

Learning to Love the End of History: Freedom Through Logic

Todd McGowan

Abstract: Hegel's *Philosophy of History* is often taken as an introduction to Hegel's thought. This essay argues that the *Philosophy of History* is actually Hegel's least representative work and can only be understood through a reading of the *Science of Logic*. But once we look at the *Philosophy of History* in this way, we are able to see the importance of Hegel's controversial idea that history comes to an end. Hegel's conception of the end of history in the *Philosophy of History* corresponds to the discovery, with Christianity, that even God does not escape contradiction. This discovery has the effect of freeing humanity from divine authority because authority can only function through the image of itself as substantial and non-contradictory. The idea of freedom that Hegel develops in the *Philosophy of History* thus depends on the idea of contradiction that he works out in the *Science of Logic*.

Keywords: Logic, History, Freedom, Christianity, Hegel, Kojève

On Not Privileging History

The most unfortunate development in the dissemination of Hegel's thought after his death was the central role that his lectures on the *Philosophy of History* played in this dissemination. Despite the fact that Hegel himself never published his thoughts on world history, the transcriptions of his own and student notes to his lecture course came to define the popular image of Hegel. This work—usually just the introduction, labeled *Reason in History* (*Vernunft in der Geschichte*)—became the beginning and end of the Hegel canon for non-specialists. The *Philosophy of History* is not at all a representative work by Hegel, as even the key terms reveal. Terms such as “the world historical individual” play a pivotal role in the *Philosophy of History* and exist nowhere else in Hegel's philosophy. And yet, this term, along with other clichés from this work (like Hegel's dismissal of the importance of the individual in history), are often the only references to Hegel that many people have at their disposal.

What's striking about the relative weight that the *Philosophy of History* receives in the analysis of Hegel's thought is the dramatic difference between Hegel's champions and his detractors. Adherents of Hegel's philosophy looking to elucidate it almost never take the *Philosophy of History* as their starting point. It is difficult to think of an exception, especially in the last 50 years. For those looking to poke holes in Hegel's system or to set him up as their philosophical fall guy, however, the *Philosophy of History* is their go-to text. It provides much juicy material (apparent ethnocentrism, justification of violence, indifference

to real historical events, and, most damningly, teleology) to bury the entire system. It is the work that Benedetto Croce has in mind when he says, "Before Hegel seeks the data of facts, he knows what they must be."¹ Opponents glom onto this text as a representative one, but they are able to glom onto it with such vitriol precisely because it isn't.

One of the key features of Hegel's philosophy is that it contains multiple points of entry. One can begin with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Science of Logic*, the *Encyclopedia*, or even the *History of Philosophy* without suffering any initial missteps. Each of Hegel's works has a legitimate claim to serving as an introduction to the entire system. In this sense, there is no bad choice when one begins to read Hegel for the first time—except the *Philosophy of History*, which has, not coincidentally, for a long time functioned as the standard shorthand for Hegel's entire philosophy. Whereas each of Hegel's other major works rehearses in some way his dialectical system while introducing the subject matter (logic, philosophy, religion, and so on), the *Philosophy of History* does not. It is a work in which dialectics has only a peripheral role relative to the description of various societies and their development of freedom.

In this work, Hegel describes history as the progressive unfolding of freedom, but he does not fully develop the foundation of freedom. His concern is to distinguish his concept of freedom from the liberal or romantic version that associates freedom with an absence of social constraint. For Hegel, there is no natural freedom. Instead, freedom arises through subjectivity's break from the immediacy of the natural world. He claims that "the human being as spirit is not an immediate being but essentially a being that returns to itself. This movement of mediation is thus the essential element of spiritual nature; in this way human beings become independent and free."² Mediation is not the interruption of our naturally free inclinations with the restrictiveness of law. Instead, freedom is attained through mediation.

But at no point in the *Philosophy of History* does Hegel offer a precise definition of freedom. He tells us clearly what his vision of freedom is not but not what it is. Nevertheless, this work operates with a tacit definition of freedom based on Hegel's ontology, which otherwise plays no role in it. In order to understand what Hegel means by freedom in the *Philosophy of History*, one must have recourse to the text that he wrote ten years before giving his first lectures on the subject. It is most likely because the *Philosophy of History* is Hegel's most accessible

.....
1 Croce 1915, p. 140.

