Does History Make Sense?

Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice

TERRY PINKARD

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The Historical Manifestation of Infinite Ends

What Hegel calls "philosophical history" takes its subject matter, as he puts it, to be "the spirit which is eternally present to itself and for which there is no past."[1] This is, as he notes, something that looks itself like a contradiction: "How can what is outside history, since it is not subject to change, still have a history?"[2] The answer is that spirit—or what will amount to the same thing, social human mindedness—is that which is both the same thing in its development and yet whose development is so path dependent that it could not be what it becomes without having traversed that path.[3] How is that supposed to work itself out?

To stand in an order of thoughts is to have a place within a shape of life in which ethical principle and individual psychology are linked by the mediation of various institutions and practices. This link between individual psychology and principle is neither completely contingent nor is it quite what would nowadays be expressed as exhibiting anything like an analytic conceptual connection. It is, for example, not a matter of complete contingency that a principle, such as the early modern principle of putting honor before all else, and the particular psychology of the individual for whom "honor" is such a binding ideal, takes on the shapes it indeed assumed. Attacks on honor are, in that context, reasons that motivate. Nor is it merely

a contingent matter that for the psychology of a late-modern individual, for whom something like the rule of law and negotiation are of prime importance, it is not merely an accident that he would be less likely to think that honor required him to avenge himself even beyond the bounds of law. And neither is it exactly a synthetic a priori link, a condition of all possible experience. It has more to do with Hegel's difficult logic of "the concept"—in which, "as existing for itself, the universal *particularizes* itself and is therein identity with itself."[4] For subjects who are trying to comprehend the world and themselves what is truly real (or "actual") is the unity of concept and objectivity, which Hegel calls the "Idea." Nor does Hegel hold (and does not even have to take a stance on the idea) that human desires are infinitely malleable. As subjects, we are self-conscious primates, and we have the organic desires of such primates. Moreover, he also accepts Aristotle's conception of there being certain facts about the human condition that every person must confront: Fear, anger, desire for status (wealth and honor), pleasure, pain, etc. These are not completely socially constructed matters, however much they are socially inflected. We know them by virtue of being the rational animals we are, by knowing, that is, the shape of life in which we live. Orders of thoughts are thus not mere collections of principles. They involve a unity of norm and practice, principle and psychology, and a picture of how that whole fits together. These unities of psychology and principle involve, in Hegel's own terminology, an "Idea" or even several "Ideas," a more concrete conception of how our basic concepts are actualized in the phenomenal world.

Orders of thoughts are, when practical, concrete constellations of passions, principles, and practices that fit into one order.[5] For such orders of thoughts, the issue is always more than whether that order is consistent, that is, more than merely the issue of whether the principles do not contradict each other. It has to do with whether the order itself generates a kind of moral psychology that can be successfully lived or put into practice or with whether the principles generate passions that in turn undermine the authority of the principles. The "Idea" can be at odds with itself in that it can manifest a world that supposedly contains a kind of necessity—for example, the way the ancient world thought of the economic necessity of slavery—and the way that world had to be normatively understood—with slavery as a deeply problematical concept from the ethical point of view even for the

ancient world. In those cases, the principles and norms turn out to be at odds with a comprehension of how the world necessarily has to work. For example, in the case of slavery, many people, in the ancient forms of slavery up to the particularly brutal modern institutions of slavery, had trouble justifying the existence of slavery itself, and yet they could not see how it could be economically, that is, practically, avoided. This was, however, not just a disagreement between reason and the world. It was a disagreement of reason with itself.[6]

Written history—in distinction from the historical events themselves—is thus an account of such orders of thoughts, of the ways in which "laws and principles," or more generally, ideas and orientations, combine with human psychology and the surrounding material culture to generate the events that happen. Part of this view is that certain constellations of principle are bound up more to particular shapes of psychology than are others. (For example, the psychology, and thus also the virtues, of a medieval prince will not be those of a nineteenth-century bookkeeper.) Hegel's question was whether there was anything like a logic to these orders, all taken as "manifestations" of spirit. To answer that question, one would have to ask whether there was any unity to the manifestations, any uniting sense to them.[7]

