Hegel, History as Intelligible and Freedom

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ABSTRACT: The most important thinkers are sometimes those who are the most difficult to understand. In writing about Hegel, it is essential to clear away tenacious misrepresentations of his position, which continue to obstruct our access to the texts. This paper considers Hegel not as a religious but rather as a secular thinker, who advances a secular view of history in applying a version of the German idealist approach to knowledge to historical phenomena. I will be arguing that Hegel's conception of history as intelligible is rooted in his idealist conception of history as constructed and hence cognizable by human beings. If, as Hegel thinks, history is the progress of freedom, then we ought to recognize ourselves in the institutions of the modern state. Yet it is not necessary that this will occur. I will be claiming that history can be intelligible but fail to realize human freedom since, though it is possible, it is not necessary that we in fact ever recognize ourselves in the institutions of the modern state.

KEYWORDS: Hegel, History, Freedom, Idealism.

The most important thinkers are sometimes those who are the most difficult to understand. In writing about Hegel, it is essential to clear away tenacious misrepresentations of his position, which continue to obstruct our access to the texts. Marx, who is in some ways Hegel's most important student, is also a source of a persistent misrepresentation of Hegel as turning away from practice, hence from the problem of theory and practice that is central to Marx's vision, but which is also central to Hegel's as well. With a glance toward Hegel, Marx famously claims that we need not only interpret but also change the world. Yet few philosophers have been as influential as Hegel in changing the world in which we live. It is well said that Hegel's rightwing and leftwing students met on the field of battle at Stalingrad. Hegel continues to influence history at least as much as any other philosopher.

This paper considers Hegel not as a religious but rather as a secular thinker, who advances a secular view of history in applying a version of the German idealist approach to knowledge to historical phenomena. I will be arguing that Hegel's conception of history as intelligible is rooted in his idealist conception of history as constructed and hence cognizable by human beings. If, as

Hegel thinks, history is the progress of freedom, then we ought to recognize ourselves in the institutions of the modern state. Yet it is not necessary that this will occur. I will be claiming that history can be intelligible but fail to realize human freedom since, though it is possible, it is not necessary that we in fact ever recognize ourselves in the institutions of the modern state.

1. *On the religious reading of Hegel*

It has been said that few thinkers are as badly understood as Kant. The same point is relevant about Hegel, including his conception of history. In part, this is because, as for his views on aesthetics, we do not have Hegel's published works on history but must rather make do with his lecture notes collated from various sources. In part this is because Hegel is a German idealist and German idealism, which has been intensively studied over some two centuries, is still largely unknown. At the beginning of the twentieth century as analytic philosophy was emerging in England, G. E. Moore suggested that all idealists deny the existence of the external world. This suggestion led to the analytic interdiction of idealism, more than a century ago, which has never been lifted, and which obviously impedes an understanding of idealist theories. In an important work, Strawson proposed a reading of Kant without idealism. It is exceedingly interesting to note that in our time analytic thinkers are turning (or returning) to Hegel, but Hegel without idealism (e. g. McDowell, Brandom, Stekeler-Weithofer, but not Redding), as if in not taking into account a central theme in a thinker somehow made it easier to understand that thinker.

According to Kant, we must not interpret a thinker according to passages lifted from context but rather in terms of the idea of the whole. Yet there is no agreement on even the central theme, no agreement on what is still living or dead in the critical philosophy, no agreement on anything other than the idea that Kant is a singularly important thinker. The same can be said for Hegel, who is widely studied but arguably not better understood.

Two false legends about Hegel especially impede the comprehension of an already difficult position. One is the view that he took the Germany of his time as the end of history. Yet what he means by Germany is not simply the Prussia of his time but rather the social context that arose in the Holy Roman Empire. This later evolved into an antithesis between Church and state leading

finally to the Protestant Reformation extending down to the time of Hegel and with which he identifies.[1] It is correct that he thinks that, as he explicitly says, the sun rises in the East, but reaches its zenith in Europe, which is the end of history. Yet he also, perhaps inconsistently, points to America as the land of the future. Another legend is the view that he took a theological approach to history.