2 Hegel 2011, p. 150.

work that teachers and students seeking a short cut to his philosophical system flock to it. But the accessibility of this work is entirely misleading. The work is not valueless, but accessing its value requires a circuitous route. To get at the conception of history articulated here, one must navigate a perilous path. The only way to the purported ease of the *Philosophy of History* is through the minefield of Hegel's most difficult work—the *Science of Logic*. It is impossible to understand the stakes of the *Philosophy of History* without grounding it in the *Science of Logic*.

Ironically, this is exactly the claim of Hegel's enemies. For them, the *Science of Logic* establishes a pattern of thought that the *Philosophy of History* imposes on a recalcitrant history, with the result that his version of history resembles his logic but not history as it really happened. In this picture of Hegel's philosophy, he is so arrogant—or so naïve—as to assume that real history corresponds to the dialectical unfolding that he discovers in the structures of thought. Obviously, such a position would be indefensible today (or, frankly, even when it was first formulated). But if we understand the *Science of Logic* as the key not to how the course of history logically develops but to the definition of freedom that animates the *Philosophy of History*, its theoretical primacy seems less ridiculous.³

The great insight of the *Science of Logic* is that the contradictions of thought necessarily entail contradictions in being itself. When thought tries to determine the identity of any entity, it discovers a contradiction because every entity involves what it is not and every identity depends on what negates it in order to have identity at all. Nothing simply is what it is. In the final chapter of the book, Hegel distinguishes the revelations of his logic from ordinary formal thinking. He writes, "The firm principle that formal thinking lays down for itself here is that contradiction cannot be thought. But in fact the thought of contradiction is the essential moment of the concept."⁴ Whereas Kant sees the contradictions that reason discovers as an index of its overreach and its errors, Hegel views the contradictions of reason as a positive assertion of knowledge. Reason's

.....
3 In "Hegel's Logic of Freedom," William Maker argues the converse. He claims that the structure of the *Science of Logic* depends on the idea of freedom as its initial precondition. According to Maker, "Freedom is the form and content of logic. It is not difficult to see why logic as philosophical science must begin in and as pure freedom, in the self-determination of self-determination, if it is going to be absolutely unconditioned. Independently of a modern practical interest in worldly freedom, Hegel shows that philosophy itself requires freedom as its innermost *theoretical* core." Maker 2005, p. 6. While I agree completely with Maker's alignment of logic with freedom, his position requires him to insert a presupposition into Hegel's logic, a logic structured on the avoidance of any presupposition.

4 Hegel, 2010, p. 745. The German reads: "Es macht sich darüber den bestimmten Grundsatz, daß der Widerspruch nicht denkbar ist; in der Tat aber ist das Denken des Widerspruchs das wesentliche Moment des Begriffes." G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II* (Frankfurt an Main: Suhrkamp, 1971a, 563.

great achievement is its ability to think the contradiction that inhabits all being, to articulate how being necessarily involves its own negation.

If there is no aspect of being that escapes contradiction, if every entity (even God) includes what negates it, then there is no consistent authority in the world. Authority depends on consistent self-identity: we attribute authority where we posit an absence of contradiction. But we do so only insofar as we leave the figure of authority unthought. Its consistency depends on our positing it as unknown, and when we try to know it, as Kant does in the Transcendental Dialectic from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, its contradictory status becomes evident. The subject finds itself enthralled to external authority only as long as it can believe in the consistent status of this authority, and the discovery of its contradiction has the effect of freeing the subject, as the subject recognizes that even the ultimate authority is in the same boat as the subject itself.

