

GEORG WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL (1770-1831): A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Clementino N. Balasabas Jr.

Introduction

Philosophy of History as a subtopic of general historical inquiry is further divided into two headings, namely, analytical and speculative philosophy of history. It is the speculative class that is our concern here, and which G.W.F. Hegel may amply represent. In other words, the speculative philosophy of history may be considered as the philosophers' philosophy of history. It specifically refers to the subject matter of history, or to the historical processes themselves, the purpose of which is to attain some comprehensive view of the historical process as a whole.

R.F. Atkinson rightly observed that the philosophers of history 'conceived themselves as synthesizing or generalising in a grand manner on the basis of detailed data supplied by more workaday historians, to whom they stand in somewhat the same relationship as do biologists, with their theory of evolution, to natural historians,' (Atkinson, 1978:8).

It is precisely on account of this theoretical character of speculative philosophy of history that we may consider it as analogous to the theoretical physicists' speculative view of the physical universe. For whatever purpose it may serve, it is clear that 'without the guidance of generalizations and general concepts, the historian would be trapped and bogged down — drowned if you will — in the welter of concrete particulars,' (Nadel, 1965:14). Since historical analyses are first and foremost interpretative in character, historians or philosophers of history must be able 'to spell out the linkages of causation and of influence between events, and this can only be done in the light of connecting generalizations,' (Nadel, 1965:11).

Though the speculative philosophy of history may be outmoded and defunct due to the recent rise to prominence of the analytical philosophy of history, its merits cannot be under-estimated. For instance, even if philosophy of history may lie outside the professional concerns of historians, (Atkinson, 1978:4) its worth for philosophy and philosophers remains significant. As a philosopher of history has recently put it, 'it is part of the task of philosophy to look at history and try to place it in relation to other fields of enquiry and concern,' (Atkinson, 1978:6). This will therefore enrich both philosophy and history.

For its part, the analytical philosophy of history corresponds 'closely to those asked in philosophy of science; indeed, philosophy of history, whatever may have been the case among its first practitioners, is nowadays most commonly conceived, on the analogy of the philosophy of science, as the philosophic study of a distinctive and rich field of intellectual enquiry,' (Atkinson, 1978:4).

It is due to the influence work of Hegel, titled *The Philosophy of History*, that the analytical philosophy of history arose as a form of rebellion against the sweeping generalizations of this particular speculative brand of thought. The Marxists, the Positivists, and the Analytical Philosophers all sprang up in defiance to Hegel's work. It is thus worth our while to look into Hegel's work, if only to gain understanding and knowledge as to what the rebellion was all about, and what its proponents were rebelling against.

Let us start by considering the philosophy of history as a distinct intellectual field of enquiry.

Philosophy of History

Strictly speaking, we may regard philosophy of history as the philosophers' interpretation or analysis of historical processes and historical occurrences. For historians like Arnold Toynbee, the philosophy of history would be an historians' philosophical consideration of history. On the other hand, the American poet-philosopher George Santayana defines philosophy of history 'as an effort on the part of a philosopher to scrutinize the past in order to abstract from it 'whatever tended to illustrate his own ideals, as he might look over a crowd to find his friends,' (White, 1965:240). For an historian, 'there can be no denying that what a historian writes is dictated to some extent by his position on determinism, on the propriety of making moral judgments at all, and on the connection between moral judgment and voluntary action,' (White, 1965:12).

Atkinson sees at least two ways in which history might have implications for philosophy. Firstly, 'if it makes sense at all to think of criteria for assessing a purportedly total philosophical view, which might be conceived as embracing all criteria, then one criterion will presumably be that a view gives some account of history. ... The second way in which history might have implications for philosophy would be if practising historians themselves developed an idea of what philosophical views made sense in relation to the practice of history.' (Atkinson, 1978: 93). Apparently, a philosophical view of history may prove significant, if it not indispensable, in providing meaning and sense to history as an interpretative mode of intellectual analysis.