Hegel is often, but I believe mistakenly, depicted as a religious thinker. The consecrated religious interpretation formulated by the right wing Hegelians and adopted by the Young Hegelians, as well as by the Marxists, continues to flourish in the debate. Here are two examples. Hartman thinks Hegel's "whole system of the world" is a "theology."[2] Hook believes that for Hegel history is "the autobiography of God."[3] Yet the identification of Hegel's analysis of history with theology cannot be correct. For it cannot be correct that human beings develop in history if the subject is God. And it cannot be that history is intelligible nor that history is the history of the advent of human freedom in history if the subject is not finite human being but an infinite God.

If Hegel were a religious thinker, then he would prefer religion to philosophy. Yet this is not the case. In the *Phenomenology*, for instance, Hegel depicts religion from an epistemological perspective as committed to representation, a deficient form of knowledge, since representations are superseded in philosophical concepts. According to Hegel, philosophy knows what only religion seeks to know.

A similar point holds for Hegel's conception of history. Hegel, who is widely understood and criticized as a religious thinker, rather provides a highly interesting secular approach to historical phenomena. Hegel is widely but perhaps incorrectly reputed to be a Christian thinker. It has even been suggested that his entire position is a kind of ontological argument for the existence of God.

When Hegel died, the right Hegelians celebrated Hegel's Christian approach to philosophy, which the young Hegelians accepted as correct but rejected as an approach. From the Christian view human history is the record of the fall away from and return to God. Yet if this is an

[1] See HEGEL, G.W.F. **The Philosophy of History**. Trans. J. Sibree. New York: Willey, 1900, p. 344.
[2] See HEGEL, G.W.F. **Reason in History**. Trans. R. Hartman. Indianapolis: LLA, 1953, p. xvi.
[3] HOOK, S. **From Hegel to Marx**. New York: Humanities Press, 1950, p. 36.

accurate statement of the Christian view, then as concerns history Hegel is not a Christian thinker at all.

The familiar Christian view of history, which is adopted, for instance, by Löwith[4] as the basic conceptual model for all history of whatever kind, is fundamentally alien to Hegel's approach. Hegel is knowledgeable about not favorable to, but rather very critical of, Christianity. He holds that it is only after the Reformation that the Christian spirit attained truth and reality, and that political life began for the first time to based on reason.[5] Though he notes that the Holy Roman Empire was swallowed up by the Church, he thinks Christianity reached its zenith through the crusades, which are the perversion of religion and of the divine spirit.[6] According to Hegel, it is only later in the increasingly secular period, the period when art has supposedly ended, that humanity has successfully integrated the divine element in standing on its own.[7]

One might claim that the view of history Hegel defends is, despite what was said above, still specifically Christian. Yet Hegel in fact explicitly says that the ideal of spirit can and in fact must be realized as he writes from the secular principle alone.[8] Indeed that is necessary since he thinks it is only when the antithesis between Church and state is resolved in favor of the latter through the Protestant Reformation that freedom can be realized in the state. In that sense, Hegel is not a specifically Christian but rather clearly a post-Christian thinker.

Clearly Hegel does not hold anything like a standard religious view of Christianity, nor even a Christian view of history. If Hegel held the familiar religious view of history, then we would not know ourselves but rather know God through knowing history. Yet it is difficult, perhaps not possible to reconcile the Christian view of God with a theory of historical knowledge, and in any case a mistake to attribute a Christian view of either history or historical cognition to Hegel.

If God is the subject of human history, then human beings cannot be said to know it. The Christian God is reputed to be inscrutable, beyond human knowledge, knowable, if at all, only by analogy. If that were the case, then the life of a human individual would not be meaningless but

[4] See LÖWITH, K. **Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.
[5] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 345
[6] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 394.
[7] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 407.
[8] See HEGEL. **Philosophy of History**, p. 109.

rather meaningful only through the return to God. This inference has often been denied. Thus Shakespeare famously compares human life to "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing."