According to Hegel, we know that there is no possible higher end for the subject than its own freedom because we have discovered that there is no being without contradiction. Freedom is the result of this discovery. In a discussion of Kant's discovery of the categorical imperative in the *History of Philosophy*, Hegel provides his most thorough and compelling definition of freedom. He claims,

While humanity seeks after this and that end, how should it judge the world and history, what should it make into its final end? For the will there is no other end than the one created out of itself, the end of its freedom. It is a great advance when this principle is established that freedom is the last hinge on which humanity turns, the last summit from which humanity lets nothing impress it and accepts no authority that goes against its freedom.⁵

.....
5 Hegel 1971b, p. 367. The German reads: "Indem der Mensch sucht nach diesem und jenem Zweck, wie er die Welt, die Geschichte beurteilen soll, was soll er da zum letzten Zweck machen? Aber für den Willen ist kein anderer Zweck als der aus ihm selbst geschöpfte, der Zweck seiner Freiheit. Es ist ein großer Fortschritt, daß dies Prinzip aufgestellt ist, daß die Freiheit die letzte Angel ist auf der der Mensch sich dreht, diese letzte Spitze, die sich durch nichts imponieren läßt, so daß der Mensch nichts, keine Autorität gelten läßt, insofern es gegen seine Freiheit ist." E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson translate the passage as follows: "While a man is striving after this aim and that, according as he judges the world or history in one way or the other, what is he to take as his ultimate aim? For the will, however, there is no other aim than that derived from itself, the aim of its freedom. It is a great advance when the principle is established that freedom is the last hinge on which man turns, a highest possible pinnacle, which allows nothing further to be imposed on it; thus man bows to no authority, and acknowledges no obligations, where his freedom is not respected." Hegel 1995, p. 459. The only major difference between this translation and Hegel's text is the word "imposed," which the translators use to make sense of the unusual term *imponieren*. Hegel's point toward the end of this passage is not that the subject that recognizes its freedom refuses to allow anything to be imposed on it (though this is undoubtedly the case) but that it is not *impressed* by anything, which is the significance of *imponieren* in this context.

The key point in Hegel's definition of freedom here is that it coincides with a refusal to be impressed by the Other. Subjects are impressed by substances, by beings that appear beyond any contradiction. But reason reveals that this beyond does not exist and that every being exists through contradiction.

History is the arena in which we discover the contradictions that strip the authority from figures of authority. Each discovery frees the subject from its investment in the authority until there are no more figures of authority left. Even the subject's own natural inclinations suffer from contradiction, which disqualifies them from any authoritative status over the subject. This absence of any authority—either external or internal—bespeaks for Hegel the subject's freedom. The free subject relates to the figure of authority as a fellow being divided by contradiction rather than as a self-identical substance.

When one examines Hegel's conception of freedom as he articulates it here, it becomes clear just how far it is from the liberal conception. For the liberal thinker, freedom is the absence of constraint, but such a thinker misses how constraint most often functions. Direct constraint is the primary concern of liberalism. And yet, direct constraint is the easiest to defy. The most pernicious form that constraint takes occurs when the external authority presents itself as substantial as thus impresses the subject. Impressing the subject is far more threatening to its freedom than imposing on it and is usually propaedeutic to imposing on it. Authentic freedom requires an absence of impressive external substances. Otherwise, the subject finds itself devoted to an external authority while remaining utterly convinced of its own freedom. This is the classic liberal trap.

Hegel famously divides history into three primary epochs: the Asiatic world in which one (the ruler) is free; the Greek and Roman world in which some (those of the ruling class) are free; and the modern world in which all are free. This schematic history actually recounts how the recognition of contradiction has developed. Despotic rule involves the freedom of only one because it is only the ruler in a despotic regime that can act without reference to a substantial external authority. The despotic ruler, by virtue of the ruling position, recognizes that every Other suffers from self-division, and this is the basis for the ruler's freedom. In the Greek and Roman world, the free men collectively share this position, but it is denied to women, slaves, and men without citizenship. Freedom is the refusal to endow the Other with wholeness or self-consistency. It is the refusal to treat the Other as a substantial being.

The modern world permits every subject to experience this revelation of the inconsistency of authority. Every subject can recognize

that contradiction is coextensive with being itself. This is why modernity is the epoch of revolutions: if there is no undivided Other, no figure of authority that avoids contradiction, then no one has a right to rule.⁶ As a result, rule becomes the object of contestation, and, what's more, subjects must learn to exist without reliance on any consistent external authority whatsoever. At the end of history, they must enact their own duties while wrestling with the self-division of the Other.

