

Freely Chosen Freedom: The Benefits of Hegel's View of History over Nietzsche's

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Two of the most famous 19th Century German philosophers, Georg W.F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche, analyze in their respective works, *The Philosophy of History* and *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, how the study of history impacts human life. The two are most concerned with history's relationship to freedom and whether there is a way of understanding the past that allows people to learn from their predecessors, while still creating anew and not repeating what has been done. According to Nietzsche, Hegel's view of a progressive history is not suitable for answering this problem. The latter's theory of a teleological world process both curbs action and presents a false image of freedom. However, a closer reading of Hegel's emphasis on the infinite nature of the Spirit throughout history shows Nietzsche's criticism to be incorrect. Instead, the basis of reason and opportunity for particularity, seen in Hegel's history, calls for activity and promotes human agency towards an end of truth. It appears, in fact, that Hegel's approach garners results that are both more productive and better capable of affirming life than Nietzsche's.

History, for Georg W.F. Hegel, begins and ends with reason. Chapter Two of *The Philosophy of History* states that history "has ... been rational in its course" (Hegel 12). By this, Hegel is not saying that human beings have acted according to reason throughout time and thus made history rational, but rather that all of history itself has

been wrapped up in the force of Reason.¹ Human reason is related to, and plays a part in, the existence of Reason, but it is not Reason itself. This metaphysical entity of Reason (or Spirit as Hegel often refers to it) transcends and, at the same time, permeates the world. As Hegel explains, “Reason is the *infinite content*, the very stuff of all essence and truth, which gives its own *activity* to be worked up” (Hegel 12). In other words, Reason is both the end goal and the means for all action on earth. Thus, a history that is inherently rational is one that is moved by Reason, but also aims at a final destination rooted in Reason. This implies a teleological element to history where everything that happens is part of Reason’s process and is moving towards a predetermined end.

Before labelling Hegel as a determinist, it is important to consider that the course he claims history to be on is one that is being steered in the direction of freedom. As Hegel puts it, “[the] *final end goal of the world* ... is [Reason’s] consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom” (Hegel 22). This is the case because the nature of Reason is “absolutely perfect” and can “will nothing but Himself, His own will. The nature of His will however ... [is] the Idea of freedom” (Hegel 23). Reason is perfect and therefore free (since anything that would be dependent on another thing would imply an imperfection) and thus when Reason tries to make itself manifest in the world it establishes freedom since that is its essence. And once more, because Reason is the means and the end, not only is freedom actualized, it is now also the goal at hand. As strict as this might seem, for Hegel such a notion of freedom is

¹ Note the usage of the capital ‘R’ for Reason versus reason. The former describes a metaphysical essence of being for Hegel (which he also interprets as the Spirit, or World Spirit, or God). The latter with the small ‘r’ usually denotes human reason in Hegel. Such usages of the two words shall be employed throughout this paper.

“indefinite and infinitely ambiguous. As the highest of concepts, it carries with it infinitely many understandings, confusions and errors, and comprises all possible excesses within it” (Hegel 22). History, then, is moving towards an end that is defined, but inconclusive, like a blank coloring book where the outline has been established, but where the final image can be reached in an unlimited number of ways.

Friedrich Nietzsche stands wholly opposed to this view of the past. To Nietzsche, Hegel’s idea of historical progress towards freedom interprets the modern world as a ‘late arrival’ which impedes action. In addition, the all-encompassing sense of freedom is a false image of liberty that actually creates doubt surrounding human agency.

