categories which for Kant constituted the permanent transcendental framework of knowledge thus constitute for Hegel the changing *historical* preconditions of knowledge.²

5. *Fifth, the Spirit of a people becomes an active factor in the development of history when those people are organised in a State.* The State is the key organisation in human history. The State is the articulated spirit of a people. A State is a people who have achieved an organised, unified, entity. Crucial to the existence of the State is laws and rules. It is in laws and rules and constitutions that the Spirit becomes Objective Spirit – it becomes embodied and manifest in the world. To quote Hegel:

A State is a realization of Spirit, such that in it the self-conscious being of Spirit – the freedom of the Will – is realized as Law.³

In its developed form, the State is 'the supreme self-objectification of Spirit...'⁴ As such, the State and its rules become the objective embodiment of Reason. The Reason of individual subjective consciousness unites with Reason as embodied in the State. It is in this way that the individual attains to freedom in the world. The State, says Hegel, 'is the actuality in which the individual has and enjoys his freedom ... All value man has, all spiritual actuality, he has through the State alone ... Thus the State is the more precisely defined object of world history in which freedom gains objective existence.'⁵ So: as history progresses, the Objective Spirit is realised in the State as Reason. As the State becomes more rational so it fuller approximates to the Absolute Spirit, and the

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), *Preface*.

² S. Houlgate, *Freedom, Truth and History*, p. 9.

³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 160.

⁴ J. N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-examination* (1958), p. 328. Note that the State in question is not necessarily, and often is not, the *nation* State. It is the existence of a political structure that can embody Objective Spirit that is crucial. C.f. Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 222-23.

⁵ Quoted in Kaufman, *Hegel*, pp. 268-69.

individual consciousness, whose essence is Reason, sees *that* Reason in the rules of the State it must follow. Individual and Objective Spirit (Consciousness) converge, and as they do the individual consciousness knows itself to be free – for it lives according to rational laws which only express, externally, its own nature. ‘Only that will,’ wrote Hegel, ‘which obeys the law is free; for it obeys itself – it is independent and so free.’¹ The Subjective Consciousness becomes ever more at home in the world.

Human Motivation and the Cunning of Reason

The absolute goal of history is to realise the Idea of Freedom, which is to realise the nature of Spirit. But the Idea, being just that, an Idea, is powerless to realise itself in concrete reality. The Idea can only be actualised and made into Objective Spirit in the world through the willed activity of humans. But Hegel was quite clear that individual people do not seek, through their willed actions, to promote the realisation of the Idea. Far from it! People act in order to satisfy their own personal interests. What motivates people is craving, need, interest, instinct – what Hegel called collectively the **passions**. Passion is emotional energy and it is this that drives human action, as people endeavour relentlessly to pursue their personal goals. It is passion that fires the human will.

The motive power that puts them [abstract ideas] in operation, and gives them determinate existence, is the need, instinct, inclination, and passion of man. ... We assert then that nothing has been accomplished without interest on the part of the actors; and ... we may affirm absolutely that *nothing great in the World* has been accomplished without *passion*.²

Given that it is only through human willed actions that Spirit as Freedom and Reason can be realised, and given that humans only act out of instinct and passion, then it follows that, in Hegel’s words, these ‘vast congeries of volitions, interests and activities, constitute the instruments and means of the World Spirit for attaining its object; bringing it to consciousness and realising it.’³ Clearly this would appear to create a paradox: how is it that the passions of individuals fixed upon some private goal serve to realise the Spirit of Freedom of which they know nothing? ‘Reason’, Hegel declares, ‘governs the world’, and yet no one individual is motivated by its injunctions. Hegel resolves this apparent contradiction by appealing to his concept of the **Cunning of Reason**. This refers to the way in which Reason uses human passions to advance its own development. Thus, as Hegel remarks, as individuals

¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 39.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

pursue their own selfish interests ‘the universal principle is implicit in them, and is realising itself in them.’¹ There are three ways in which this is so:

1. First, for Hegel passion is not some blind, erratic, emotion. It is not mere violent barbarism. Rather, **passion is a drive to realise our interests.** It is a single-minded commitment to pursue some end. Reason enters into this in numerous ways: in selecting one goal above others, in disciplining our pursuit of that goal, and above all, in the way that agents follow the rules and laws and ethics of society when conducting themselves. Thus, while the aims of the individual are limited and specific to themselves, their actions in practice are conditioned by the duties, laws, ethics, and customs of the State within which they operate, and in so acting they inadvertently strengthen and consolidate those very social rules – which are the manifestation of Objective Spirit. People are selfish within the law, and thereby act to reinforce the law.²
2. Second, individuals, when pursuing their own goals, are led, for reasons of self-interest, to form relations with, and cooperate with, other individuals. In this way they are led to create a State, which requires for its operation a system of law, right, contract, and order. By this means the social system evolved to serve the interests of the individual becomes a means for regulating the conduct of that individual according to the Objectified reason of Spirit. Thus, again, the private passion of interested individuals adds to the stock of reason, right, law, and duty in the world and they thereby involuntarily act to bring into reality the Absolute Idea.
3. Third, there is the vital part played by **World Historical Individuals.** While ordinary people serve the Absolute Idea by going about their lawful sanctioned duty, there are moments in History where one set of ideas about the world needs to be challenged and overthrown by a new set of ideas which supersede the existing ones and carry the Spirit further towards its concrete realisation. At such moments a special type of human will is required and the Cunning of Reason works through what Hegel called the World Historical Individuals. These are individuals like Caesar, Luther, and Napoleon who, while pursuing their own passions, destroy old worlds and lay the foundations of new ones. Although World Historical Individuals lack awareness of the evolution of the Absolute Idea – they are men of action, not philosophers – they *are* thinking men who are better able to perceive the Spirit of their age and the potential to seize it, transform it, and take consciousness to the next level by their action.

These are the great men in history, whose own particular purposes comprehend the substantial content which is the will of the world spirit. This content is the true source of their power; it is the universal unconscious instinct of men.³

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

² Even criminals normally act within the law (e.g. they will follow the rules of the road when driving to a bank hoist). And when acting outside the conventional law there is ‘honour amongst thieves’.

³ Quoted in Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 392.

Caesar, for example, grasped that the Roman Republic had to be superseded by an Imperial Dictatorship. What these people will is the will of the World Spirit. Hence, they embody what the people sub-consciously want and therefore the people 'flock to his standard, for he reveals to them and carries out what is their own immanent spirit.'¹ 'It is the world-historical individuals who first told men what they wanted.'²

Hence, it is the passions of humans, whether in the form of the private individual pursuing his localised goal, or that of a World Historical Individual bending reality to his will, that drives forward the Objective Spirit of a people embodied in the state, and in so doing they raise the consciousness of the World Spirit and carry it (unwittingly) towards the Absolute Idea and Universal Freedom.

It is not the general Idea that is implicated in opposition and combat, and that is exposed to danger. It remains in the background, untouched and uninjured. This may be called the *Cunning of Reason* – that it sets the passions to work for itself, while that which develops its existence through such impulsion pays the penalty and suffers the loss.³

The Evolution of the Idea through History

As we have observed, each civilisation sees the world differently as it views and understands it through different conceptual frameworks, and these frameworks form the content of experience itself as perceived. History is made up of a series of distinct civilisations, each with distinct metaphysics and each grasping part, but not all, of the truth. It is by means of the progress of this understanding through the successive civilisations of world history that the human mind arrives at the Absolute Idea and the Concept of Spirit is realised. To quote Hegel:

In the History of the World, the Idea of Spirit appears in its actual embodiment as a series of external forms, each of which declares itself as an actually existing People. ... The principles of the successive phases of Spirit that animate the Peoples in a necessitated gradation, are themselves only steps in the development of the One Universal Spirit, which through them elevates and completes itself to a self-comprehending *totality*.⁴

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel outlined the main stages in the evolution of the Idea in human consciousness. The essential journey is from a world

¹ Quoted in McCarney, *Hegel on History*, p. 110.

² Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 393.

³ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

where None are Free, to one where One is Free, then Some are Free, and finally where All are Free.¹ Each stage of consciousness is objectified in a particular culture or State which is dominant – not necessarily politically, but in terms of the degree to which its consciousness approximates to that of the Absolute Idea of perfect Freedom and Reason. At any given moment of time, only one State is playing a significant role in the development of the Spirit, the rest being mere onlookers, and that once a State has passed out of this phase of historical significance, ‘its vicissitudes’, says Findlay, ‘may be important for the annalist, but they have lost all significance for the Philosopher of History.’² For the philosopher, ‘world history’, writes Hegel, ‘is the necessary development, out of the concept of mind’s freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so of the self-consciousness and freedom of mind.’³

1. **The State of Nature.** Humans start in a state of nature, immersed in immediate being. They are at one with nature and have no idea of freedom. The world is just given as a fixed system of external events. This is the stage of pre-history. No one is free.
2. **The formation of organised communities – i.e. the State.** The state is the crucial unit in Hegel’s system. ‘In the history of the world’, declared Hegel, ‘only those peoples can come under our notice which form a state.’⁴ The state is that stage where humans live together in communities regulated by consciously made rules. It is when humans form organised communities with deliberately made rules and laws that they enter the realm of self-consciousness and freedom, which is to enter the realm of history. It is now that the Spirit of the People is articulated in Objective Spirit for the first time through the elaboration of rules, laws, constitutions, and rational bureaucratic systems. In short, the social world individuals experience begins to be shaped by Reason – and since Reason is the essence of consciousness, the individual consciousness begins to see itself reflected in the State it inhabits. This is the decisive event in world history and hence Hegel’s notorious remarks: ‘The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth.’⁵ ‘The State is the march of God through the world.’ As it is with the formation of the State that the Idea of the Spirit is externally manifested for the first time, from this point on the development of the Spirit through history is a development which is most clearly displayed in the development of the State and its political principles.⁶
3. **The Oriental World – Egypt, China, Persia, India.** The organised laws of the state are the setting for freedom and reason. But at first this is not realised. It is not realised that the essence of man and the universe is Reason and that this is Freedom. The Concept of Reason and Freedom is not yet

¹ In Hegel’s well-known summary: ‘The East knew and to the present day knows only that *One* is Free; the Greek and Roman world, that *some* are Free; the German world knows that *All* are Free.’ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

² Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination*, p. 331.

³ Quoted in Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 221-22.

⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

embodied in the Idea. It is not understood that man **as such** is free. Instead in the Oriental World **Only One is Free**, namely the ruler, who is often regarded as a kind of God. The rest of the population are like children, accepting unquestioningly the diktats of the ruler, with no sense, yet, of their own individual freedom or capacity for reason. Thus Hegel writes that in 'China the Universal Will immediately commands what the Individual is to do, and the latter complies and obeys with proportionate renunciation of reflection and personal independence.'¹ In general, humans have not escaped from the world of nature. For example, the caste system fixes one's position in the world for life. Since humans have not grasped that they are free as such, slavery is prevalent. As Hegel writes: 'The Orientals do not yet know that the spirit or man as such is free in himself, and because they do not know this, they are not themselves free.'

4. **Greek World.** It was here that the next leap forward in the development of the Spirit occurred since, for the first time, the Idea of individual Freedom became diffused through society. The free citizens of Athens lived in harmony with the Objective Spirit as embodied in the city state and its political institutions expressed the rational spirit of the people. This is why Hegel considered the Greek polity to be the first home of freedom. The power of this new incarnation of Spirit was revealed in the Greek victories over the Persians, victories which Hegel considers 'World-Historical' since they represented the triumph of the spirit of Greek freedom over Oriental despotism. 'Never in History', he declares, 'has the superiority of spiritual power over material bulk been so gloriously manifest.'² But there was a crucial weakness: the society was based on slavery. Only **Some are Free** – the citizens. It was slavery which made possible the life of the citizen, since it was only by delegating manual tasks to the slaves that the citizens had the leisure to devote to affairs of state. The freedom of Greece was enjoyed by a few and understood as such. There was no idea that people *as such* were free. Similarly, the Greek state did not fully reflect the concept of the individual: the citizen identified completely with the city:

The habit of living for their country without further analysis or reflection, was the principle dominant among them. ... To the Greek his country was a necessity of life without which existence was impossible.'³

While this generated the kind of unity between individual and state that for Hegel was the mark of true freedom, it occurred at an instinctive level and was not based on the voluntary recognition by the free individual of the reason of the state. Socrates was the World Historical Individual who grasped this, calling upon all Athenians to question received opinions and arrive at judgements for themselves, but the Spirit of the Greek people was not able to

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

² *Ibid.*, p. 258.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

comprehend this. Socrates was put to death and the Greek city state passed from history.

5. **Roman world.** Although with the Romans the vivacious Spirit of individual freedom that characterised the Greeks is lost, still the Spirit makes further progress towards the Absolute Idea with the development of the idea of the Roman citizen, under which all citizens across the Roman Empire were held to be equal. Thus was established, for the first time, the abstract concept of the 'Person', independent of any social or political role. Whilst Roman individuals had no political rights under the Empire, the idea of Private Right developed in the form of private property. 'Private Right,' says Hegel, 'is this, that the social unit as such enjoys consideration in the state, in the reality which he gives to himself – viz., in property.'¹ The institution of law also becomes formalised to provide legal expression of right conduct. But again there is a contradiction in Roman civilisation – slavery remains. Still only SOME are free. Others are treated not as men but as things. A further important step forward in understanding that occurs under the Romans is the conception of the State as an abstract power standing outside of the individual. The authority of the State does not depend upon sentiment or utility but simply exists by right and cannot be questioned by the individual. However, this abstract delineation of the State is a product of mere brute power and domination and as such cannot provide the synthesis between Subjective and Objective consciousness required by Spirit. As Hegel summarises: 'Such a condition is Roman life at this epoch: on the one side, Fate and the abstract universality of sovereignty; on the other, the *individual* abstraction.'²
6. **Christianity.** The emergence of Christianity is the next and greatest breakthrough in human consciousness – and thus in the life of Spirit. Rome prepared the way with the idea of the individual person, but Rome could not develop the potentiality of this insight since the individual was subject to the stifling power of the State. As a result, Private Right was, in fact, 'a nullity, an ignoring of the personality; and the supposed condition of Right turns out to be the absolute destitution of it.'³ It was Christianity that opened the way to resolving this contradiction, being the first ideology to grasp that all men and women are, as such, Free. **All are Free.** Thus was initiated the principle of Subjective Freedom in the world. But still this was true only in an abstract sense, not in reality – 'the human will is emancipated only abstractly, not in its concrete reality, for the whole sequel of History is occupied in the realization of this concrete Freedom.'⁴ In Christianity, the Freedom of man was primarily a religious freedom, not a political one, and Christians envisaged a separation of the spiritual and temporal worlds. The early Christians had little power and freedom was thus a concept rather than an actuality. Indeed, while Christ himself embodied the unity between Subjective Spirit and the Absolute Idea,

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

² *Ibid.*, p. 317.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

showing that ‘the human and the divine are essentially one’, Christ himself was put to death. The Spirit of Man was not yet ready for the truth that ‘Man, finite when regarded *for himself*, is yet at the same time the image of God and a fountain of infinity *in himself*. ... Man is Absolute Self-Consciousness – his Spiritual nature being the starting point and presupposition.’¹