The claim that history comes to an end seems odd coming from the philosopher who introduced history into philosophy.⁷ It seems like a retreat from the radicality of Hegel's own recognition of our inescapable historicity. For this reason, critics often see the proclamation of an end to history as a sign of Hegel opting out of political struggle, of him taking a position above the fray. But the proclamation that history ends with the modern world does not function as an escape hatch from politics or freedom. It assures us that we are condemned to freedom, that we cannot turn back to the assurances of a consistent authority. Hegel's assertion of an end to history is not a retreat but a refusal of retreat, and those who would reassert the claims of history today are themselves looking for respite from the traumatic and liberating implications of its end.

The proclamation of an end of history is the most radical step that Hegel takes in the *Philosophy of History*. History ends when freedom becomes accessible for all. As Hegel sees it, freedom can be the only possible end of history because being itself has given it to us. Whatever end that we erect for ourselves beyond freedom will always have its basis in freedom, which derives from the absence of any substantial authorization. The ontology of contradiction assures us that we will never have any assurance and that history will never move beyond freedom. No matter how advanced humanity becomes, no matter how far we go down the road of posthumanity or metahumanity, we will remain within the ontology of contradiction and thus on the terrain of freedom. It is in this extreme sense that freedom marks the end of history.

The Allure of Modesty

It is tempting—and even the greatest Hegelian thinkers sometimes

.....
 6 Hegel's commitment to this position and to the revolutionary nature of modernity led him to champion every revolution he encounters. As Domenico Losurdo notes, "every revolution in human history was supported and celebrated by Hegel, despite his reputation as an incorrigible defender of the established order." Losurdo 2004, p. 99.

7 Many observers have described Hegel as the inventor of history in philosophy. For instance, Joseph McCarney claims, "For he is, beyond all comparison, the historical philosopher, the one for whom history figures most ambitiously and elaborately as a philosophical category." McCarney 2000, p. 7.

succumb to the temptation—to interpret the end of history in relative terms. One can infer from Hegel's formulation that he is making the modest claim that one cannot but relate the narrative of history from its endpoint. Because the future is radically foreclosed to our thought—Hegel never wavers on this point—we cannot anticipate the direction that history will go or the future truths that it will reveal. As a result, when recounting history, we necessarily find ourselves at the end.

This is how Slavoj Žižek conceives of the end of history. For Žižek, it is our total immersion in history that condemns us to speak about history as if we were at its end. According to this position, Hegel theorizes an end of history in order to acknowledge that there is no exit from history, that we can never view the world *sub specie aeternitatus*.⁸ We cannot subtract ourselves from the historical process that we are recounting, which gives this process the appearance of an end with us. Hegel's point, Žižek claims, is not that all of human history ends with him, but that we cannot but think history from the end, which is always now. This closure is the result of the standpoint from which we speak, the result of the act of speaking history. Our position of enunciation manifests itself within our historical statements in the form of a retrospective account. Žižek puts it like this: "at every given historical moment, we speak from within a finite horizon that we perceive as absolute—every epoch experiences itself as the 'end of history.'"⁹ We are, in other words, condemned to locating ourselves at the end of history.

Žižek's analysis of the end of history is correct as far as it goes. It is accurate to say that we cannot avoid speaking from the perspective of the end when we narrate history. But this interpretation of the end of history has the effect of minimizing Hegel's claim when he announces that history reaches its end with the full development of the concept of freedom. This interpretation reflects a modesty in relation to Hegel that Žižek typically avoids. Hegel's claim here is stronger than an admission that the end of history constantly imposes itself on us as historical subjects. Instead, he believes that we will never move beyond the recognition that all are free, which is the recognition that occurs in modern Europe (as well as in North America and Haiti).

This does not mean that significant historical events will cease or that no new avenues for the articulation of freedom will be discovered—

.....
 8 In this sense, Hegel's theorization of the end of history represents a direct riposte to Spinoza, who insists on our ability to abstract ourselves from a historical perspective and take up the perspective of eternity.