This is the same as asking whether there is a purpose, an end—a *Zweck*—to these various orders of thoughts, such that if there were such an end, then they could be evaluated in terms of how well they manifest that end and how well they embody it. Moreover, if there is such an end, it would be an "infinite" end. A finite end is one that can be achieved by doing something specific. All ordinary wants are about finite ends. One might want to see a certain movie, and when one has seen it, the end goes away. One might want a drink of water because one is thirsty, and, having had the drink, one's want for a drink of water goes away. Finite ends can arise again and again, and there can in principle be an infinite number of them, with the limits being set only by the contingent limits of human life. (One might want more consumer goods than one's neighbor, he might want more than you, and the list would grow in principle to infinity. One is thirsty, drinks, and no longer is thirsty, and then one gets thirsty again.)

An infinite end, on the other hand, would be not something that can be achieved in any one action but which can only be manifested by various actions. (Happiness, on something like Aristotle's conception of it, might be

one such infinite end, such that many different actions can be manifestations of it.) The end of drinking a glass of water, on the other hand, is fully exhausted by drinking the glass of water. Finite ends may simply add up, but infinite ends are never exhausted by the actions that manifest them. Finite ends—such as drinking the water—expire, but infinite ends have no intrinsic limit. They require a continual sustaining activity for them to be effective. Justice, for example, is not something that a collective enterprise can establish and then tick off the list of things still needing to be done. It must be realized over and over again. An infinite end has no limit at which it has finally been accomplished.[8] One comprehends such an infinite end not when one has added up all the actions that manifest it but when one has comprehended the principle that is at work in the way those actions manifest it. To revert a bit more into Hegel's own terminology: In human action directed in terms of an "Idea"—as a comprehensive understanding of how our "concepts" and "objectivity" work together—an "infinite" concept can be realized in finite actions (as when one acts justly or virtuously). The conception of what it ultimately means to lead a human life is an infinite end.[9]

For there to be such an infinite end in history, it need not be the specific purpose of any particular set of subjects but only of the collectivity taking itself as such a collectivity, as thinking of themselves as a "we" and not just "all of us." Now, in a great number of places, Hegel states that the final end of history is that of freedom, but that is merely the shorthand he adopted in his lectures both for his students (not always as attentive as they were supposed to be) and for the general public attending his lectures.[10] Hegel's shorthand can certainly suggest that all major events in history are aimed at producing a definite end, freedom. However, if that were the case, then freedom would be a finite end, and it is certainly unclear that it could have such absolute importance in that role. After all, as one of many goods, freedom is certainly high on anybody's list, but so is stability, and, for that matter, so are a whole list of other worthy goods (security, prosperity, piety, and so on). Moreover, if freedom were such a finite end, then if we achieved it, we would be done with history. That would be the "end of history"—there would be no more history, just an endless repetition of what would be needed to keep freedom (whatever that would be) in place. To be sure, Hegel has more often than not been credited with that conception, but such a conception would distort his own insistence that freedom is "infinite." If

history involves such an infinite end, then history would end only when there were no more people.

Here is one way to think of it. The infinite "end" of history is more like health than it is like learning a determinate skill. One may achieve various levels of health (one may get sick and recover, or one can get sick and never recover), but health is not something you achieve and then cross it off the list as you move on to other things. Nor is health something that is always there at the front of one's mind when one acts. All those who argue for an "end in the sense of completion" to history confuse infinite with finite ends, including all those who think or thought history ended in either 1806 or 1989.

