

Introduction

Will Dudley

“History,” Hegel emphasizes, has a double meaning: it refers both to the course of human events, and to the writing that strives to comprehend those events and impress their significance upon human consciousness. These two senses of “history” are necessarily linked, according to Hegel, for the course of events transforms human consciousness—our understanding of the world and ourselves—and human consciousness informs the contributions we make to the ongoing course of events.

Hegel thus regards human beings as thoroughly historical creatures. What we are is determined by what we do; what we do is determined by what we understand ourselves to be; and what we understand ourselves to be is determined by what we have been. Our history—the events that have led to our present condition, and our awareness of those events—generates the possibilities we envision for that which we might become.

Our historical nature is manifest, Hegel thinks, in all of our endeavors. We actualize our self-understanding (“objectify our spirit”) in our legal, moral, social, economic, and political practices and institutions. At the same time, we express our self-understanding in aesthetic, religious, and philosophical forms. Our appreciation of the truths presented in art, religion, and philosophy makes our self-understanding increasingly explicit, which hastens its transformation. Our transformed self-understanding motivates further upheavals in the practical arenas of law, morality, social custom, economics, and politics. These intertwined developments of human self-understanding and its worldly objectifications are the stuff of history.

Hegel's philosophy of history aims to comprehend the trajectory and most important moments of human development. The key to such comprehension, Hegel claims, is the concept of freedom. Hegel believes that the capacity and desire for freedom are definitive of humanity, and that all humans therefore seek to establish the conditions in which they can be free. Because freedom can be understood in many different ways, however, people have produced a great variety of cultures, despite sharing the same ultimate goal. Hegel attempts to make sense of this cultural variety by ordering the possible understandings of freedom from the least to the most adequate, from those that grasp the truth only partially (or abstractly) to those that grasp it most fully (or concretely). He then identifies cultures that have actualized these understandings of freedom in their legal, moral, social, economic, political, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical endeavors. Hegel employs the resulting mapping of cultures onto understandings of freedom to define historical epochs. These epochs, he concludes, are constitutive of the historical process through which human beings have gradually come to understand the freedom that is their own defining characteristic, and in so doing have been able to achieve an increasingly complete liberation.

Hegel's account of history contains some of his most famous claims and formulations, almost all of which remain controversial. It is in history, for example, that the equivalence of the rational and the actual—which Hegel notoriously asserts in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*—is said to emerge. History reveals the actualization of freedom and, Hegel contends, everything that actualizes freedom is “rational” (despite the fact that the proximate causes of liberation are often accidental, violent, and even immoral). Hegel recognizes that human endeavors frequently make no contribution to freedom, and are sometimes positively detrimental to it, but he refuses to grant that such undertakings, though undeniably real, deserve to be called “actual” in the proper sense of the term. “History,” in other words, does not include everything that happens (no matter how important such happenings may be to the people who experience them) but is limited to those events that play a part in the actualization of freedom.

The fact that human development and freedom have been advanced by events causing intense and widespread suffering leads Hegel to refer to history as a “slaughter bench.” Within the apparently meaningless slaughter, however, Hegel discerns the “cunning of reason,” a colorful personification of the idea that actions often serve the rational end of freedom even when the people carrying them out have no intention of doing so. The cunning of reason is a secular version of the religious myth of divine providence, according to which the apparently incomprehensible

and painful course of events is in fact accomplishing the plan of God. By comprehending and bringing to consciousness the necessary operation of reason within the world, the philosophy of history functions, according to Hegel, as a theodicy, an account that reconciles the existence of suffering and evil with the ultimate goodness of the world.

The agents of reason, those whose deeds do the most to further the actualization of freedom, Hegel calls “world historical” individuals and peoples. In the course of time, they have inspired and led humanity to fulfill its potential for self-determination. Hegel traces the path of this fulfillment from East to West, asserting that the consciousness of freedom and its objectification in the world first appeared in Asia and then spread to Europe, intensifying in ancient Greece before culminating in modern Germany. Hegel refers to humanity’s achievement of an adequate understanding and actualization of freedom as “the end of history,” and the claim that history has such an end—in the dual sense of both a goal toward which it aims, and a moment in time at which it accomplishes that goal—is among his most controversial of all.