9 Žižek 2012, p. 218.

like some new form of communism, for instance. But for Hegel, history as a field for the unfolding of new insights into existence reaches its conclusion with the recognition of universal freedom. The assertion of freedom based on the recognition of intractable contradiction is the most important event in the history of subjectivity. It marks the end of history because no subsequent event can ever top it.

Though it has become fashionable to bash Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of liberal capitalist democracy as the end of history in 1989 as a terrible reading of history and of Hegel, his thesis is true to Hegel's thought in one crucial sense.¹⁰ Like Fukuyama, Hegel believes that history can come to an end, that we can reach a decisive recognition that no subsequent event can dislodge. The difference is that for Hegel the end of history is not the end of political struggle because it has its origins in the recognition of a divided substance rather than in the achievement of a particular political regime.

Freedom is the key to history for Hegel because freedom is the correlate in the subject of the recognition of being as contradictory. The freedom of all that Hegel sees manifest in modern Europe has its basis in the absence of any consistent Other that might function as an authority for the subject. The subject is free because it has nothing external to it that it can rely on for guidance. Every external authority that the subject would defer to—God, nature, the monarch, the people, history itself, and so on—suffers from the same contradictory logic that besets the subject itself. The modern subject can fantasize a consistent Other, but this consistency can only be fantasmatic for it. When it posits laws of historical development or harmony in nature, the modern subject attempts to avoid the fundamental insight of modernity—the inconsistency of the Other—and thereby to escape its own freedom. But the problem with these stratagems is that they rely on the freedom that they purport to escape.

The End of Freedom

While one temptation is to relativize Hegel's conception of the end of history, the other is to reject it altogether, which is the majority position. Most interpreters of Hegel refuse the image of Hegel as a philosopher of the end of history.¹¹ Because it seems so evidently wrong,

.....
¹⁰ See Fukuyama 1989. Fukuyama subsequently developed this thesis in a book-length work entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*. See Fukuyama 1991. More recently, Fukuyama has qualified his claims, though he has not retracted them.

¹¹ Others attempt to cut out the dead idea of the end of history from the rest of the Hegelian corpus. This is the position of Steven B. Smith, who, in an otherwise sympathetic interpretation of Hegel's political philosophy, argues, "Hegel's thesis about an end of history could not but become another

because history clearly introduces fundamental substantive changes to existence after Hegel's death, Hegel's champions have found this thesis untenable, which has led them to attribute it to someone other than Hegel himself. That someone is Alexandre Kojève.

For much of the 20th century, Kojève seemed like the most important interpreter of Hegel's philosophy. Though his interpretation cut against the grain and married Hegel with Marx and Heidegger (who were, to say the least, strange bedfellows), it reignited the spark of this philosophy and created an awareness of Hegel as a valuable thinker that otherwise would not have existed. The Hegel of the 20th century is more or less Kojève's Hegel. When Kojève gave his lectures on Hegel in Paris during the 1930s, there was no extant translation of the *Phenomenologie des Geistes* in French.¹² There was one soon afterward, just as there were philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Bataille seriously engaging with Hegel's thought in a way that would have been unthinkable without Kojève's epochal intervention. Kojève created a contemporary Hegel, but the price of this currency was that Hegel became the thinker of the end of history.

In his lectures, Kojève makes it clear in no uncertain terms that Hegel formulated an end to history. Kojève idiosyncratically bases his reading of Hegel's philosophy of history on the dialectic of the master and slave in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹³ Rather than read the *Philosophy of History* directly on its own, Kojève hits on the idea of a detour through the *Phenomenology*, and this detour produces stunning results. According to Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, humanity begins in the struggle for prestige or recognition. A long series of senseless fights to the death in order to gain prestige dominate prehistorical human existence. The winner of these fights gains prestige but lacked anyone to bestow it because the other was dead. This war of all against all is, according to

stifling orthodoxy that would generate its own antithesis, namely, an end to the end of history." Smith 1989, p. 230-231. Though Smith articulates several justifications for Hegel's claim about history coming to an end, he ultimately believes that one must reject it in order to stay true to the core of Hegel's philosophy.