What Hegel suggests is that there is a deeper need out of which the need for freedom arises so as to become a necessary component of the deeper need. He characterizes this deeper need by a theologically loaded term "reconciliation." Reconciliation in this sense is what is achieved when people have come to terms with the world and each other. To put it broadly: Reconciliation is a matter of making sense of things, where "making sense" is to be understood in a capacious, rather than more narrow, sense. (One can in principle make sense of things in a variety of ways, in the practices of art, religion, theory, or by trying to fit components into a rational plan, and so forth.) True reconciliation has to do with seeing the human world as resting on acceptable reasons, or, again, to put it as loosely as possible, as having a rationale to it. Reconciliation is thus also an infinite end. Reconciliation is thereby tied closely to another concept that Hegel does not often use (except in his early, pre-*Phenomenology* writings), namely, that of legitimation. Hegel's ultimate thesis is that history manifests a human need for such reconciliation—a need for making sense—and, so he argues, it turns out that something like an order of thoughts about "justice as based on freedom"—as the proper unity of principle and psychology—is the only order that can possess the proper legitimation, and that this comes about very late in the development of shapes of life by way of the very determinate failures of earlier and other orders of thoughts.

This desire for reconciliation which history manifests at all points (although it does not manifest it in all, or, for that matter, even very many, of its events) is not a desire that is rooted in some deep biological basis in humanity. If it were, it would only serve as a finite end, like that of hunger or even perhaps of something like glory, honor, or status. It is a desire that

follows from the nature of self-consciousness itself.[11] One of the major points of Hegel's discussion of the origins of mastery and servitude is to show how an unreflective consciousness can be forced to make the step to a reflective consciousness when the giving and asking for reasons transforms itself instead into a life-and-death struggle. Once such authority has been seized by force and implicates others into itself, there is the possibility of its being once again deauthorized. Once there is a distinction between ruler and ruled, the issue of the justice and the legitimacy of such rulership arises. If in order to be real, *wirklich,* effective authority, such authority must be recognized authority, then the lack of legitimacy of any hierarchy of ruler and ruled always remains an open possibility. It is not implausible to say that running throughout human history therefore is a desire to make sense of things which itself engenders in finite humans a desire for justice. Justice, reconciliation, legitimation—all these are components of the infinite end of *Geist* making sense of itself. None of them is a means to some other end. Nor are they mere givens or brute desires that we just happen to have. They are connected with the nature of self-consciousness and with the concrete way we thereby inhabit the human space of reasons.[12]

A crucial part of Hegel's philosophy of history has to do with how the need to make sense of things leads to a conception of justice, which as history develops, transforms itself into a conception of the necessity of freedom. The infinite end at work in history is that of self-comprehension and therefore that of justice, and, in our time, that demand for justice has become a demand for freedom. For that transformation to have taken place, humans had to transform their understanding of themselves. At the heart of historical movement is a deep issue about the nature of human subjectivity itself, both as individual subjects and as collective actors. The struggle over recognition is the ongoing thread in history that is the basis of justice as an infinite end in historical movement. The struggle over authority that is at the basis of the dialectic of mastery and servitude has crystallized into various institutions and practices—the "universal self-consciousness" of which Hegel speaks—that anchor the authority that percolates out of it in practice (or, we might say, which attempts to anchor it while often failing to do so in either the short or the long term). The infinite end of justice is a collectively pursued end that forms itself out of the myriad ways in which authority in social and political life is both accepted and resisted by individual subjects. Out of

the struggles over such authorization, the standard of "eternal justice" takes shape as a proper ordering of human relations that is intrinsically dyadic. What constitutes the "proper order" among people turns out to be the slow moving "Idea" around which history turns.

Spirit thus has an extended temporal shape. We are what we are by being the creatures that bring ourselves under the concept of thoughts—by being moments of an order of thoughts—and that order extends thickly backwards and forwards. Likewise, each of us is a moment in the larger temporal order, looking back to our ancestors and forward to our successors.