On the topic of progressive freedom and action, Nietzsche correctly asserts that Hegel considers his contemporary period to be more advanced, and closer to the goal of freedom, than any other previous generation. Hegel, when tracking the movement of the ideology of freedom through time asserts that the “[ancient] Orientals knew that *one* person is free; the Greeks and Romans that *some* are free; while *we* know that *all* humans are implicitly free” (Hegel 22). Since the goal is the realization of freedom, the fact that one group of people understands all people to be free would imply that they are close to the end. For Nietzsche, this understanding results in two reactions. The first is an “ironic existence”, where the late arrivals “[lead a] limping course through life; they shudder at the thought of [their] annihilation as they enjoy the past” (Nietzsche 46). Here, recognition of the end makes people afraid; they cling onto life and try to stop all movement so as to not bring about the world’s completion. Conversely, some late arrivals believe that because of their favored placement in history they “possess the rarest virtue, justice, to a higher degree than any other age; through this excess ... the

maturing of the individual no less than of the whole is prevented” (Nietzsche 28). In this instance, the late arrivals see the opportunity to finish the task ahead of them, but by elevating themselves above the past, they ignore important lessons, discover themselves unprepared, and then fail. The two scenarios, for Nietzsche, prove that the idea of world process negatively influences people’s ability to act in a meaningful way.

Secondly, Nietzsche claims that history moving towards freedom is in itself a paradox that denies true liberty. When a person considers that the world is moving on a track that is guided by an exterior and higher force, it becomes difficult to pinpoint when they have agency to act. If one chooses to act, they run into the conundrum of figuring out whether their action was of their own will or the will of the higher power. As well, according to this mentality, the outcome of an action is irrelevant, since either way – ~~success~~ success or fail, the result was determined by Reason beforehand. The “infinite horizon” portrayed by Hegel’s mentality, results instead in man “[retreating] into himself” (Nietzsche 57), as he attempts to cope with his indecision and impotence. This inability to declare control also provides an outlet for atrocity. Nietzsche articulates that “[if] every success contains within itself a rational necessity, if every event is a victory of the logical or of the ‘idea’ – then quickly down on your knees and up and down on every rung of the step ladder of success” (Nietzsche 47). Any regime that comes with force and rises to power can claim themselves to be the product of the world process and inflict damage in its almighty name. Clearly, in the progressive freedom ideology, people are not free to act as they want; they are subject to an overarching system which claims control and forces their submission. Those who are oppressed seemingly have no means for escape and those in power have no guarantee that their rule will last.

In place of seeing history through the eyes of reason, Nietzsche suggests instead a more instinctual and creative approach. To him, humanity is tortured by their ability to remember; the past is to all people an “invisible and sinister burden” (Nietzsche 9). Thus, one must attempt to balance a life of historicism and unhistoricism. They must learn to both “use the past for life and to refashion what has happened into history” (Nietzsche 11). Knowing whether to remember or forget a historical moment is based on “strong instinctual feelings”, where no objective goal is in mind, but only the promotion and acceleration of life’s active vitality (Nietzsche 10).

This importance of constructive subjectivity is furthered by his image of the man in the mountains. Unlike Hegel who places humanity in the midst of an infinite movement of freedom, Nietzsche claims that “every living thing can become healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon” (Nietzsche 10). Such a horizon, though restrictive in space, must abound with countless opportunities for daring feats. As the template, Nietzsche presents the “resident of an alpine valley”. The mountains that surround this citizen clearly define his spatial boundaries, but also invigorates his will in the face of great obstacles. Despite failing up the mountain numerous times, Nietzsche exclaims that this man “stands firmly in indefatigable health and vigour, a pleasure to behold, while right beside him the man of greater justice and learning deteriorates and crumbles because the lines of his horizon relentlessly shift again and again” (Nietzsche 11). The alpine man has no goal in mind and sees the mountain as an end in itself. Those, however, who chase high objective standards such as freedom and justice are constantly in flux since human imperfection makes these truths unknowable in full and new ideas and theories force one to constantly change their views on life. For

Nietzsche, history is not a baton that each generation passes to the next, forever inching closer to a final goal; but rather scattered pictures of previous ages that people can choose to utilize so as to “give oneself a past from which one would like to be descended in opposition ... from which one is descended (Nietzsche 22).