¹² Jean Hyppolite published the first translation of the *Phenomenologie des Geistes* in 1941 as *Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, two years after the end of Kojève's lectures.

¹³ Kojève translates Hegel's "Herr" and "Knecht" into "maître" and "esclave" in French, which would be "master" and "slave" in English. Most translators and interpreters of Hegel avoid the term "slave" as misleading, though some retain "master." The two translators who rendered the *Phenomenology* into English in the 20th century, J. B. Baillie and A. V. Miller, opt for "bondsmen" rather than "slave," for instance.

Kojève, Hegel's version of the state of nature.¹⁴ History proper begins when the fight to the death for prestige ends not with death but with the acquiescence of one subject to another. At this point, the slave offers to work for the master in order to avoid death, but even more importantly for Kojève, the slave also agrees to recognize the master. The slave's gesture of capitulation, rather than simply indicating cowardice and dishonor, becomes the inaugural gesture of history and the basis for all cultural achievements. Kojève's revaluation of the slave parallels Marx's revaluation of the proletariat. In each case, the apparent historical loser becomes responsible for the creation of value in history.

The contradiction within this relationship is the motor for history. It is the slave that drives history progressively forward while the master ends up cast aside. For Kojève, the master suffers from an untenable position. He claims, "the Master struggled and risked his life for recognition, but he obtained only a recognition without any value for him. This is because he can only be satisfied by the recognition from someone whom he recognized as being worthy of recognition. The attitude of the Master is thus an existential impasse."¹⁵ The master desires recognition from someone worthy of recognition, but at the same time, she or he cannot tolerate the existence of another master who would have this status. There is only the slave to recognize the master, and the slave's recognition is really no recognition at all. As a result, mastery leads to a historical dead end or an existential impasse.

The slave, in contrast, has history on her or his side. Through the dread of death and subsequent work for the master, the slave finds another avenue for recognition that is not open to the master, and when slaves successfully revolt, they establish a society of mutual recognition in which they can achieve satisfaction. This society is the end of history. In his lectures and subsequently, Kojève waffles on just when history does come to an end. He begins by accepting the verdict that he attributes to Hegel—that history ends with the Napoleonic regime after the success of the French Revolution. But later Kojève sees the end in American capitalism and, ultimately, in what he calls Japanese snobbism. In each case, the end of history arrives when subjects attain mutual recognition.

Despite the enormous influence that Kojève had on French thought

.....
14The problem with Kojève's account should become evident with the invocation of a prehistorical state of nature. For Hegel, we have absolutely no insight into the state of humanity prior to history because the emergence of spirit so dramatically distorts what precedes it. When we look at the state of nature, we see only the fantasy of the state of spirit.

15 Kojève 1947, p. 25.

in the 20th century (and, ironically, on American neoconservative thought), most committed readers of Hegel view Kojève not as a commentator on Hegel but as an altogether separate thinker—the thinker who believes in the end of history.¹⁶ Philip Grier gives this position its most compelling formulation. He painstakingly shows how Kojève's thesis of the end of history borrows liberally from Alexandre Koyré's own distortion of Hegel's philosophy of history in order to produce a distinct philosophy.¹⁷ Grier claims straightforwardly that "Kojève's end-of-history thesis has no obvious grounding in Hegel's text."¹⁸ By interpreting the end to history as foreign material inserted into Hegel's philosophy, Grier can simply dismiss this troubling idea and preserve Hegel as the thinker of a continually evolving history. But the price of this corrective is too high. While Kojève's conception of the end of history may have gone astray, we cannot abandon the idea altogether while remaining true to Hegel's project.

Grier simply sidesteps Hegel's own direct statements on the end of history, statements that force us to grant that Kojève is onto something. For Hegel, history has an end in both senses of the term—an aim and a terminus in which this aim has been reached. When spirit "is at home not with another but with itself, with its essence, not with something contingent but rather in absolute freed," Hegel believes that this is "the final end of world history."¹⁹ History achieves this end in modern Europe.²⁰ Here, Hegel gives Kojève enough material to justify his claims about history coming to an end, an end that he identifies with freedom.