According to Hegel, history does not turn on the return to God but rather on the progress of the idea of freedom. Hegel, who understands history as human history, made by, hence knowable by, finite human beings, takes a secular approach to history. He approaches historical phenomena as growing out of a series of human actions, hence presumably agrees with the English poet Pope, who famously writes: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,/The proper study of mankind is Man."

2. *German idealist theory of cognition and human history*

To begin to understand Hegel's conception of history, it is crucial to grasp that his approach to history, which does not ignore religion, is basically secular. Hegel's conception of knowledge of history can be said to apply a version of the German idealist conception of cognition to the historical domain. Since this conception of cognition is not well known, I will now describe it very briefly.

Cognitive constructivism is a central theme in German idealism. A simple way to describe this approach to knowledge is to compare and contrast it with Platonism. We do not know and cannot now determine Plato's position, if indeed he has one in a recognizably modern sense of the term. Platonism, the position traditionally attributed to Plato, turns on the infamous theory of forms. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates presents this theory as an alternative to standard scientific causal explanation. Stated in causal language, the theory seems very modern, since it authorizes an inference from cause to effect, but not from effect to cause. According to the theory of forms, individual objects, which are explained through the relation of things to forms or concepts, or from cause to effect, cannot be known through a backward inference from appearance to reality, or from effect to cause.

On the basis of the theory of forms, Plato famously attacks imitative art of all kinds, since artists do not and cannot know what they merely imitate. Since imitation is a type of

representation, Plato is refuting cognitive representation, hence a representational approach to knowledge. In its place, he recommends direct intuition of the real. In the *Republic*, he suggests that on grounds of nature and nurture, some gifted individuals can directly intuit reality.

There is an obvious link between Plato and the critical philosophy. Kant much later suggests that we can know an author better than he knows himself and that he has a profound grasp of Plato (B 370). My hypothesis is that whether consciously or not, the critical philosophy and, as a result of its immense influence in the immediate context, post-Kantian German philosophy, hence all of German idealism, can be understood as an effort to carry Kant's central cognitive insight, the so-called Copernican revolution, beyond the critical philosophy.

Kant's Copernican turn is a form of cognitive constructivism. Constructivism, which refers to the insight that we can know only what we in some sense construct, is a second-best theory, which only becomes interesting after the failure of the main approaches to knowledge: intuitionism and representationalism. Kant, who rejects both representation as well as intuition, hence turns away from the two main approaches to knowledge of mind-independent reality, hence away from the possibility of knowing reality in limiting cognition to appearance only. The famous Copernican revolution, a term he never uses to describe his position, but that was used during his lifetime to refer to the critical philosophy, suggests that we know only what is "constructed" by the knower. In this way, Kant explains, not how to know reality, which has never been explained, but rather how to know appearance. According to Kant, we know and can know appearances since we construct them according to a plan of our own.

Kant's effort to solve the cognitive problem along constructivist lines helps to answer two central questions in German idealism. What is German idealism? Who are the German idealists? Some observers think that German idealism means the effort to solve the problem of knowledge along epistemologically foundationalist lines. If that were correct, then Kant would not be an idealist, since German idealism would only begin after the critical philosophy. From this perspective, Reinhold, an epistemological foundationalist writing in Kant's wake, would be the first German idealist. A further consequence of this view is that there would be no German idealism.

If we want to maintain there is something called German idealism, then Kant and the post-Kantian German idealists must have something in common. What they have in common is the

effort to formulate a constructivist approach to cognition. A central theme of German idealism is an effort by different hands to work out a constructivist approach to cognition. Kant formulates a Copernican approach to cognition. Post-Kantian German idealism focuses on interpreting, criticizing, completing, hence carrying further Kant's Copernican revolution. This task engages in different ways the attention of all the German idealists, including Marx, who, from this angle of vision, is a full member of German idealism.

If this is correct, then the answer to who is a German idealist is easy to find. The German idealists include Kant, the first in a series of thinkers concerned to formulate a constructivist approach to cognition, as well as those who continue this task. In other words, German idealism is neither more nor less than the effort to work out a constructivist approach to cognition.