The chapters in this volume represent the very best in contemporary scholarship on Hegel and history, and collectively they address all of the important and disputed topics in the field. They are organized thematically into four groups, each of which concentrates on a particular constellation of questions and problems.

Part I: Past, Present, and Future

The four chapters in the first section of the volume engage, in different ways, the various interpretations and implications of Hegel’s claim that history has an end, toward which it necessarily progresses, and at which it has already arrived. This claim immediately calls into question the status of the present and the future in Hegel’s philosophy of history. If the actualization of freedom brought history to an end in the nineteenth century, what is the significance of that which has since transpired, is currently transpiring, or has yet to transpire? What, if anything, can Hegel contribute to the comprehension of ongoing human events and development?

William Maker, in “The End of History and the Nihilism of Becoming,” argues that a proper interpretation of Hegel’s claim that history has been completed leads not to nihilistic resignation in the face of closure and stasis, but rather to an appreciation of the openness and dynamism of the modern era. The end of history coincides with the beginning of modernity, with the insight that freedom involves radical self-criticism

and the rejection of unjustified authority. The implication of this insight for modern philosophy is that it must proceed without accepting as given any foundational presuppositions, which is what Hegel claims to have undertaken and accomplished in his own system. The correlative implication for modern life is that it must proceed without accepting as given any traditional prescriptions. Modernity demands a radical self-legitimation of the norms that justify thinking and action. The end of history thus marks, Maker contends, the onset of self-determination, genuine freedom, in both theoretical and practical endeavors.

Maker draws upon his interpretation of the end of history to make a case that it is Hegel, rather than Nietzsche, who offers a postfoundationalist philosophy that can account for both the becoming intrinsic to being (successfully responding to the challenge posed by Parmenides) and the norms intrinsic to freedom (successfully responding to the challenge posed by nihilism). Maker's view is that although Nietzsche is often celebrated as the thinker of postfoundational becoming, the will to power functions as an implicit foundation in his thought, and one that makes nihilism inevitable by undermining the possibility of legitimate norms. In contrast, Hegel's systematic philosophy and the end of history that it announces herald the onset of a truly modern epoch, one that secures normativity precisely by insisting that thinking and living be self-determining.

The relationship between Hegel's modern demand for the justification of norms and utopianism is the subject of Mario Wenning's essay, "Hegel, Utopia and the Philosophy of History." Wenning argues that Hegel appropriates utopian thinking selectively, by rejecting the longing for a transcendent escape from actuality while incorporating the conception of humanity as progressively transforming and improving itself. Wenning attributes Hegel's rejection of transcendence to his analysis of the French Revolution, which he saw as destroying traditional authority in the name of abstract ideals that proved incapable of regenerating and sustaining a concrete alternative.

Hegel responded to the failure of transcendent ideals, according to Wenning, by undertaking a "historical genealogy" of normativity, and ultimately locating the source of norms in the concept of freedom. Hegel then adopted the regulative hypothesis, Wenning contends, that history itself exhibits tendencies toward the actualization of freedom, which is what Hegel means when he says there is "reason in history." Wenning reads Hegel's philosophy of history as testing this hypothesis by tracing the progressive emergence of the tendencies toward freedom in particular human cultures. The resulting narrative then sanctions retrospective judgments that certain moments in the progression were

“necessary,” given the context established by the moments that came before. Wenning intriguingly compares such historical necessity to the necessity we often attribute to the progression of elements in a good piece of music, which he points out is compatible with the music (or history) containing surprising developments.

Wenning concludes that Hegel’s attempt to identify rational tendencies in history aims at enabling us to reconcile ourselves with it. Such reconciliation leads neither to happiness nor to quietism, in Wenning’s view, but rather to taking responsibility for history as our own, and so to a critical comprehension of the present that can give impetus to future reforms.