The problem with Kojève's interpretation is not, as Grier would have it, that it lacks textual warrant. The fundamental problem is that

.....
16There are commentators on Hegel who take up and develop Kojève's reading of Hegel. See, for instance, Maurer 1965), and Cooper 1984.

17 Kojève did not simply take over Koyré's thesis about the end of history in Hegel's philosophy. He also took over the course on Hegel that Koyré was giving when Koyré sought a replacement.

18 Grier 1996, p. 186. Grier makes clear the fundamental break between Kojève's philosophy and Hegel's, even though Kojève poses his philosophy as merely a commentary. Grier writes, "No serious reader of Hegel could fail to recognize that Kojève is as much creator as interpreter of the system he ascribes to Hegel." Grier 1996, p. 185.

19 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Volume I*, 168.

20Toward the end of the introduction to the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel says, "World history goes from east to west; because Europe is the end of world history as such, Asia is the beginning." Hegel 1956, p. 103 (translation modified). The German reads: "Die Weltgeschichte geht von Osten nach Western, denn Europa ist schlechthin das Ende der Weltgeschichte, Asien der Anfang." Hegel 1970, p. 134.

Kojève imagines history coming to an end through the elimination of contradiction. Kojève supplements the *Philosophy of History* with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (specifically the master/slave dialectic) when he should have supplemented it with the *Science of Logic*. He rightly saw the need for another text to make sense of Hegel's most idiosyncratic work, but he chose injudiciously. Kojève identifies a society developed out of servitude in which mutual recognition overcomes social antagonisms. This is the point at which Kojève's debt to Marx gets the better of his allegiance to Hegel.

History doesn't come to an end when a society emerges that no longer suffers from self-division. Hegel's point is exactly the opposite. History comes to an end when we recognize that we are all free, and we recognize that we are all free when we recognize that nothing can avoid contradiction, that there is no possible consistent authority to provide a ground for our identity. Kojève is on the right track when he identifies the end of history as a crucial pillar of Hegel's edifice. But his attempt to theorize it has the effect of knocking it down. Thinking the end of history requires seeing Kojève as symptomatic of its refusal.

A Christian That Refuses Heresy

When we grasp Hegel's conception of freedom and its relationship to contradiction, the explanation for the privileged role that Christianity plays in his thinking about history becomes clear. It is not that Hegel simply prefers his own religion and that of Europe, which is what it seems on the surface. Christianity offers a philosophical insight that no other religion does. This insight derives from the unprecedented act of divine humiliation that it enacts, and this is what Hegel finds so appealing about it. With the death of Christ on the cross, humanity is able to witness the contradiction at the heart of the divine, the revelation that the divine endures the travails of finitude. It is a moment at which the infinite shows itself as finite, an event that strips all authority from the divine.

The divine humiliation that Christianity enacts follows directly from Christ's message of love. A loving God or a God capable of love cannot be a substance but must be a subject. Only divided subjects can love because only divided subjects turn to the other to look for a corresponding division. The message of love initially draws Hegel to Christianity, but it is the humiliated God that love entails which sustains him as an adherent.

The advent of Christianity marks the end of history for Hegel, even though it takes over 1,500 years for the world to register this end. With Christianity, it becomes possible to recognize that even the highest authority imaginable, even the infinite authority of God, suffers from the

same contradiction that besets the lowest subject. But Hegel does not end his account of history with the death of Christ or with the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 CE that installs Christianity as the religion of Rome.²¹ The decisive blow in the development of Christianity occurs with Martin Luther, who offers subjects a direct relation to God.