3. *Hegel's cognitive constructivism*

Hegel's conception of constructivism is expounded in the introduction to the *Phenomenology* and then later applied to history, natural science, aesthetics and other cognitive fields. Hegel, who is thought to ignore experience, according to Engels in descending from the mind to the world, in fact goes in the other direction in rising from the world to the mind. Hegel's conception of cognition is not a priori, but rather a posteriori, not apodictic but rather a posteriori, in fact clearly experimental. According to Hegel, theories emerge in the form of concepts (*Begriffe*) formulated to explain cognitive objects. The concept of the object and the object, in other words the theory and the object it is intended to explain are both situated within consciousness. The theory, which arises to account for experience, is then tested, hence evaluated against further experience by comparing the theory to its cognitive object within consciousness. There are two and only two possible outcomes of such a test: either the theory meets the test of experience, so that the concept and the object can be said to coincide in what Hegel obscurely describes as the identity of identity and difference; or, on the contrary, the theory fails the test of experience and must be reformulated.

In Hegel's approach to cognition, the relation of concept or theory to the cognitive object is circular. The object, which depends on the concept, is literally constructed as a result of the

cognitive framework. And the concept is the result of the effort to cognize the object. The central theme of Kantian constructivism is that we know what we construct a priori, hence prior to and apart from experience. According to Hegel, who takes an a posteriori approach to cognition, we can know only what we construct in and through experience on the level of consciousness as a result of the construction of a conceptual framework to grasp it. At the limit, when we know, concept and object are identical, but, since the world is not constructed by but is rather independent of the subject, concept and object are also non-identical, or different. Cognitive claims are not justified a priori, nor are they justified through some form of foundationalism. They are rather justified through working out the self-justifying theory.

4. *Hegel's constructivist approach to history*

Hegel's approach to history applies his general constructivist approach to knowledge. His famous quip about the failure to learn from history implies we can and should do so. Aristotle famously prefers poetry to history since the former concerns what might happen, hence is universal, but history, which happens only once, has no lessons to teach. Now if it is possible to learn from history, then in some way history must be intelligible, or capable of teaching us.

Hegel's assumption that all phenomena are intrinsically rational, hence can be grasped by reason, is one of his oldest conceptions. For instance, at the beginning of the third part of his dissertation, which centers on Kepler's and Newton's contributions to our grasp of planetary orbits, Hegel insists, in terminology he employs at the beginning of his career before he discovered the concept of spirit, that human reason can and in fact does grasp nature.[9]

[9] "It remains to add some observations on the relations of planetary displacements, which appear to be a matter of experience alone. In truth, they cannot be measures or numbers of nature alien to reason. For our pursuit of the laws of nature, and our knowledge of them, is founded on nothing other than the belief that nature is shaped by reason, and that we are convinced of the identity of all natural laws. Whenever those who seek laws through experience and induction happen upon something that looks like a law, they rejoice at their find and the identity of nature and reason therein, and when other appearances are difficult to accommodate with that they feel some doubt in the earlier experiments and try in every way to establish harmony between the findings. Our topic, the planets' orbits, offers a case in point: While the displacements of the planets suggest an arithmetic progression in which unfortunately, no planet in nature corresponds to the fifth member in the series, it is supposed that there really does exist between Mars

As Hegel points out, the world is rational for someone who looks at it rationally.[10] According to Hegel, what philosophy brings to history is reason,[11] which displays itself in history, through which human beings develop and know themselves. In related ways Hegel and Marx both contribute to developing a view of history based on Hegel's suggestion that the real is the rational and the rational is the real, which is a key to his view of the intelligibility of history. Hegel and Marx are both committed to a constructivist approach to historical phenomena.

Constructivism is perhaps the central theme in German idealism. Hegel links constructivism and idealism in clearly claiming that what we mean by idealism is that reason is all reality.[12] According to Hegel, the real is rational since otherwise it could not be known. More generally, history is rational since by implication everything that human beings do is rational by definition. Yet it does not follow that because history is rational, that human beings fully realize themselves in the historical context, nor does it follow that they are fully free.