This remains part of Hegel's own kind of modified Aristotelian naturalism. The animal acts in light of the demands of its genus. Much of what, for example, rabbits do is what they do because they are rabbits. They act in accordance with their genus, they act intelligently, perhaps set plans of a sort, even do something like make choices, but they do not do it self-consciously. Humans act in accordance with their genus, but those actions are self-conscious. The genus of rational animals is, as Hegel puts it, the genus that is aware of itself as a genus.[13] The lion hunts, and the human may likewise also hunt. However, human subjects also desire a reconciled world, one that makes sense to them and in which they have some justifiable standing. They are what they are by falling under an order of thoughts, which they fall under by virtue of bringing themselves under it. That order of thoughts, in turn, is concretely a social space whose "shadows" are the more abstract conceptions found within the *Science of Logic*.[14]

That this is who we are—"self-interpreting animals," in Charles Taylor's famous phrase—is, for Hegel, something that we have only recently—really, only since Kant—actually understood. And that, so Hegel argues, is the difference that makes the difference.[15]

What Is a Philosophical History of Modernity?

Here are three questions Hegel had to put to himself. First, can we make any sense of there being any kind of infinite end at work in history? Hegel's argument is that there is such an end and that this end takes on different manifestations as history goes forward in time. That of course remains to be shown, and furthermore, it must cohere with history as we can know it, not as we wish it might have been. Second, is there any way by which we could

mark progress in the way that end has been actualized over historical time, that is, whether we are manifesting that end in any better way? It is, after all, not an a priori condition of possible experience that there be such progress. Third, in the process of attempting to answer the question about progress, we must ask whether there is or could be any "logic" to the movement that would legitimate judgments about such progress or whether any such claim to progress is really nothing more than a self-celebration of one's own current age.

A comparison with both Kant's sketch of a philosophy of history and with the second-century historian, Polybius, can perhaps put these questions into greater relief.[16]

Kant structured his sketch of a philosophy of history around both what he thought he had demonstrated about the moral desirability of a cosmopolitan world order and how he had shown that it is at least plausible that such an order will eventually come about, namely, by exploiting our "unsocial sociability" in a way so that our various natural antagonisms will drive us, even more or less against almost all our own intentions, into such a cosmopolitan order. If that is the case, then Kant takes the next question to be: How will history judge us? More specifically: How would future historians writing in an achieved cosmopolitan world order treat us historically? Even more specifically, how would they judge our own actions and efforts in terms of how we either promoted such an order or hindered its arrival (an arrival which is in any event necessary)?[17] Even more specifically: How will history judge me?

Kant in effect asks the question of how it is that a cosmopolitan world order (and thus a partially reconciled world) could and will come about by looking at it from the standpoint of a hypothetical future. Looking at our world from the hypothetical standpoint of a relatively distant future cosmopolitan historian writing about us, we can ask about what in our present circumstances (circa 1784 when Kant wrote his essay) was promoting the cosmopolitan world that eventually came about and what, on the other hand, was standing in its way. For Kant, a philosophical history is one written from the standpoint of such a hypothetical future.[18]

But why should one write history from the standpoint of the future? Hegel's view, in contrast to those of Kant, was that we need not look to the future to write such a history. We need look simply to the here and now.

Why? After the French Revolution, "modernity" was in full swing, and what we need to ask was whether this was necessary as a result of any historical "logic" or whether it itself was only a contingent "appearance"—whether "modernity" is, as it were, only a minor character making its appearance on the world stage and therefore something likely also to soon make its exit, or whether it represented some major new status that was "absolute" for our time. In contrast to this, we might also ask a very different question and wonder whether instead of progress, "modernity" represents perhaps a more brutal fall from grace, a regress in human life rather than progress. (That was certainly how at the time many conservative aristocrats experienced it.)

By 1820, Hegel had published his summary statement of the shape of the modern world, which consisted of a political and social order structured around rights, moral duties, and social goods. That order integrated within itself the rights to life, liberty, and property, and it was populated by moral subjects who took themselves to have binding duties based on universalizable reasons. It anchored itself in the institutional goods that were part of the lives led within the bourgeois family, the emerging civil society of the nineteenth century, and a constitutional, monarchical state with a representative government. The remaining issue was whether this modernity is indeed reconciliatory, or whether it only represented one more disappointment on a road leading to who knows where. We could thus ask: How did we get here and what may we conclude from that? Was it progress?

