

## History as a Philosophic Domain

For Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, History plays a central role in each of their respective philosophies, revealing the dialectical relationship between temporality and the search for meaning. First, Hegel's History is the "object-level" unfolding of the self-determined "Notion," his term of art concerning the classic Idealist problematic of how, as finite beings, we can ever be sure that our objects of knowledge correspond to what there actually "is." For Marx, History remains "dialectical" in the Hegelian sense, but only insofar as the standard Idealist formulation is inverted: instead of self-consciousness determining objects of thought, Marx views ideas and collective practices as the products of material conditions and processes. Furthermore, both Hegel and Marx view History as progressing towards some Truth, either as Freedom (Hegel) or as Communism (Marx), the realization of a classless society. On the other hand, Nietzsche is ostensibly opposed to the notions of progress and Truth in History, conceiving of it as "perspectival." Nevertheless, Nietzsche seems to offer his own notion of progress with his vision of a post-historical *Übermensch*.

Before delving into his *Philosophy of History*, an important clarification ought to be made regarding Hegel's philosophic position: first, Hegel does not think of History as the eternal extension of some transcendent metaphysical One (i.e., Spinoza's *sub specie aeternitatis*), nor does he conceive of it as a mere atomistic flux à la Heraclitus. What Hegel has in mind, rather, is that: (1) History is dialectical, the

“development of Spirit in *Time*”<sup>1</sup>; and (2) it is the self-legislation of “Reason.” But what does Hegel mean by such terms as “Spirit” and “Reason,” and what does any of it have to do with History? The first step towards understanding Hegel is to place him within the context of German Idealism and the Kantian problematic of how to adequately “ground” objects of thought. To make a long story short, Kant makes two decisive moves (the latter of which Hegel rejects): he begins by postulating the fundamental principle of the “transcendental unity of apperception”: that, for example, I not only assert S is P, but *take myself to be asserting that* S is P, or “the Thinking of Thinking,”<sup>2</sup> as Hegel refers to it. The second move Kant makes—the one which Hegel rejects—is to ground self-consciousness in “pure intuition,” or Space and Time as the a priori forms of pure sensible intuition. Hegel’s controversial move, in his own view, is to go beyond Kant’s “subjective skepticism” by arguing that “pure concepts” (Notions) are self-grounding, self-legislating synthetic judgments.<sup>3</sup> In order to make this claim genuinely philosophical (without any appeals to the “beyond”), Hegel returns to the classic Idealist problematic of the “conditions of possibility” as the third form of Kant’s “a priori” logic: for Hegel, any Notional determination of object-hood, the *conditio sine qua non* of consciously apprehending any sensible object, can only come about as a result of having taken into account another self-consciousness, viz. “mutual recognition.” The understanding of the forms of social institutions and collective practices built throughout history around

---

<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> This is what Hegel means by the term “ground-principles” in the Introduction. See: Ibid., pp. 56-57.

such “recognition” is *Spirit*.<sup>4</sup> “Reason,” or what is rational, is merely the way in which these “object-level” manifestations of Spirit’s “coming to itself”<sup>5</sup> accord “absolutely” with their Notions: it thus involves a form of dialectical development, mediated by “activity” as that which makes logically identical *potentiality* and *actuality* (the genesis of practices and their historical details).<sup>6</sup> Which is all to say that Hegel believes that he has moved beyond Kantian skepticism by proving that the Notion is “self-grounded”: he can therefore claim, based on his decision to qualify History as the development of Spirit,<sup>7</sup> that History is progressing towards Freedom precisely because it apprehends the fact that it, and only it, grounds itself, i.e., becomes self-conscious of its implicit Freedom in Notionally mediating what there “is,” in actuality.<sup>8</sup>

In *The German Ideology*, Marx offers his theory of “materialist” History as the progressive development of the forces of production, contra Hegel’s Idealism. For Marx, History begins, not with the coming-to-be of self-consciousness, but rather with the “production of the means to satisfy human needs.”<sup>9</sup> The birth of “productive forces” out of human needs constitutes, for Marx, the foundation of “historical materialism,” the way in which social relations and even consciousness

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness*, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 17 and p. 55. See especially on p. 17 where he claims: “This self-contained existence of Spirit is none other than self-consciousness—consciousness of one’s own being” and “the essence of Spirit is Freedom.”

<sup>8</sup> The difference between “early” and “late” Hegel is that “early” Hegel is concerned primarily with establishing a “ground” for his claims about “self-determining” Notionality whereas “later” Hegel is concerned with proving that such determinations can be seen at the “object-level,” e.g., in History.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition*, pp. 156-157.

itself are, in the last instance, determined by material conditions. As Marx writes: “Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all”<sup>10</sup> and that the “sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse... is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as ‘substance’ and ‘essence of man’...”<sup>11</sup> Although Marx’s emphasis on material conditions opposes any Idealist formulation of History as the “self-realization of Spirit,” etc., his theory of History heavily relies upon the Hegelian dialectic. History is conceived as purposive development, i.e., that the implicit contradiction between/within productive forces and social relations will lead to the overthrow of the bourgeois mode of production by the proletariat to form Communism.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, Nietzsche ostensibly rejects any notion of progress and, in fact, thinks of himself as opposed to any such “History” conceived in this light. Instead, Nietzsche uses the term “genealogy” to designate the critical method of evaluating historically developed power relationships obscured by our reification of various concepts, attitudes, and social relations, similar to Marx’s formulation ideology as “false consciousness.” The most famous example of this method of understanding history can be found in *The Genealogy of Morals*, where Nietzsche utilizes his philological expertise to evaluate the etymological origins of morality. He analyzes the binaries of “good” and “bad,” “good” and “evil,” tracing their

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

development to “noble” and “slave” morality.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Nietzsche views the fixity of historicity and memory, as well as our historical consciousness, as a testament to our domestication of “men” from “beasts,” who lack such slavish *ressentiment*.<sup>14</sup> The dichotomy between “slave” and “noble” thus reflects Nietzsche’s conception of history, not as part of the domain of Truth, but instead as that of a power struggle between various perspectives.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Nietzsche toys with a conception of an affirmative ideal to which History may progress with his vision of the inhuman *Übermensch* who “confronts all earthly seriousness so far... as if it were their most incarnate and involuntary parody.”<sup>16</sup>

The various philosophic attitudes toward History of Hegel-Marx-Nietzsche may now be reformulated into a dialectical triad of Idealist-Materialist-Perspectival. For Hegel, History is the development of Spirit, the result of consciousness determining itself within the domain of collective social practice. For Marx, however, History is the development of productive forces, how material conditions determine consciousness and social being. Finally, for Nietzsche, History is the unity of various perspectives and the way in which they constitute power relationships that govern our consciousness of Time and ourselves. Yet, within all of these formulations, each of the three philosophers offers various visions of progress and freedom, constituting a final triad of Self-Consciousness-Communism-*Übermensch*.

---

<sup>13</sup> See: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, pp. 28, 31, 33, and 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 57-58.

<sup>15</sup> Nietzschean perspectivism, however, is not the same as mere relativism simply because he does not consider all perspectives to be equal.

<sup>16</sup> Nietzsche, p. 299.

### Works Cited

Hegel, G.W.F. *The Philosophy of History*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1956.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, 1989.

Pippin, Robert. *Hegel's Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Tucker, Robert C. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978.