It is in this sense that philosophy gains practical significance, because philosophy itself is concerned with what is practical and actual. Alfred North Whitehead has noted that 'philosophy is at once general and concrete, critical and appreciative of direct intuition. ... It is a survey of possibilities and their comparison with actualities. In philosophy, the fact, the

theory, the alternatives, and the ideal are weighed together. Its gifts are insights and foresights, and sense of the worth of life, in short, that sense of importance that nerves all civilized effort." (Whitehead, 1933:98).

Considering further the relationship between Science and Philosophy, it must be said that they 'mutually criticize each other, and provide imaginative material for each other,' (Whitehead, 1933:146). Thus, Whitehead goes on to say that a philosophic system "should present an elucidation of concrete fact from which the sciences abstract. Also the sciences should find their principles in the concrete facts which a philosophic system presents, (Whitehead, 1933:146). Thus, in this light, it might be said that the history of thought is the story of the successes and failures of the joint enterprise of Science and Philosophy, (Whitehead, 1933:146).

Ultimately, it will not be the philosophy of history, but (as pointed out by Hegel in closing his philosophical system) the history of philosophy, that engulfs or encloses the whole phenomenon. Initially, we may maintain, according to Hegel, that "the most general definition that can be given, is that the Philosophy of History means nothing but the "thoughtful" consideration of it, (Donogan A. and Donogan B., 1965:53). Historically speaking, the history of the world is 'none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom, a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate.' (Donogan A. and Donogan B., 1965:65).

At this point, I hope I have provided the necessary background to the intellectual concerns of philosophy, history, and science as a whole, which should be able to aid us in appreciating Hegel's philosophical work on history.

Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*

Like most speculative thinkers of history, Hegel believed that history has a pattern, and hence he sets to attempt to reveal the pattern and changes in it that come about from time to time. As a philosopher, Hegel takes off to prove that the process of history is, in fact, the process of knowledge. Conversely, the process of knowledge is to him the actual process of history. Philosophically, it has to be understood that Hegel's scheme attempts to deduce historical laws from epistemology, i.e., the theory of knowledge. Inasmuch as Hegel believed that history has a pattern and was bold enough to reveal it, it should be nevertheless kept in mind that a sound critique of Hegel should also take into account 'his remarkable restraint; he did not attempt to play the prophet and was content to comprehend the past,' (Kaufmann, 1960:113).

The central idea of Hegel's philosophy of history is that 'History is the story of the development of human freedom,' (Kaufmann, 1976:250). Indeed, it is on the basis of the idea of "freedom" that Hegel develops his philosophy of history. Anything that is free must

not have any other attribute than itself. For anything that has an attribute other than itself is not free, because it is dependent on an attribute that is not itself. With this in mind, Hegel proceeds to demonstrate that there exists something which is absolutely free and thus is the universal attribute of everything. This something which is absolutely free is what Hegel posits to be the first indeterminate universal in his *The Science of Logic*. This something is what he calls *being*.

According to Herbert Marcuse, Hegel reasoned that 'we cannot define being as something since being is the predicate of everything. In other words, every thing *is*, but being *is not* something. And what is not something is nothing. Thus, being is 'pure indeterminateness and vacuity; it is no thing, hence, nothing.' (Marcuse, 1941: 129).

To further describe the character of being, Marcuse goes on to say that 'everything *is* only so far as, every movement of its being, something that as yet *is not* comes into being and something that is now passes into not-being. Things are only in so far as they arise and pass away, or, being must be conceived as becoming.' (Marcuse 1941:130).

At this point, let us consider the religious implications of *being* as posited by Hegel. This universal being is what Hegel considers to be the universal Spirit (German *Geist*), which reveals the religious undertone of Hegel's philosophy of history. Commenting on Hegel's view, Alan and Barbara Donagan state: 'The rational aspect which history presented to Hegel was providential. Universal history belongs to the realm of Spirit (*Geist*); and Spirit, being self-contained existence, is essentially free. History, therefore, as Spirit in the process of working out the knowledge of itself, is the story of man's working out the knowledge of freedom. ... It is not each man's freedom to do as he likes (for Hegel, that would be merely 'subjective') but 'the union of the subjective with the rational will.' Each man must recognize, believe in, and will what is common to the socio-political whole to which he belongs. Hence, Law, Morality, Government, and they alone, (are) the positive reality and completion of Freedom.' (Donagan, A. Donagan, B., 1965:10).