Nietzsche’s argument rightfully highlights some of the dangers associated with the world process of history theory. If one chooses to deify the idea and proclaim it as the exclusive mover of time, the result can be both apathy and tyranny, both of which, for Nietzsche, are life denying mentalities. However, Nietzsche misinterprets the nature of Reason, or Spirit, that Hegel outlines. Nietzsche ignores Reason’s particular manifestation as well as its connection to truth. Proper understanding of these elements proves Hegel’s theory to be action-oriented and life affirming.

Earlier, the image of the picture found in a colouring book was presented as a way to understand Hegel’s view of progressive freedom.² It was determined that the colouring book drawing, though restricted by a specific shape could be completed in an infinite number of ways, and that this image aligned with Hegel’s because the nature of Spirit is such that it takes up all possibilities of existence. Every action done in accordance with reason is related to Spirit, just as any colour or pattern can be used to finish the drawing so long as it stays within the lines and attempts to portray the picture.

The implication, then, for human beings, is that the end they are seeking is particular to them. Nietzsche assumes that Spirit’s linear track through time implies a grand homogenous completion, but that is untrue. Spirit, whose end is freedom³, cannot actualize freedom by administering uniformity. In order to be true freedom, each person

² See the final sentence on page 3

³ See reference 4 on page 3

must be able to understand and realize it on their own terms. As well, freedom cannot exist as a theory, it demands actualization. Hegel says, “[as] reflection into self, this freedom is altogether abstract ... [a]ctivity is the middle term which translates the universal and internal into external objectivity” (Hegel 29). Lastly, Hegel makes it very clear that “one who is active in behalf of something is not merely ‘interested’ but is interested *in it* ... [Nothing] is accomplished, unless the individuals involved are satisfied as well” (Hegel 25). Here, Nietzsche’s claim that people are trapped by progressive freedom towards an end they do not want is proven wrong. Freedom requires both action and will; it does not occur unless one equally works and wishes for it. And yet, who would choose to not be free? Freedom, then, is always in someone’s best interest. Thus, the presence of Spirit through history does not hinder human activity, nor does it deny human agency, since it is only made manifest by those who realize its particular goodness to themselves, and who voluntarily choose to act on it.

In retaliation to Nietzsche’s second point about a historical process paving the way for submission to an unjust leader, Hegel affirms Spirit’s relation to truth and the objectivity of freedom. For Hegel, as it has been previously mentioned, Spirit (or Reason) has been guiding the course of history to the realization of itself. In this way, Spirit is the means and end of history.⁴ Above, it was determined that history has been rational, but now, in addition, it becomes clear that history *must* be rational because of this fact. In other words, according to Hegel, nothing can occur and remain, unless it is in accordance with the nature of Spirit, which is also Reason. This is not to say that nothing bad can ever happen, nor that people must accept evil as good. Hegel

⁴ See references 1 and 2 on page 2 and 3

understands that the limitations of people are such that “there can be something more involved in the immediate action than what is in the intention or the consciousness of the agent” (Hegel 31). People can mess up, but the course of time illustrates that rationality and freedom will win out, because they are aligned with Spirit, who governs all.

Here, an objective standard for freedom begins to establish itself. Since freedom is the end goal that Spirit is moving towards, it can become the basis for determining right and wrong action. Better put, whenever comparing two options, whichever scenario more effectively brings about freedom is the choice one should make. Now, this does not imply always letting people do what they want. For Hegel, sobriety is sometimes more liberating than liberty itself. He describes how when building a house, one uses “fire to melt the iron; air to blow up the fire [and] water to turn the wheels for cutting the wood” (Hegel 30). And yet, a properly constructed house successfully keeps fire, air and water away from people residing in it. As Hegel explains:

[The] elements are utilized according to their nature, and yet they co-operate toward a product by which they themselves are being limited. In a similar way the human passions satisfy themselves; they fulfil their goals according to their natural determination and they bring forth the edifice of human society, in which they have provided for law and order as forces *against* themselves (i.e., restraining those passions). (Hegel 30)

A house removes people from the freedom of nature, but provides a space where they can exercise a freedom akin to their distinctly human character. A house provides a space to think and communicate with others. The objective standard of freedom for human beings then, curbs their animalistic qualities and presents a space for rational and social activity. It is it not subjective, or instinctual, as Nietzsche might prefer.

