

Monday, April 9, 2012
Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*
§12, 18–25, 27–30, 33, 36–38, 40–50, 61–63, 72, 97–99

Reason in history:

“Philosophy of history” aims to comprehend history of the world as a “rational process.” It brings to history only the concept of “Reason.” OK... but what is “Reason”?

“Reason/Idea” is both “infinite form/power/energy” and “infinite material/substance” that strives after its “Truth/Essence.” (In its “most concrete form,” Reason is God.) Um... OK... but what does that mean?

- “infinite”: better to read this as “overcomes, transcends all apparent limitation” than in a mathematical sense, i.e., “goes on forever, has no largest element”
- “form/power/energy”: A principle of development toward an end. Here, Hegel seems to count on his audience to think of the Aristotelian natures of organisms.
- “material/substance”: What is developed.
- “Truth/Essence”: The end that the development strives to realize.

So, Reason is a principle of development toward an end, which overcomes or transcends all apparent limitation, where what it develops is supplied by itself.

Reason is not something *merely psychological*, which stands opposed to something alien to itself—namely, the world beyond the reasoner’s mind—and has no effect on it.

Reason is at work in the world itself: in very thing the reasoner is reasoning about.

What entitles Hegel to claim that not simply our thought about the world, but also the world itself, is governed by Reason? Some possibilities (and there may well be others):

1. *A religious view*: The world is the image of the mind of God.
2. *A necessary condition of the possibility of knowledge*: How can we ever know the world unless it is governed by the same reason we bring to bear in trying to know it?
 - Importantly, Kant *denied* we could know things-in-themselves: things as they are in abstraction from the spatial and temporal conditions that our experience imposes on them. (Why? Because only what can be experienced can be known, and experience will impose spatial and temporal conditions.) This was one of the most important “apparent limitations” that Hegel thought needed to be “transcended.”
3. *The proof is in the pudding*: Consider how much is explained, how everything comes together, when we view the world as governed by Reason.

Reason’s process of development is “*dialectical*.” The Idea “assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape.” The Idea overcomes the apparent limitations, but at the same time incorporates them, and so becomes fully articulated.

What is the end of Reason? What is the “ultimate design of the world”?

Nature can be divided into:

1. physical nature, or Matter,
2. psychical nature, or “Spirit.”

Reason also the principle of physical nature. But insofar as we are concerned with world history, we are concerned with it as the principle of Spirit.

The “Essence/Truth” of Spirit is “Freedom.” OK, so the end that Spirit is developing toward is its Freedom. But what is Freedom?

“Free”: Dependent only on itself and not on anything else for its existence.

But what is it for *Spirit* to be free?

- Spirit is psychical nature, consciousness. Not any *individual* consciousness, or simply the *sum* of all individual consciousnesses, but *collective human consciousness*, as reflected in the state of development of culture as a whole.
- If Spirit is to be free it can’t be conscious of *something outside itself*. That would make it dependent on something else.
- So, to be free, it must be conscious of itself.
- So, the end of Spirit is self-consciousness.

“OK, but what is it conscious of when it is conscious of itself?”—“Duh: Its Essence/Truth, namely freedom.”

- So, the end of Spirit is consciousness of itself as free.

This may help to explain the initially puzzling contrast with Matter:

- The Essence/Truth of *Matter* is *Gravity*: It strives *toward something outside itself*: e.g., the apple strives toward the center of the Earth.
- The Essence/Truth of *Spirit* is *Freedom*: By contrast, Spirit strives *toward itself*.

So, in plain English, ***history is the story of human culture gradually becoming aware that human beings are free.***

National genius, or the spirit of a people:

Each culture, or historical epoch, is distinguished by the particular stage in the development of self-consciousness of freedom that it represents. This is its defining characteristic, manifested in every dimension of its life: politics, religion, science, art, technology, etc. Understanding its place in world history is the key to understanding it in all its facets.

For example, the stage of self-consciousness of freedom that the ancient Egyptians reached is reflected in such things as their use of hieroglyphics and their mythical figure, the Sphynx!

The “Orientals”:

Do not realize that *human beings as such* are free. They recognize only *one* human being as free: *the despot*. However, since, in his culture, there is no broader conception of freedom, the despot can’t have freedom as an object of his own consciousness. He can’t *will* freedom (e.g., laws that achieve freedom for everyone). Instead, he can only will his own desires, which are given by nature. So, even he isn’t, in the end, free.

The Greeks:

Come closer to realizing that human beings as such are free, but not all the way. They still have slaves. They realize that *some*, but *not all*, are free.