Karin de Boer agrees that Hegel is optimistic about our prospects of reconciling with the past, and that such reconciliation depends upon comprehending the historical moments in which the actualization of freedom has been advanced. In “Hegel’s Account of the Present: An Open-Ended History,” she argues, however, that Hegel is much less optimistic about the possibility of achieving reconciliation with the modern world. This is because Hegel acknowledges, according to de Boer, that modernity confronts us with economic and political conditions that might prove impossible to comprehend. Indeed, these conditions give rise to conflicts—especially those between poverty and wealth, individual citizens and the state—that threaten freedom with destruction.

Hegel calls for the development of institutions capable of mediating these conflicts, but acknowledges that their successful mediation cannot be guaranteed. Consequently, de Boer encourages us to understand Hegel’s stance toward the modern world as tragic: the institutions of modernity have actualized freedom as fully as possible, and yet they generate unavoidable conflicts capable of destroying both freedom and the institutions themselves. There is no escape from this predicament, de Boer concludes, because Hegel has demonstrated that no dialectical improvement upon the modern conception of freedom is possible. To be free, we must be modern, but being modern, we are always a threat to our own liberation.

John McCumber suggests that Hegel can comprehend some of the most pressing modern threats to freedom—including the cold war and religious fundamentalism—but only if we learn to employ Hegel’s approach to the philosophy of history independently of the particular master narrative that he used it to develop. In “Hegel and the Logics of History,” McCumber emphasizes that Hegel’s philosophy of history is intended to offer not an explanation of the mechanisms by which things have come to be, but rather a schema for understanding what things are. When successful, it enables us discriminate between those

features of phenomena that are merely contingent and inconsequential, and those that are basic and effective.

McCumber argues, however, that no single schema can be adequate for understanding historical agents and events, because such agents and events are always transformed by their encounters with that which they are not. Some of these transformations are sufficiently fundamental that they require us to change the categories we use in our attempts to understand the newly arisen phenomena. Consequently, the comprehension of history requires multiple logics, rather than a single logical narrative. Hegel's system nonetheless remains of value, in McCumber's view, because it offers us a rich and powerful set of categories, which we can deploy piecemeal to illuminate the events with which we are confronted.

McCumber proceeds to practice the method he recommends, demonstrating how the logical categories Hegel used to criticize Fichte's social theory can also be used to reveal the falsity of the alternatives that defined the cold war in the twentieth century. He then uses Hegel's logical concept of the "excluding one" to analyze the contemporary conflict between decisive individualism and submissive fundamentalism. McCumber's conclusion is that the future belongs to neither of these, but rather to the infrastructure upon which the preservation and expansion of freedom depends.

Part II: History, Geography, and Race

The two papers in this section of the volume undertake to determine whether Hegel's philosophy of history, which proclaims that the goal of humanity has been achieved with the actualization of self-conscious freedom in nineteenth-century Germany, is either Eurocentric, or racist, or both.

Andrew Buchwalter answers negatively the question posed in the title of his essay: "Is Hegel's Philosophy of History Eurocentric?" Buchwalter argues that Hegel offers a normative reconstruction of history, which evaluates cultures and events according to the extent to which they actualize freedom, and in doing so aims to cultivate an ongoing commitment to the practical project of liberation. This project, so defined, cannot accord special status to the modern West, or to any other particular time or place, because the only legitimate criterion of distinction is the degree to which freedom has been actualized. Hegel's reconstructive account of history thus attempts to identify the rational and irrational

aspects of each culture, those aspects that are in accordance with, and those that are contrary to, the requirements of freedom.

Although Hegel's philosophy of history cannot presuppose the superiority of Europe, it does of course conclude that European modernity actualizes freedom more fully than any other historical culture. Buchwalter points out, however, that Hegel regards freedom as universally and essentially human, not as the special prerogative of Europe. Moreover, Hegel remains critical of European societies, none of which is perfectly rational, and all of which pose economic and political challenges that threaten the freedom of their people. Finally, Buchwalter adds, Hegel understands freedom, at both the individual and the cultural level, to require recognition of the autonomy of others, and so to be a principle that demands mutual respect and openness, while precluding unilateral domination.