7. **The development of Christendom.** Once the idea of human freedom emerged, the history of Western Christendom consisted in the gradual process of developing this recognition of universal freedom and dignity of all humanity into the social and political reality of the state. European history has seen a gradual process of matching the idea of freedom in state and society with the Christian idea of freedom in religion. This was the combined achievement of the Catholic Church and the Germanic peoples – the tribes which conquered the former Roman Empire and built up the modern states of Europe in its wake. What these Germanic peoples brought from the forests of Central and Eastern Europe was the spirit of individual freedom and the strength of self-will to realise their goals. It was, remarks Hegel, ‘the destiny of the German peoples ... to be the bearers of the Christian principle.’ As a result, they did not merely receive the Idea of Freedom from the early Christian Church, but they made it real by infusing with it the ‘free and spontaneous developments from their own subjective self-consciousness.’² In this way, he declares: ‘The German Spirit is the Spirit of the new World. Its aim is the realization of absolute Truth as the unlimited self-determination of Freedom’.³ Thus we witness how, in the Christian states of Europe, public law becomes established, with even Kings gradually becoming subject to it. The violent passions are restrained under the civilising ethos of Christian morality. The rights of the individual are more widely respected and slavery and serfdom are abolished. Yet there remain limitations. Church and State each develop separately, with the Church proclaiming the absolute Truth of Christianity while the State oversees the secular world based on loyalty, affections, and passion. Indeed, this very antithesis between Church and State is a sign that the Absolute Idea has not fully realised itself in the Spirit of the people. Further, while the Catholic Church did great service in educating the peoples of Europe in the Truth of religion, the Church itself gave too great a weight to conformity and authority and did not encourage the free judgement of the individual. The Spirit of Subjective Freedom was wanting. As Hegel (the Lutheran) explained:

The clergy imposed certain conditions, to which the laity must conform if they would be partakers of the Holy. The entire development of *doctrine*, spiritual insight and the knowledge of divine things, belonged exclusively to the Church: it has to ordain, and the laity have simply to believe: obedience is their duty – the obedience of faith, without insight on their part. This position of things

¹ *Ibid.* pp. 334-35.

² *Ibid.*, p. 341.

³ *Ibid.*

rendered faith a matter of external legislation, and resulted in compulsion and the stake.¹

8. **The German Reformation.** The Reformation placed the freedom of the spirit centre-stage for the first time. Each individual is free and able to embrace voluntarily the truth of God, whose Spirit dwells within them. The Protestant religion is the religion of truth and freedom and rests the authority of institutions, not upon external forms, customs, and hierarchies, but upon the free will and judgement of autonomous individuals. ‘This is the essence of the Reformation: Man is in his very nature destined to be free.’² Since the Reformation, this idea has spread around the world and has never been seriously challenged for any length of time. It was this spirit of the Reformation that paved the way to the reconciliation of Individual and Collective Reason and Freedom that is the key to the modern realisation of the Absolute Idea. Hegel expressed this in strong terms:

The principle of Free Spirit is here made the banner of the World, and from this principle are evolved the universal axioms of Reason. Formal Thought – the Understanding – had been already developed; but Thought received its true material first with the Reformation, through the reviviscent concrete consciousness of Free Spirit. From that epoch Thought began to gain a culture properly its own: principles were derived from it which were to be the norm for the constitution of the State. Political life was now consciously regulated by Reason. Customary morality, traditional usage lost its validity; the various claims insisted upon, must prove their legitimacy as based on rational principles. Not till this era is the Freedom of Spirit realized.³

Put simply, with the discovery of individual subjective freedom and reason, the challenge was now created to ensure that the external world be characterised by the same qualities of freedom and reason and thus realise the harmony between subjective and objective spirit.⁴

9. **The French Revolution.** This was the great application of the idea that all people are free and equal in the secular sphere – the sphere of Objective Spirit – and that Reason is the measure of all things.

Never since the sun had stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around him had it been perceived that man’s existence centres in his head, i.e. in Thought, inspired by which he builds up the world of reality.⁵

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

² *Ibid.*, p. 417.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

The Revolution's levelling process was necessary to finally liberate man from the realm of nature. All hereditary claims to power were abolished. Some men are no longer aristocrats or kings or slaves by accident of birth. All are free by virtue simply of being human. Freedom is understood to be an essential part of what it means to be a human being. The French Revolution represented a great attempt to remould the State in accordance with principles of free, rational, self-determination. 'No structure founded on the authority of tradition,' writes Taylor, 'the divine order of things, is to be respected or obeyed.'¹ However: the French revolution unleashed the principle of the general will but it did not know how to embody that in determinate forms. In seeking after universal freedom for everyone it destroyed every inherited structure of authority and social organisation. Humans, however, cannot engage with an unstructured society and the Revolution did not know how to form these. The popular will could destroy but not build, and this led to the excess of violent energy. 'Universal freedom', wrote Hegel in response to the French Revolution, 'can produce no positive work or deed; only *negative action* remains to it; it is only the *fury* of destruction.'²