Hegel merged some themes found within that kind of uptake of Kant's philosophy of history with the account given by the Greek historian, Polybius, written in the second century BC, about the rise and world dominance of Rome. Like Hegel, Polybius also wrote from the standpoint of the here and now. Polybius' aim was to explain to his contemporaries (and, most importantly, to his fellow Greeks) how it was that world history had recently revealed where it was going and how that had turned out to be the Roman dominance of first their Mediterranean world and then eventually of the whole world. His history was intended to show what was essential to that world-historical event and why it is was also irreversible in any short-term way.[19]

Rome had succeeded predominantly because of its unique virtues and its religion. This is not an ephemeral matter, so Polybius argued, and non-Roman

peoples are simply going to have to face up to this fact. Rome's triumph was, moreover, not just that of a local conquest but was of world-historical importance for the reason simply that Rome had made it de facto world-historical. The other candidate for exercising that kind of power—specifically Persia, the other great empire whose borders were near the Mediterranean world and which had staked claims to that world—had on Polybius' account essentially played out its hand, and, as Polybius seemed implicitly to think, was in the process of fading out of the picture. By taking over its world in the way it did, Rome had turned what otherwise might have been merely local history into world history.

In effect, Hegel was arguing a similar point. European modernity was where things had ended up, and the foreseeable future was, so he thought, ineluctably going to be a version of European modernity. The great civilizations of the rest of the world were destined either to fall under its dominance or to atrophy. Whereas Polybius was in effect telling his fellow Greeks to get used to this state of affairs both because this is the end to which history had led them and because there was a partial justification for it, Hegel was, in effect, putting himself forward as a modern Polybius but with a much more robust theoretical underpinning than Polybius himself could have possibly imagined.

Polybius actually gave two different kinds of reasons for Rome's triumph. On the one hand, Rome had triumphed and would continue to do so because of the strengths of its institutions and practices (with its religion as a core part of them), but, on the other hand, as he also stressed, it had also been a matter of "chance" (or "fortune") that had led to Rome's rapid rise and triumph. Looking back on the Roman conquest from a couple of thousand years later, Hegel concluded that Polybius's account of Rome's triumph was merely that of supersession: Rome replaced the other powers vying for dominance of the Mediterranean world. It did this not only by its superior virtues but also by its hard-headed understanding of the relation between power and violence. It had presented the world of its time with a *fait accompli* such that it would now be impossible to revert to the days before its rule. As Hegel saw it, although Polybius' account of Roman superiority left it open that Rome would one day be itself superseded by some other power—such is the nature of *Fortuna*—Polybius' account did not have an understanding of

how Rome might have been not the supersession but the sublation—the *Aufhebung*—of what came before.

Hegel's question for his own day was a version of what was left open in Polybius's account: Was it merely a matter of blind fortune that European modernity had triumphed (such that there was no necessity to its achievement), or was there something about European institutions and practices that meant it was destined to serve as the model of progress for other civilizations? Was there a logic? From our contemporary perspective, all one has to do is state Hegel's questions to elicit what is our typical response, which is: Yes, it was contingent, and no, there was no logic. For Hegel to make even part of his case successfully to us, there are a fair number of hurdles in his way.

Hegel's well-known shorthand for his philosophy of history was that it progresses from ancient despotism (where only one—the emperor—is thought to be free) to the aristocratic societies of the ancient world (where only some were thought to be free) and from there to the modern idea which commits itself to the proposition that all are in principle free. This shows, so Hegel thought, that there was something about European practice that made this conception of universal freedom into a reality and that there was something about the practices of other civilizations that made it impossible for them to reach this conclusion until they had thoroughly transformed themselves.

What was it about European practices and institutions that not merely allowed for that development but also put a pressure on themselves to actualize it? In answering that question, Hegel's own classicism and his own blinders led him awry and ultimately, in many instances, into a distortion of his own views on the right shape of order of thoughts. But that does not mean that he failed utterly to make his case.