Sûrya Parekh grants that Hegel claims his philosophy of history is governed by impartial norms of rationality and freedom, but wonders whether geography and race are in fact merely contingent factors in the narrative. More generally, he challenges us to consider whether it is possible for philosophy to distinguish between those factors to which it attributes historical necessity, and those that it relegates to the sphere of contingency. In "Hegel's New World: History, Freedom, and Race," Parekh focuses on two particular ways in which Hegel appears to violate his own claim to impartiality by grounding historical judgments on considerations of race.

First, Parekh argues, Hegel denies to inhabitants of the New World the rationality that he purportedly regards as universally human. This is indicative, Parekh contends, of a metaphysical distinction Hegel presupposes between the Old and New Worlds, and upon which he bases his belief in the intrinsic inferiority of the inhabitants of the latter. This inferiority includes, on Parekh's reading, an incapacity for education, which makes it impossible for Hegel to believe that those born and raised in the New World could ever be rational or free.

Second, Parekh turns to two passages in which Hegel links freedom to blood. In the first of these, Hegel ascribes the impulse to freedom only to those native Americans who have at least some European blood. In the second, Hegel connects the failure of Catholic lands in Europe to accept the Reformation to the Roman blood of their inhabitants.

By bringing these issues to our attention, Parekh aims to place the burden on those who defend Hegel's impartiality to explain the passages in question. If Hegel's philosophy of history is neither racist nor Eurocentric, then how, Parekh forces us to ask, can it link ancestral

blood to freedom, or draw metaphysical distinctions between the Old World and the New?

Part III: The Historicity of Morality, Ethical Life, and Politics

The third section of the volume contains four chapters, all of which are concerned with Hegel's accounts of the ways in which the elements of "subjective spirit" and "objective spirit" undergo, and contribute to, historical development. The essays treat, respectively, the historicity of selfhood, moral imputation, ethical life, and political organization.

Allegra de Laurentiis, in "Spirit without the Form of Self: On Hegel's Reading of Greek Antiquity," traces the evolution of self-knowledge and subjectivity from ancient Greece to the Medieval and Modern eras. She argues both that the transformation of subjectivity is linked to advances in self-knowledge, and that it was just such an advancement and transformation of selfhood that led to the downfall of the Greek way of life.

The primary deficiency in the ancient Greek self-understanding, as de Laurentiis reads Hegel, was ignorance of subjective freedom and the ethical institutions appropriate to it. The Greeks therefore had only limited knowledge, based on intuition rather than concepts, of the truth of what it is to be human, and so failed to attain selfhood in the fullest sense.

This failure of the ancient Greeks is understandable, de Laurentiis argues, for Hegel demonstrates that truly adequate self-knowledge and subjectivity are intrinsically historical achievements, which could not emerge at such an early stage of human development. The consequences of this failure are therefore also understandable: Greek society made sharp distinctions of caste and class, on the basis of which it enslaved some and denied property rights to others, because it failed to recognize the universality of free human subjectivity. The ancient Greeks, and their chief philosophical representative, Plato, could see such freedom only as a threat to the success and happiness of their communities. This insight proved to be correct, de Laurentiis concludes, for the emerging awareness of, and insistence upon, the universal freedom of individual subjects proved to be incompatible with, and so helped bring to an end, the form of life in ancient Greece.

In "The Historicity of Ethical Categories: The Dynamic of Moral Imputation in Hegel's Account of History," Jason Howard attempts to determine exactly how Hegel understands the development of self-knowledge and subjectivity to take place. In particular, Howard is

interested in the role that moral imputation—the experience of being expected to fulfill ethical obligations, and of feeling guilt when one fails to meet these expectations—plays in these developments. Howard seeks to explain how ethical obligations and moral imputation contribute to the actualization of freedom, and so to the accomplishment of the goal of history.