The Germans:

It's the Germans, influenced first by Christianity and later, specifically, by Protestant Christianity: who "were the first to attain the consciousness, that man, as man, is free: that it is the *freedom* of Spirit which constitutes its essence."

What means does Spirit use in order to realize its Idea?

Academics publishing treatises? Let's-all-get-together-and-realize-human-freedom-while-singing-kumbaya marches?

No: Instead, the *private, selfish desires and passions of "World-historical men"* such as Alexander, Caesar, Luther, Napoleon. When the existing culture is holding back, or failing to realize the potential of an emerging, higher degree of self-consciousness of freedom, a World-historical man appears to tear down the old culture and put up a new one in its place.

Why does Spirit use private, selfish desires and passions?

1. Such motivations are powerful spurs to action.
2. By contrast, respect for established practices, prevailing mores, etc. would *inhibit* development. *Disregard for the limits* of the old culture is necessary to forging a new one. "Their power lies in the fact that they respect none of the limitations which justice and morality would impose on them."

The "cunning of Reason": Reason uses men and their passions in order to bring about its ends, without their knowledge or agreement. There is no intention to bring about a higher level of self-consciousness of freedom. Indeed, there isn't even an awareness that that is what is happening. At most, the World-historical figure has only an inchoate sense that the time is somehow "ripe for development."

This progress comes at the price of untold horrors:

But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized—the question involuntarily arises—to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered.

For Hegel, though, the question isn't rhetorical. There *is* a final aim to which all of these horrors have been striving: consciousness of ourselves as free. This is an instance of Hegel's view of political philosophy as working to *reconcile* us to our social world: getting us to see the point or purpose behind what might strike us as hostile, or alien, or arbitrary.

When Spirit becomes conscious of itself as free, what actually takes place in the world?

As Hegel puts the question: "What is the object to be realized by these means; i.e. what is the form it assumes in the realm of reality"?

Answer: the state. "Law, Morality, Government, and they alone, the positive reality and completion of Freedom."

Why? More on this next time, but as a first pass:

- Recall that freedom is not being dependent on anything else.
- When the will wills only what it happens to desire, it depends, for the object of its willing, on nature, on something outside of itself. So it is not really free. “Freedom of a low and limited order, is mere caprice; which finds its exercise in the sphere of particular and limited desires.”
- To be free, the will would have to will itself, its essence. And what is that? Freedom. So to be free, the will must will its own freedom. Moreover, it must do so self-consciously.
- But how can the will will its own freedom? What concrete object could the will will such that it could will its own freedom?
- The state. The state exists to realize freedom in human affairs. So by self-consciously (not simply instinctively, like the ancient Athenian) willing the state and our own place within it, in recognition that the state manifests freedom, we self-consciously will freedom itself and so are truly free.
 - It is the very object of the State that what is essential in the practical activity of men, and in their dispositions, should be duly recognized; that it should have a manifest existence, and maintain its position.
 - It must further be understood that all the worth which the human being possesses—all spiritual reality, he possesses only through the State. For his spiritual reality consists in this, that his own essence—Reason—is objectively present to him, that it possesses objective immediate existence for him.
 - For Law is the objectivity of Spirit; volition in its true form. Only that will which obeys law, is free; for it obeys itself—it is independent and so free.

Note a consequence: Hegel rejects the idea of the (at least pre-Kantian, although he perhaps unfairly attributes it to Kant’s *Doctrine of Right* too) social contract as somehow *restricting* our freedom, in exchange for other benefits or at least more freedom of the same kind. Instead, the state makes possible for us a higher kind of freedom, which would we otherwise could not enjoy, by making it possible for us to will freedom itself.

The error which first meets us is the direct contradictory of our principle that the state presents the realization of Freedom; the opinion, viz., that man is free by *nature*, but that in *society*, in the State—to which nevertheless he is irresistibly impelled—he must limit this natural freedom.

Review Questions:

1. Why, according to Hegel, is it a mistake to view infinite Reason as something merely psychological, which stands opposed to something alien to itself: namely, the world beyond the reasoner’s mind. (Hint: Because it would make Reason finite. But how so? Other answers are also possible.)
2. What point is Hegel making the following passage?

The perpetually recurring misapprehension of Freedom consists in regarding that term only in its *formal*, subjective sense, abstracted from its essential objects and aims; thus a constraint put upon impulse, desire, passion—pertaining to the particular individual as such—a limitation of caprice and self-will is regarded as a fettering of Freedom. We should on the contrary look upon such limitation as the indispensable proviso of emancipation. Society and the State are the very conditions in which Freedom is realized.