With this idea of the progressive process towards the realization of the knowledge of freedom, Hegel divides history up to his time into three periods or epochs. The first was the Oriental World, where the idea of freedom is known only to one, the despot. The second was the Graeco-Roman World, where the idea of freedom was known and experienced by some, namely, the Greek citizens and the Roman freemen. The third was the contemporary Germanic World of his time, where the idea of universal freedom was made known to all through the 16th century Reformation.

Characteristically, Hegel optimistically hoped, if there is any reason and purpose at all to man's existence, that universal and absolute freedom will eventually be attained. In his view, 'the question of the means by which Freedom develops itself into a World, conducts us to the phenomenon of History itself. Although Freedom is, primarily, an undeveloped

idea, the means that it uses are external and phenomenal; presenting themselves in History to our sensuous vision.' (Donogan, A. and Donogan, B., 1965:56).

In other words, 'each form of consciousness that appears in the immanent progress of knowledge crystallizes as the life of a given historical epoch,' (Marcuse, 1941:95). Hegel thought posits a rational world order and man's ability to understand it. For him, human life is not "a tale told by an idiot;" and history is not merely, although it is indeed also, a succession of tragedies. Rather, history has an ultimate purpose, which is freedom, and it is this ultimate purpose which furnishes a standard for historical judgment, (Kaufmann, 1960:110).

It is on account of this very notion of rationality and consciousness that Karl Marx radically objected to Hegel. For Marx, it is not man's consciousness that determines his material conditions; rather, it is man's material conditions that determines his consciousness.

Hegel and the "State"

Since Hegel believed that it is the realization of universal freedom that is immanent and constitutes the actual process of history, it follows that for him the progress of freedom culminates in the institution of the State. In *The Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel points out that "the self-conscious subject attains his freedom not in the form of the "I" but of the "We," the associated We that first appeared as the outcome of the struggle between lord and bondsman. The historical reality of that We 'finds its actual fulfillment in the life of a nation.' (Kaufmann, 1960:118). Hegel considers the State to be supreme over all human institutions, because all such institutions are subordinate "to the highest spiritual pursuits," and because Hegel believes that such highest spiritual pursuits are possible only in the State. (Kaufmann, 1960:112).

If we consider the fact that the world is in fact composed of individual State, then Hegel's idea inevitably points to the evolution of one universal World State, if the universal Spirit (*Geist*) is at all to come to realization.

By "the State," Hegel means one in which freedom is realized, and in which a human being counts "because he is a human being." Thus, Hegel would consider rational the conscientious objection of an individual, who a century later would oppose the policies of Hitler, recognizing his own absolute right to make himself free from any dictatorship and in that way realize his inalienable rights. (Kaufmann, 1960:111).

Since the whole argument posits deep religious implications, it is not difficult to understand Hegel suggesting that the whole purpose of life or the realization of the universal Spirit as the progress towards Freedom, is none other than the incessant quest for Truth. For, as a later interpreter would summarize Hegel's view on this point, 'truth is the Unity of the

universal and the subjective Will; and the Universal is to be found in the State, in its laws, its universal and rational arrangements. The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth ... only that will which obeys law, is free; for it obeys itself — it is independent and so free.' (Kaufmann, 1960:61).

Hegel and the "Great-Man" Theory

It is to be observed that in past history, there had arisen men of great influence and power that in one way or another moved and influenced the course of events. These are the "great men" of history. In Hegel's view, the "great man" in history is that man who has attained that degree of self-consciousness where he identifies his individuality (by negating it, in fact) with the universal "I," which is the "We". Thus, this individual is not only attuned to the currents and pulses of the universality of individuals, but also to that of the universal Spirit (*Geist*), which is constantly at work through individuals for its self-realization. It is in the attainment of that self-consciousness that the individual recognizes the actuality of the universal Spirit working in him and in all other individuals — for it is common to all. In this way does the "great man" gain the power to influence other people, and thus, also the course of history.