Howard argues that, for Hegel, the conflicts individuals experience between their own identities and the norms that define their culture drive the transformation of self-consciousness, which in turn is the motor of historical change. Individuals experience these conflicts in the form of guilt, the feeling that results from self-consciously violating cultural norms. Guilt, Howard contends, can be sufficiently powerful to lead individuals to revise their self-understanding in ways that then generate widespread and fundamental change in the culture.

Howard supports his argument by considering two particular historical transformations that Hegel analyzes as having been driven by conflicts between individual identities and the prevailing cultural norms. The first of these is the demise of ancient Greek ethical life, which was catalyzed in part by the conflicts individuals experienced between obligations to their families and obligations to the state—most famously discussed by Hegel in the section of the *Phenomenology* devoted to Antigone. The second case considered by Howard is the rise of Europe, which was precipitated by the erosion of formerly stable traditional norms. What these two very different historical developments have in common, Howard argues, is a general dynamic, according to which moral imputation and guilt cause identity change, which causes cultural change, which ultimately advances the actualization of freedom, bringing history closer to its goal.

Nathan Ross, in “The Mechanization of Labor and the Birth of Modern Ethicality in Hegel’s Jena Political Writings,” examines the importance of economic processes to the historical transformation of self-consciousness and ethical life. The early Jena writings offer Hegel’s richest account of these issues and, Ross claims, the conclusions they draw are consistent with the later treatment of civil society in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Hegel understands labor, according to Ross, as a mechanistic force within the organic social whole. Civil society is like a machine in the sense that it is composed of individual working parts that interact to produce results at which none of those parts intentionally aims. Each free agent laborer seeks to serve his or her own particular interests, and only incidentally does such self-serving behavior contribute to the functioning of the larger economy. Labor thus isolates individuals from the common goals and universal interests of society.

Paradoxically, however, Hegel regards the mechanism of civil society as strengthening the social organism within which it operates, Ross argues. This is because certain processes intrinsic to a healthy economy also prove to enhance the ethical bonds of the community. For example, economic interaction teaches people to relate to each other as equals, qua producers and consumers. Such recognition of mutual equality then provides the basis for the emergence of the relations of right that are the core of ethical life. Economic activity also binds individuals together in virtue of the common interests that it generates: the satisfaction of each agent comes to depend upon the conditions that make possible the satisfaction of the others, since no one can labor and consume successfully unless the whole economy thrives.

Ross cautions that the mechanism of civil society is not always conducive to the health of the social organism, which is the reason Hegel advocates careful economic regulation. If the economy is allowed to become an independent sphere, treated as an end in itself, rather than as a component organ that exists to enable the flourishing of a free community, then economic rights and interests become falsely regarded as the ultimate social goal. Making such rights and interests absolute, on Ross's reading of Hegel, fosters and entrenches class differentiation, which undermines consciousness of the organic nature of the community.

Mark Tunick explores the relationship between Hegel's claims that the most rational form of political organization is hereditary monarchy and that his philosophy of history proceeds empirically. In "Hegel's Claim about Democracy and His Philosophy of History," Tunick questions whether Hegel's defense of monarchy and critique of democracy are in fact based upon, or are even compatible with, a careful empirical study of history.

Tunick notes first that Hegel deems democracy to be more appropriate for some peoples than for others. Indeed, Hegel regards democracy as having been necessary for the ancient Greeks, but as unsuitable for the modern era, in which a strong sense of individual interest has taken root. Such individual interest, Hegel worries, needs to be mediated by a concern for the universal good, which he believes democracy to be incapable of fostering. Consequently, Hegel concludes, a democracy of people concerned primarily with their own individual interests will fail to care adequately for the needs of the whole (and thus, ironically, will ultimately fail to care adequately for the very individuals who are attempting to care for themselves).

Tunick analyzes Hegel's conclusion concerning the incompatibility of democracy and modernity as resting upon two premises. The first

is that individualism fails to actualize the truth of freedom as fully as possible, which Hegel attempts to establish on metaphysical or conceptual grounds. The second premise is that modern democracies make individualism absolute, and therefore actualize freedom imperfectly. The grounds for this second claim are purportedly empirical, however, Tunick argues, Hegel's evidence is much too weak to support his case. Tunick therefore concludes that Hegel simply presupposes that modern democracy is based upon the principle of sovereign individualism, and fails to consider alternative forms of modern democracy that incorporate interests representing social groups of various types.