Hegel, who had encyclopedic interests, was unusually well read. His approach to history borrows widely from modern political economy, from Aristotle and many others. In his account of the "System of needs", he adapts Adam Smith's invisible hand, which reappears as the cunning of reason. He further adapts the Aristotelian conception of human activity as teleological as an approach to modern industrial society. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle formulates a conception of activity that much later functions as the template for understanding human beings in terms of what they do, and society and history not in terms of the fall away from and return to God but rather in terms of a basically secular model. This same model is later followed and amplified by Marx. Marx's own model differs, not, as is sometimes said, in considering the economic structure of modern society, which also attracts Hegel's attention, but rather differs mainly in accentuating the economic dimension loosely captured in the so-called superstructure-base theorem.

Hegel rehabilitates human reason by freeing it from limits set by Kant in the critical philosophy. Hegel's constructivist conception of history is comparable to Vico's. Vico famously

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and Jupiter, unbeknown to us, a planet moving through outer space. It is now being eagerly looked for." HEGEL, G.W.F. **De orbitis planetarum**. Trans. D. Healan. Berlin and Yokohama: 2006.

[10] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 11.

[11] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 9.

[12] See HEGEL, G.W.F. **Phänomenologie des Geistes.** In Hegel-Werke, volume III. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1971, p. 179.

claims that only God, who made nature, can know it, but that human beings, who make history, can know history. Like Vico, who was little known in his time, but who later influenced Marx, Hegel thinks that we know human history because we make it. Yet his view is wider than Vico's since Hegel that we can know everything, which occurs on the level of consciousness.

5. *History, freedom and the state*

According to Hegel, history is intrinsically teleological. He identifies the teleology of history as the growing consciousness of the idea of freedom. Hegel thinks this idea begins in the East and ends in "Europe," more specifically in "the Sun of self-consciousness" which is "absolutely the end of History."[13] He famously writes that "The East knew and to the present day knows only that One is Free; the Greek and Roman world, that some are free; the German World knows that All are free."[14] Yet there is a deep ambiguity, since self-consciousness and freedom should not be equated. For it does not mean that if we know that we are free, that is, that we are free other than on the level of self-consciousness, nor that we are in fact free in other ways.

Hegel, who was profoundly knowledgeable about and interested in history, relies, as everyone must, on what was known in his historical moment. One might not want to defend Hegel's conviction that in a monarchy one is freer than say in a democracy. If we read Hegel now for insight into the historical process, we might also want to look away from his preference for the Germanic world as the most enlightened in order to weigh the merits of the general approach to history he forges early in the nineteenth century.

Hegel's theory of history draws on many other views. His conviction that progress in history is the consciousness of freedom is taken over from Kant's *Ideas concerning a universal history in cosmopolitan spirit*. We recall Kant's suggestion that what he calls "the realization of

[13] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 103.
[14] HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 103-104.

Nature's secret plan" lies in "a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed."[15]

Hegel differs from Kant in his view that human history does not develop through some secret plan, nor through nature, nor again through Providence, but rather through the actions of finite individuals, whose aim is often different from what occurs. We can reconstruct Hegel's theory as the claim there is a kind of reason operative in history. Nothing human beings do is irrational and everything they do is rational. Since everything human beings do is rational, history is therefore rational. Since history is rational, we can cognize history as well as realize our aims in the historical context. Yet there is a difference between the intelligibility of history and the historical realization of human freedom.

The intelligibility of history can be understood from different perspectives. According to Hegel, history is intelligible as the progressive manifestation of the idea of human freedom underlying the historical process. Marx, who takes a more focused, hence narrower view, can be read as identifying historical reason with the development of human beings within the limits of economic constraints. Hegel is clearly well informed about political economy, which he discusses, for instance in the *Philosophy of Right*. Clearly he does not ignore nor is he unaware of the economic dimension of the modern world. Yet he might be read as aware of but still underestimating the economic component. For Marx, on the contrary, history is in the first instance not intelligible on rational but rather on economic grounds, more precisely as the expression of an ongoing economic process through which in the transition from capitalism to communism freedom or at least an important new stage in the struggle for freedom can supposedly be attained.