But the "great man theory" need not imply that great men do all the work. It implies rather that "their presence and their individual characters make a tangible difference. And not only do great men have this power, but so do men of small or middling stature when occupying the seat of authority.' (Barzun and Graff, 1977:160) In line with this consideration, Kaufmann says: 'Hegel found that world-historical individuals are always propelled by some passions ('Nothing in the world has been accomplished without passion') and that their motivation is rarely entirely disinterested. The latter point he (Hegel) expressed in terms of 'the cunning of reason.' The individual may be motivated not only by profound insights but also by 'private interests' and even 'self-seeking designs.' (Kaufmann, 1960:121).

Hegel also maintains that 'progress depends on man's ability to grasp the universal interest of reason and on his will and vigor in making it a reality. (Marcuse, 1941:231)." This is because 'only a being that has the faculty of knowing its own possibilities and those of its world can transform every given state of existence into a condition for its free self-realization. True reality presupposes freedom, and freedom presupposes the knowledge of the truth. The true reality, therefore, must be understood as the realization of a knowing subject.' (Marcuse, 1941:154). Hence, the great man of history is the man who necessarily brings reason to the world, 'to a form in which the reality actually corresponds to the truth,' (Marcuse, 1941:156).

But these great men of history are not the actual subjects of history. They are simply 'the executors of its will, the agents of the World Mind, no more. They are victims of a higher necessity, which acts itself out in their lives; they are still mere instruments for historical progress,' (Marcuse, 1941:232). In any case, they are free. For by the realization of the Will

of the Will of the 'World Mind,' which is the true subject of historical progress, the great man who actualizes the potentialities of the 'Idea,' acts not according to the dictates of Universal Reason but voluntarily obeys the Universal Will by fully recognizing its necessity, and thus attains freedom and realizes freedom not only for himself but for all individuals who could voluntarily recognize the same necessity. Truly great, indeed, is the man who recognizes and actualizes the necessity of Freedom, which is the Truth of the Universal Will and Reason.

Conclusion: Hegel's Method of Exposition

Since Hegel deduces his historical generalizations from epistemology, it is but natural for him to utilize logic heavily as a tool in exposing his general thesis. His logic, however, radically parts from what has been used up to and since his time. Hegel is, in fact, 'commonly credited with having sought to invent a new dialectic logic of the reason which would supersede the barren logic of the understanding,' (Atkinson, 1978:92) which utilizes the traditional Aristotelian logic. More significantly, Hegel's change from traditional to material logic marks 'the first step in the direction of unifying theory and practice,' (Atkinson 1978:102). Thus, his protest against the 'fixed and formal truth of traditional logic is in effect a protest against divorcing truth and its forms from concrete processes; a protest against severing truth from any direct guiding influence on reality. (Atkinson, 1978:102).

In developing his ideas on history, Hegel starts his explanation with his work entitled *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807). Here he maintains that sensual experience is the first instance towards the acquisition of knowledge. An individual, according to this work, gains knowledge first from sense experience, but, sense experience will be meaningless unless the individual comprehends the form of experience that is had. Objectivity, therefore, is but the objectification of the comprehending subject and 'a priori' knowledge is completely precluded.

In line with this view, Marcuse notes that 'if man pays strict attention to the results of his experience, he will abandon one type of knowledge and proceed to another; he will go from sense-certainty to perception, from perception to understanding, from understanding to self-certainty, until he reaches the truth of reason. (Marcuse, 1941:93-94). Self-certainty is that stage when an individual comes to know his spirit, which is essentially free, its realization being the truth of reason. Thus, the truth of reason is the realization of the spirit, which is essentially free; and the process towards the realization of the freedom of the spirit is the same process that transpires in history — the realization of freedom.