Part IV: The Philosophy of History and Religion

The two chapters in the fourth and final section of the volume investigate, in quite different ways, the relationship between religion and Hegel's philosophy of history.

In "Hegel's Philosophy of World History as Theodicy: On Evil and Freedom," Pierre Chérelat evaluates alternative interpretations of Hegel's claim that the philosophy of history is also theodicy. Chérelat argues that Hegel does not claim to have solved the classical problem of evil in the monotheistic tradition—that of explaining how evil is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and benevolent deity—but rather to have shown how evil can be reconciled with the goodness of the world. Hegel does this, according to Chérelat, by demonstrating that the world is governed by reason, and thus that history is not a merely contingent series of events, but a necessary development toward the actualization of freedom, which is the ultimate good. "God," on Chérelat's reading of Hegel, is a religious term intended to personify the idea that reason is at work in history, and that the goodness of freedom can enable the transcendence of evil.

Chérelat emphasizes, however, that transcending evil is not the same thing as justifying it. Hegel does not, on his view, believe that evil is justified in virtue of being a necessary means to the end of freedom. This position, Chérelat points out, is neither philosophically compelling—because much of the evil in the world clearly fails to advance freedom at all—nor proposed in Hegel's texts.

Freedom can transcend evil without justifying it, Chérelat contends, by enabling us to rise above our own particularity, and thereby to overcome suffering by accepting its necessity. Chérelat distinguishes this position, which he attributes to Hegel, from Stoic resignation. The chief difference, on Chérelat's reading, is that Hegel holds that the

blessedness of freedom, which is enjoyed through participation in ethical life, actually reduces the suffering we experience in the world.

Glenn Magee argues that Hegel's philosophy of history is deeply indebted to religious sources. More specifically, contends Magee, the central theses in Hegel's philosophy of history can all be found in the "irrationalist" tradition of Jewish mysticism. In "Hegel's Philosophy of History and Kabbalist Eschatology," Magee makes the case that important elements of the mystical Jewish tradition were inherited and adapted by Swabian "speculative pietism," which then had a significant, if largely indirect, influence on Hegel.

Magee traces the fundamental ideas common to the Kabbalah and Hegel's philosophy of history, and the intellectual path by means of which the former could have influenced the latter. The three most important shared theses identified by Magee are: (1) History has a knowable order with an endpoint; (2) The endpoint of history occurs in time; and, (3) At the endpoint of history, God is objectified in human institutions. These principles of the Jewish Kabbalah were incorporated in the Christian mysticism of Jacob Boehme, and then in seventeenth-century Swabian pietism, especially through the work of Friedrich Christoph Oetinger. Magee emphasizes the importance of Oetinger to the development of Schelling, who borrowed from the ideas of his pietist predecessor in both his *System of Transcendental Idealism* and *The Ages of the World*. Hegel's awareness of this influence on Schelling is most clearly evident, Magee believes, in his famous declaration that "the truth is the whole," which is nearly a quotation from Oetinger, and is strategically placed in the *Phenomenology* to ensure that Schelling would get the reference.

Magee cautions that he does not intend to claim that the Jewish Kabbalah, by way of Swabian pietism, was the sole influence that gave impetus and direction to Hegel's philosophy of history. His goal is rather to demonstrate that these religious traditions were an important factor in Hegel's intellectual development, and that as such they are deserving of greater attention than they have so far received in philosophical scholarship.

Nearly two centuries after declaring "the end of history," Hegel remains a rich source of insights into our historical nature and its manifestations in every domain of human endeavor. The essays collected here interpret and develop those insights, while also challenging Hegel's philosophical approach to comprehend present and future phenomena that he could neither experience nor imagine. The importance of that open challenge ensures that it will be many years before the discussion of Hegel and history reaches its own end.