10. **Modern Prussian State.** This was the highest level of consciousness yet attained. The Prussian state incorporated the idea of equality and freedom from French Revolution, but tempered it and formed it as an expression of Objective Spirit through the laws and constitution and bureaucracy of Germany. Careers were open to everyone. The state thus comes to objectivise human reason and freedom. Modern western civilisation as exemplified by Germany is the most advanced civilisation there has been since it is closest to the Truth – it is most aware that humans are free and self-determining through reason. Indeed, within the world of Absolute Spirit, that is to say, in the world of ideas like Philosophy, the Spirit attained to self-consciousness of its nature as rational freedom as seen in the work of Hegel himself. In the philosophy of Hegel the collective mind knows itself and the world as Reason and Freedom.

In the modern state, the Spirit has attained to a condition of what Hegel calls concrete freedom. He elucidates it thus:

Concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for their right (as they do in the sphere of the family and civil society) but, for one thing, they also pass of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and for another thing, they know and will the universal; they even recognise it as their own substantive mind; they take it as their end and aim and are active in its pursuit.³

¹ Taylor, *Hegel*, p. 405.

² Quoted *ibid.*, p. 416.

³ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 438.

The End of History?

‘History’, summarises Taylor, ‘reaches its culmination in a community which is in conformity with reason; or, we could also say, one which embodies freedom...’¹ Does the Western European state as exemplified by Prussia represent a community in conformity with reason, and thus constitute the End of History? Two considerations suggest that it might do.

1. Hegel’s philosophy of history implies that there is an end of history – a point to which history is inevitably tending, and which, once reached, the dialectic of history will cease. If history is indeed the realisation of the Concept of Freedom and Reason in the World as the Absolute Idea as embodied in the Objective Spirit of the State, then there must be an End of History when this end is attained and consciousness cannot deepen or advance any further. The Absolute Truth in all its rich diversity is grasped as a whole. The Subjective Spirit of the individual consciousness recognises in the Objective Spirit of the State its own essence – it recognises the State as perfect Reason and perfect Freedom and thus recognises itself and is at home in the world.
2. Hegel often suggested that nineteenth century Europe represented the end of history due to the universal attainment of freedom and reason. Thus:

The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning.²

The Christian world is the world of completion; the principle is fulfilled and thereby the end of days is come.³

Such statements apparently suggest that Hegel envisaged Western Europe, or Germany, as realising the Absolute Idea and thus bringing history to an end. ‘Freedom has found the means of realising its Ideal – its true actuality’.⁴ In short:

The Concept = The Idea

However, two arguments suggest that this may not be true, and that history may not, after all, have come to an end.

1. While we may inhabit a world of completion, in which the Spirit tends to realise its essence as Reason and Freedom, this does not mean that the world is completed – there remains scope for the Idea to more fully correspond to the Concept and for Objective Spirit to become more rational and more free. Interestingly, Hegel appeared to suggest that it is to America that the world must look for the next stage in the development of the Spirit: ‘America is

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 103.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴ Quoted in Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*, p. 235.

therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the world's history shall reveal itself...'¹

2. Hegel himself, and especially in the *Philosophy of Right*, appears more pessimistic regarding the trends within modern society, which he holds to be developing in ways that run contrary to the attainment of pure reason and pure freedom. Three tendencies, in particular, threaten this consummation of the Absolute Idea:
 - a. The growth of inequality and poverty. Those that are absolutely or relatively poor cannot be properly free and self-determining – for example they cannot have full access to justice in the state – and so all men are **not** free in reality.
 - b. Vested interest groups within Civil Society put pressure upon, and corrupt, the State and in so doing hinder its capacity to deliver universal rational justice and governance.
 - c. The poor tend to lose access to the truth of religion – and religion is essential for freedom and to perceive the reason underlying physical existence. It is, remarks Hegel, the general form in which Truth exists for *non-abstract* consciousness.'²