From the knowledge of the truth of reason, Hegel proceeds to support his contentions by scrutinizing the logic that works within reason itself, or the logic of reason. in his *The Science of Logic* (1812-1816). He opens his argument by pointing to indeterminate universals, such as being and nothing, and the interplay between them. Unlike his *The Phenome-*

starts where the former ends. Hegel argues that thinking in its quest for the truth behind the facts 'seeks a stable base for orientation, a universal and necessary law amid the endless flux and diversity of beings, (Marcuse, 1941:128).

Such universals, if they are to be the basis and the beginning of subsequent determinations, must themselves be indeterminate, for they will neither be the first nor the beginning. Thus, being came about as the first indeterminate universal, in which everything is dependent upon. But being cannot be defined as something, and that which is not something is nothing. Being therefore is nothing.

This marks the Hegelian "negative logic," that is, that there is an inherent contradiction in everything which makes man restive and prompts him to overcome his given external state. The contradiction thus has the force of an "ought" (*Sollen*) that impels him to realize that which does not yet exist, (Marcuse, 1941:135).

Hegel sees this law operative in all beings. As he puts it, 'the highest maturity or stage which any Something can reach is that in which it begins to perish, (Marcuse, 1941:137) and by this Hegel cannot have meant an infinity apart from or beyond finitude. For him, 'the idea is actual and man's task is to live in its actuality, (Marcuse, 1941:162). The incessant perishing of things he sees to be a continuous negation of their finitude, and this perishing is an infinite process. As Hegel goes on to say, 'thus it passes beyond itself only to find itself again. This self-identity, or negation of negation, is affirmative Being, is the other of the Finite ... is the Infinite. The infinite, then, is precisely the inner dynamic of the finite, comprehended in its real meaning. It is nothing else but the fact that finitude 'exists only as a passing beyond itself,' (Marcuse, 1941:138).

Accordingly, there is only one world in which finite things attain self-determination through perishing. And as Hegel says, 'their infinity is in this world and nowhere else,' (Marcuse, 1941:139). To this effect, Hegel remarks that self-consciousness is the nearest example of the presence of infinity. He goes on to say that 'reflection is not primarily the process of thinking but the process of being itself.' (Marcuse, 1941:143).

This process of being, as emphasized, is the process of history, which is man's notion as apprehended by philosophy. Thus, essence and existence are actually interrelated in philosophy, and 'the process of existence is a return to the essence,' (Marcuse, 1941:99). From here, Hegel proceeds to expound on the idea in his *The Philosophy of History*.

It can rightfully be said that Hegel's conception of the historical process is both spiritual and philosophical. Although he succeeds in unifying universal and particular categories with the dialectic exposition and in plausibly proving the identity of being and nothing, finitude and infinity, he fails to provide concrete categories which could verify his bold generalizations. Nevertheless, the value of his study on the philosophy of history cannot

be under-estimated. For one, it provoked Karl Marx to come up with his own dialectical materialism and to devise (or revive) 'praxis' from Hegel's unification of the universal and particular categories. On the other hand, Hegel also provoked analytical philosophers, such as G.E. Moore and Rudolf Carnap, to become vigilant in scrutinizing the meaning of terms philosophers or historians alike use in their explanations.

We can say that such works as Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* is valuable in providing the general orientation, if not a theoretical framework, in the analysis of concrete phenomena. One can always start with anything anyway, and proceed to prove or disprove not only what one comes to seek but also what one uses as a point of departure. It can be said that Hegel's work is novel in its own right, as any truly great work is.

We can therefore close this discourse with Walter Kaufmann's comment in comparing Hegel with Marx: "Hegel's philosophy of history illuminates Marx's philosophy of history far better than Marx's own. The reason: 'Hegel's philosophy of history is at its best when applied to philosophies and things spiritual, but is hardly helpful for economic analysis, while Marx's philosophy of history is at its worst when it is used — as it often is — to deal with philosophy, religion, art, and literature,' (Kaufmann, 1960:152).

To this, we can say that Hegel and Marx are just but two sides of the same coin, and one cannot get a full and comprehensive understanding of the worldview of one or the other, unless one considers them both.

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