However, it has a human scope too it, and is concerned, of course, with people's best interest, though they may not perceive it as such in the moment.

To return to the argument, these two points are proof that Nietzsche's tyrant of time cannot be a by-product of Hegel's movement of freedom. The fact that Spirit guides history indicates that a tyrant whose rule limits freedom is doomed to fail because it is not in accordance with the true nature of existence. Moreover, the people will be able to spot out a tyrant, and have ground to override him, because of the objectivity of freedom. Such a standard, rooted in reason, holds leaders in check, and provides hope and direction for a people looking to overcome oppression.

The outcome of his philosophy, according to Hegel, is a dynamic community. Spirit, or Reason, which is present all throughout the world, is likewise present in each person. Since the entirety of history is moving to the same end of Spirit, it would only make sense that every element of Spirit plays a part in the process. In other words, every person has the potential to affect each individual's realization of freedom.

Thus, community, or a State, arises because people realize that within such an institution, "[the] objective and subjective will are ... reconciled" (Hegel 42). The individuals of the State understand they will only achieve their end if everyone is working towards the same goal, and thus the State becomes a vehicle for affirming freedom. Laws only come into being if people recognize their accordance with the objective standard of freedom. With a system of law aimed towards liberty, "the will that is obedient to the law is free" (Hegel 42), since it adheres to regulations it has deemed just, and thus, effectively, adheres to its own desires. And, because the nature of the State is rooted in freedom, anyone who believes they are being wronged can freely

exercise their will against the will of the community. According to the overarching governance of Spirit, if the individual will is more aligned with Reason than the State's, if their view of liberty is closer akin to the objective standard of freedom, it will come to be recognized as truthful and implemented. Of course, human life, and history, never runs smoothly, and the freedom of people can sometimes prevent real freedom from emerging, but, one who believes their stance to be true always has the option of pursuing it.

The infinite particularity of freedom allows for a State that is active and open to all possibilities and the engagement of everyone. Nietzsche's horizon model, on the other hand, appears restrictive. The man in the mountains may find constant danger and adventure, but he is alone, and his lifestyle though daring, is repetitive and stagnant. Additionally, the call to forget the past means losing sight of the path to freedom and leaving oneself open to enslavement. The life that Nietzsche defends, he defines as a "dark, driving, insatiable, self-desiring power" (Nietzsche 22). Magnanimous, but horribly enclosed, Nietzsche forgoes the colouring book for a piece of canvas. He surely will produce art, but it will speak only to him, and always remain the same. It will affirm his life, but never life in its entirety.

Georg W.F. Hegel's view of history as progressing to a final end of freedom is not an idea beyond criticism. Friedrich Nietzsche's concerns with its capability to render people inactive and its potential to reduce human agency are echoed by many. As well, Hegel's view seems easy to accept in a time of peace, when one can see the horrors of the past playing a part in their tranquility. For those faced with suffering, it is much more difficult to believe in hope and harder still to accept that their pain is justified by future

prosperity. Despite all this, Hegel's theory proves vital in understanding how to live a good life. With Reason as the mover of time, evil becomes forever transient and one is able to accept the past without having first to denounce it. The infinite particularity behind the goal of the world process connects all people and demands that each be respected. It provides an arena for action, a platform for learning, and holds everyone accountable for their own freedom and the freedom of the community. The State, born from reason aimed towards liberty, arises as a practical system that ensures good laws and the actualization of people's passions. The world process unites history in the name of freedom and by doing so unites unites all people in the name of life.

Works Cited

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