



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**

DEPARTMENT FOR  
CONTINUING EDUCATION

# Philosophy of History

Week 3: Hegel

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# teleological

- ‘In history, we must look for a general design [*Zweck*], the ultimate end [*Endzweck*] of the world’ (28)
- generally, the development of reason;
- more specifically, the realization of the political and social institutions which can guarantee freedom

# spirit [*Geist*]

- ‘the history of the world is a rational process, the rational and necessary evolution of the world spirit.’ (29)
- ‘I that is we and we that is I [...] the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence’  
(*Phenomenology of Spirit*, ¶177)

# unintended consequences

- ‘The human passions [...] fulfil themselves and their ends in accordance with their specific nature, and thereby create the edifice [*Gebäude*] of human society in which justice and order are given power over the passions themselves.’ (72)

# the cunning of reason

- ‘Particular interests contend with one another, and some are destroyed in the process. But it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal [i.e. a more rational state of affairs] emerges [...] It is what we may call the *cunning of reason* that it sets [or ‘allows’: *lässt*] the passions to work in its service.’ (89)

# spirit as teleological agent?

- ‘the means which the world spirit employs in order to realize its concept [...] is the activity of individual subjects ’ (92)
- ‘the organic individual [e.g. a tree] produces itself: it makes itself into what it implicitly [or ‘potentially’: *an sich*] is [...]’ (126)
- ‘and spirit too is only what it makes itself, and makes itself into what it implicitly is’ (126)

# spirit *comes to be* self-conscious

- ‘world history does not begin with any conscious end [...] World history begins with its universal end - that the concept of the spirit should be realized - existing only in itself, i.e. as mere nature, it is as yet only an inward, basic, unconscious impulse, and the whole activity of world history, as already mentioned, is a constant endeavour to make this impulse conscious.’ (74)

# process of development

- the rise and fall of different cultures and societies, each 'a link in the chain of the world spirit's development' (53)
- historicism: an insistence on and appreciation of the diversity and mutability of human cultures as revealed in history
- 'the brilliant cultures of the past' (32)

# dialectical

- contradictions appear in societies, as a result of which they become unstable and decline, in time to be followed by a new social form which resolves the contradiction which afflicted its predecessor, but then finds itself afflicted by contradiction, and so on ...

# ‘world-historical individuals’

- e.g. Socrates, Julius Caesar, Luther, Napoleon
- see extracts given on p. 9 of the Course Pack

# Hegel's critique of progress

- that is, 'progress towards a better and more perfect condition' (125) – i.e. Enlightenment progress
- criticized in respect of:
  1. smooth gradualism;
  2. quantitative character;
  3. endlessness of progress -  
= *bad or spurious* infinity.

# unsatisfactoriness of endless progress

- a.  $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1$  and so on ....
- b.  $1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8}$  and so on, asymptotically inclining towards 2
- *either* 'without aim or purpose' (125) [i.e. (a)]
  - *tedium*
- *or* 'always remain[ing] distant from its goal' (149) [i.e. (b)]
  - *frustration*

# infinite progress unteleological

- ‘we cannot speak of an ultimate end [*Endzweck*] without implying that this end is destined to be accomplished or realised’ (44)
- Hegel’s *telos* is an end in both senses of the word: a purpose and also a conclusion; a meaning or function and also an end-point.
- The ‘end of history’?

# weaker sense of 'the end of history'

- the end of history as always 'now'
- 'The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk' (*Philosophy of Right*, Preface)

## a further form of *historicism*

- ‘the present world and the present form and self-consciousness of the spirit contain within them all the stages which appear to have occurred in history [...] Those moments which the spirit appears to have outgrown still belong to it in the depths of its present’ (150f)
- See materials on historicism from Week 1

# strong sense of the end of history

- ‘the general direction of world history’: sun rises in the Orient; by evening, humanity has ‘constructed an inner sun, the sun of his own consciousness’
- ‘Here, in a nutshell, is the course of the whole historical process, the great day of the spirit and the day’s work it accomplishes in world history.’
- ‘World history travels from east to west; for Europe is the absolute end of history, just as Asia is the beginning.’ (196-197)

# when does the 'end' start?

- 'With [the Enlightenment], we come to the final stage of world history, to our world and our own times'
- The Reformation is beginning of 'the period in which the spirit knows itself as free [...]'
- 'the Christian world is the world of completion; the principle is fulfilled and thereby the end of days is fully come'

(all extracts given on p. 10 of the Course Pack)

# more history to come?

- possible 'world-historical' roles to be played by Russia, United States of America?
- 'World history [...] represents the development of the spirit's consciousness of its own freedom and of the consequent realisation of this freedom' (138)

# the 'slaughterbench' of history (69)

- inadequate responses:
  - “that’s just the way it *is*”
  - “that’s the way it *was then*”
  - deriving ‘a lugubrious satisfaction from the empty and futile sublimities which the negative results of history evoke’ (69)

# proper response

- Philosophical history, which enables 'us to comprehend all the ills of the world, including the existence of evil, so that the thinking spirit may be reconciled [*versöhnt*] with the negative aspects of existence; and it is in world history that we encounter the sum total of concrete evil.' (42-43)

# reconciliation

- ‘Reconciliation begins with differentiated entities standing opposed to each other in conflict with each other. Reconciliation is the negation of this separation, this division, and means that each cognizes itself in the other, finds itself in its essence. Reconciliation, consequently, is freedom, the movement that makes the estrangement disappear.’

# reconciliation - strong and weak

- *weak*: progress in its most general form - *things are always getting better*, such that 'the negative is reduced' (43)
- *strong*: teleological progress – the 'negative' is the way things get better:
  - 'It was not so much *from* slavery as *through* slavery that humanity was emancipated'

# theodicy

- ‘That world history, with its changing spectacle of [individual] histories, is this course of development and the actual coming into being of the spirit – this is the true *theodicy*, the justification of God in history. Only this insight can reconcile the spirit with world history and with actuality – the insight that God is not only present in what has happened and what happens every day, but that all this is essentially his own work.’

# Bibliographical note

- All page references given in brackets are to Hegel, G. W. F., *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, tr. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1980)