These tendencies clearly pose a threat to the universal realisation of freedom – and thus the End of History. There would seem to be, in the words of McCarney, 'a structural fault' running through Hegel's work: in terms of Reason, history must be a dialectical progress of the consciousness of freedom and the subjective and objective reign of Reason. There must be progress in History. Yet, in reality, Civil Society was developing in ways that contradict this, with inequality, especially, leading to irrationality and unfreedom.'³

Hegel recognised this but his response was fatalistic – he was unable to arrive at a solution to the problem: which suggests that he, at least, was no World Historical Individual!

Summary Remarks

In Hegel's view, Universal History is exclusively occupied with showing how the World Spirit comes to a recognition of its own essential nature as Free Reason. 'The History of the World', declares Hegel, 'is nothing but the development of the Idea of Freedom.'⁴ To put this in less formalistic terms, what Hegel is saying is that history is the process by which the collective consciousness of humans – which IS Spirit – comes to recognise that the essential nature of the human consciousness is to be rational and

¹ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 86.

² *Ibid.*, p. 445.

³ McCarney, *Hegel on History*, p. 189.

⁴ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, p. 456.

free. To be truly human is to be rational and free in a rational and free world. Now, Freedom and Reason are the essence of Spirit (i.e. the collective human consciousness) from the very beginning. But at first they are only implicit in Spirit. They are present only as an abstract Concept. This Concept begins to become real when it assumes the form of an Idea. An Idea is an actual thought held by humans regarding their essential nature and the world they inhabit. The Idea that fully grasps the Freedom and Reason of humans and the world is called the Absolute Idea. The Absolute Idea is the complete realisation in reality of the Concept. Universal History is the narrative of how the Idea develops through stages until it realises the initial implicit Concept. It is the tension between the Concept and its Idea that drives history, and hence once the Absolute Idea is arrived at the tension between Concept and Idea ends and with it History. The Spirit has arrived at full and true self-consciousness. That is, humans have grasped that their essence is Rational Freedom. At this point History ends. At first, the Ideas humans form regarding their nature fall far short of this Truth about themselves. This is because humans are not only thinking beings – they are natural beings immersed in daily life. Spirit must work its way to self-consciousness through this initially unpromising material. Spirit is, says Hegel, ‘at war with itself’ and its development is no royal road to its realisation as Freedom and Reason – its development is a struggle. In terms of Ideas, this development is the Dialectic, as Ideas generate conflicting Ideas which contest and synthesise and develop still fuller and truer Ideas, always tending towards the Absolute Idea. Further contributing to the messiness of history is the fact that, while humans are the vehicle of the development of Spirit as Reason and Freedom, they do not self-consciously act with this objective in mind. Over their history humans have been unaware of the Concept of Spirit and their own essence as free and rational. What has motivated them has been the passion to realise their limited and local objectives. However, in pursuing their own interests they have, unwittingly, served the development of the Idea and have thus been the tool of the progress of consciousness. This is the Cunning of Reason, best exemplified in the World Historical Individuals, who shift the consciousness of peoples from one stage to the next by their intuitive grasp of the potentialities of their time. By this means States are formed, and these states, constituted by laws and constitutions and characterised by their own specific forms of art, religion and philosophy, become ever more rational and free, and it is in and through these states that the Spirit takes Objective form in the life of humans, and the individuals who make up the State become ever more aware that they, as Subjective consciousnesses, are rational and free. It is when the Objective Spirit realised in the State is wholly rational and free, and the individual consciousnesses know that they are rational and free and see their rationality and freedom in the State, that the Absolute Idea of the Concept of Spirit is realised.¹ At this point the collective mind of humans is truly and finally aware that its essence is rational freedom. Spirit has attained to the self-consciousness that was its goal and

¹ C.f. *Ibid.*, p. 456.

has gone from being merely an abstract idea to a concrete reality and Universal History will have ended.