It is clear that Hegel thinks that history is the realization of the idea of freedom. Yet it is unclear what "freedom" means in a historical context. There are different ways to understand freedom, hence different ways to understand history as progress toward freedom. One is, as noted, pure, hence abstract consciousness of freedom, in which case freedom would consist in an awareness of oneself without any social changes. This is one of the dimensions of Hegel's view of history. Hegel can be understood as pointing toward that view in his suggestion that the West

[15] See the Eighth Proposition in KANT, I. **Kant's Idea For A Universal History With A Cosmopolitan Aim.** Ed. A. Rorty. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 19.

differs from the East through the former's self-consciousness. Thus the master-slave account in the *Phenomenology*, which is ingredient in so many liberation movements in our time, can be read from a stoic perspective as freedom through mere self-consciousness. Sartre seems to exemplify this approach in his Cartesian conception of freedom.[16] Yet the same Hegelian passage can also be read as calling for realizing social freedom by changing the social context, if necessary through revolution as following from revolutionary self-consciousness, as Lukács suggests through the conception of class consciousness.[17] In that case, simple self-consciousness cannot replace the need for political struggle.

If this is correct, then we have three distinct models of freedom: freedom as self-consciousness, freedom as entailing basic social changes, and freedom as realized within the social structures of the modern state. The latter view is initially formulated in Plato's *Republic*, a dialogue Hegel apparently regards as a mere fantasy. Yet Plato arguably intends it as a conceptual blueprint for an intrinsically rational state. If it could be realized, such a state would be good for everyone; would be based on knowledge, hence true; and it would be in fact a beautiful work of art, from the Platonic perspective perhaps the only beautiful work of art.

6. *Hegel on human freedom and the Platonic state*

Plato points to a problem, which echoes through the later debate. The problem in question, which has never been resolved, is how human beings, who are social animals, should understand their relation to the modern state. There seem to be two main possibilities with many intermediate variations. One possibility is that individuals find or recognize themselves in the institutions of the modern state, in which case from Hegel's perspective they are free and the state is viable. Another possibility is that individuals fail to find or recognize themselves in the state, in which case they are not free and the state is not viable.

In modern times, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx offer three different responses to this problem, which we can describe as pre-modern, modern and perhaps as post-modern. Rousseau famously

[16] See SARTRE, J.-P. La liberté cartésienne. In **Situations 1**. Paris: Gallimard, 1947, p. 314-327.
[17] See LUKÁCS, G. **History and Class Consciousness**. Trans. R. Livingstone. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.

suggests that the individual leave the modern state in which everyone is literally or at least figuratively in chains to recover one's liberty in the fictitious state of nature.[18] Marx proposes that through the transition from capitalism to communism, freedom can be attained in surpassing the economic restrictions of the modern industrial state. Yet though political economy is obviously crucial, freedom is not exclusively economic in character, though that is perhaps a precondition to meaningful forms of freedom.

The difficulty Hegel faces is to find the solution of what Rousseau in the *Social Contract* describes as the union of private interests in the general will, and which Hegel resolves in the recognition of oneself in the institutions of the state. According to Hegel, freedom is not reached either prior to, nor outside of, nor again beyond but rather only within the modern state.

Kant treats the moral individual, hence morality as the high point in the scale of different beings. Distantly following Kant, Hegel takes the modern state as incarnating morality in its institutions. This approach supposes two points: first, that the state effectively realizes public morality in institutionalized form, and, second, that the citizens recognize themselves in these institutions, hence in the state, where one's interests and desires are reflected so to speak. If this occurs, then private interest and common interest coincide[19] for the reason that the state exemplifies morality.[20] It is possible but not necessary for this to occur, for instance, since the institutions of the state might fail to incarnate, hence fail to correspond to, the interests of its citizens. In treating the modern state as a series of approximations to the idea of freedom Hegel is close to Plato. In this sense, Hegel's idea of freedom in the state resembles the Platonic view of the city-state as the embodiment of practical reason, hence as intrinsically rational. Another way to make this point is to say that Hegel apparently takes over the Kantian theoretical view of the moral individual as the highest form of being, which he supplements through the Aristotelian view that morality plays out in a concrete political context.

[18] Hegel points out that the state of nature is not better but rather worse than the modern state. "The state of Nature is … predominantly that of injustice and violence, of untamed natural impulses, of inhuman deeds and feelings." HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 41.
[19] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 24.
[20] See HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 38.

According to Hegel "The State is … the embodiment of rational freedom, realizing and recognizing itself in an objective form."[21] An instance might be the institution of private property. Hegel believes that the modern state acts according to a shared or common will. Yet this theoretical vision masks the fact that this political unity is not always or perhaps even often the case. Modern states are often divided, perhaps even mainly divided, in ways that threaten even their minimal viability as a political entity.

The theoretical view of the state as the concrete instantiation of morality in which individuals recognize themselves is a theory of social practice. As in cognitive constructivism, political recognition presupposes that the individual and the state coincide in that one recognizes oneself in the institutions of the state, hence in the state, since the state is in effect oneself in the form of otherness. Yet a difficulty arises if it turns out that in practice the institutions of the really existing state, the state as it is, fall below Hegel's theoretical claim, or the state as it should be. For it often happens that the really-existing state, though obviously rational in one way, is not rational or not rational enough in another way since it falls below the level we can and should expect, or again is diverse from the aims animating an important segment of the population, so that only at most some individuals recognize themselves in the state.

It may well be that there is a teleological progression in history that becomes more reasonable, for instance in realizing human freedom in many instances, but also, since this is not incompatible, in failing to do so in other cases. If this is correct, then there are many instances in which some or even many individuals do not recognize themselves in the political institutions, which do not advance their freedom but rather transform one form of thwarting full human development into another form. The most important, but not the only form of freedom is economic.

It is difficult to avoid the inference that when individuals find themselves within the institutions of the state there are often economic reasons rather than just reason at stake. An example might be varieties of colonialism, which replace more overt forms of dominance of the so-called mother country, and so on. Thus empires in the historical process are replaced by colonies, and colonies are later replaced by different forms of special relations with the more

[21] HEGEL. **The Philosophy of History**, p. 47.

developed country, for instance a common currency, special trade relations, a common language, and so on. But, when all is said and done, the relationship of one to the other, of the former mother country to the former colony remains almost the same or the same.

7. *Conclusion: Hegel, human freedom and historical intelligibility*

I come now to my conclusion. This paper has suggested that Hegel's view of history as rational is an application of his version of cognitive constructivism running throughout German idealism. It has further suggested that, for Hegel, history is intelligible, since it is constructed through the actions of human beings, actions which are always rational, hence always cognizable or intelligible.

Earlier I claimed that it is incorrect to attribute a specifically Christian or even a religious view of history to Hegel. Yet though Hegel's does not work out a specifically religious view of history, perhaps what still remains of the Christian nineteenth century background is the optimistic historical vision that we not only comprehend history but also comprehend history as the record of human progress. Though we comprehend history, it not longer seems as clear as in Hegel's time that the development of the social context necessarily realizes human freedom. An obvious example might be the familiar case of global warming, which is a byproduct of the economic expansion that raises the living standard of many people though in the process many others fall even further behind. It is not difficult to cite many other such instances where progress for some turns out not to be progress for others, where it can legitimately be said that only some individuals can be said to recognize themselves in the institutions of the modern state. In short, there is an obvious difference between human freedom and historical intelligibility.

It might be helpful to put this point informally rather than in the more familiar but austere language of professional philosophy. According to the cunning of reason, what we want and what we get in the modern state, which is the political and social center of the modern world, are sometimes not the same. This is true for Hegel as well, who wants to show how we strive for freedom through seeking recognition of ourselves in modern political institutions, which,

however, so often fails since finally what we mean by freedom in history differs widely since we finally, though Hegel seems to presuppose otherwise, we have so little in common.

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