As long as the Church functioned as a mediator between the subject and God, the subject could not partake in the freedom that Christianity enacts. The presence of the Church sustains God's obscurity for the subject and leaves God in a position where divine contradiction does not become evident. History ends only when the God of the beyond comes down to earth for all subjects, which is what Protestantism occasions. At this point, everyone can see the divine humiliation that transpires in Christianity.²²

But Christianity is not the only religion in which the divine manifests itself in a finite form. Both Hinduism and Buddhism have their own versions of incarnation, each different from the Christian version. Both fail, according to Hegel, to formulate the severity of the humiliation that God suffers in Christianity. The point is not that Hinduism and Buddhism lack the sophistication or elegance of Christianity but that they lack its extreme humiliation of the divine. For instance, a certain version of Buddhism posits God's reincarnation in another Dalai Lama after the death of one, whereas in Christ, God dies once and for all. The Buddhism of the Dalai Lama preserves God from the depths of finitude to which Christianity subjects the divine. The profound abasement of God in Christianity is the source of the freedom that it provides. This is what leads Hegel to make the impolitic remark that "a human being who has not the truth of the Christian religion has no truth at all; for this is the one and only truth."²³ Here, Hegel not only fails to be a good multiculturalist, but he also theologizes truth, which would appear to make him a bad subject of modernity as well. Two strikes against him in a single sentence. But he doesn't strike out. His claim is neither a failure

.....
²¹ Despite Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 CE, his did not name Christianity that state religion of the Roman Empire but did end the persecution of Christians.

²² If we compare the iconography of Protestantism with that of Catholicism, it would seem that Hegel makes the wrong choice for the form of Christianity that embraces divine humiliation. Catholicism's crucifix gives us a vision of a devastated God suffering on the cross, while the empty Protestant cross appears to spare us from this confrontation. For Hegel, however, the absence is crucial for the freedom of the subject. As long as God remains on the cross in a particular form, we do not yet have the moment of the Holy Spirit, the moment when individual subjects can come together through God's absence.

²³ Hegel 2011, p. 449.

of multiculturalism nor a retreat from modernity. Christianity is “the one and only truth” insofar as it proclaims that the subject must experience divinity through its humiliation, which any modern subject—Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim—can do by recognizing that the divine doesn’t exist beyond contradiction. Otherwise, one condemns oneself to unfreedom.

Protestant Christianity implies freedom for all because it exposes the fundamental contradiction of God itself. The true Christian ceases to be impressed by the glory of God. This glory loses its ability to dominate the subject insofar as it comes down from the beyond and exists in a finite form (and dies). The recognition of contradiction at the heart of the divine announces the end of all slavery. Of course, slavery continued well into the era of Christianity, but for Hegel, this required a betrayal of the foundation on which Christianity is built.

History ends with Protestant Christianity and the freedom that it unleashes, but most often modern subjects take up a heretical attitude to their Christianity. Hegel stands out as a Christian because he absolutely refuses heresy. Unable to confront the humiliation of God, most Christians restore the divine to the position that it has in other religions. Every claim that “no one knows God’s plan” or “I have faith in the man upstairs to guide me” or “we look to God for guidance” indicates a thoroughgoing abandonment of the basic tenet of Christianity: God is no longer a mysterious being existing beyond the contradictions of our existence. The real heretics are those who cling to an unknown God in order to avoid confronting a divided God, a God suffering from the same humiliation that subjects themselves endure.

Hegel recognizes that his version of Christianity is not the garden-variety version. During his theorization of its link to freedom, he admits, “We need to remember that we are not to be thinking of a Christianity of the man in the street, as whatever anyone makes it out to be.”²⁴ The problem with the “Christianity of the man in the street” is that it refuses the full weight of the divine humiliation and clings to the existence of an undivided God. For Hegel, this recalcitrance from the average Christian does not have the power to block Christianity’s philosophical revelation. It is this revelation that brings history to an end, despite the rearguard efforts of average Christians.

The Absence of Idealism

There are two standard readings of the *Philosophy of History*, both of which take Hegel as an idealist in the strict sense. The worst of these, favored especially by Hegel’s opponents, sees history as a

.....
²⁴ Hegel 2011, p. 449.

teleological narrative directed by a transcendent God who uses particular historical events and actors to accomplish the universal goal of freedom. According to this reading, Hegel’s indifference to the suffering of particulars sacrificed in the slaughterhouse of history is the necessary byproduct of his investment in the endpoint of the historical narrative.

The second reading posits an immanent development of freedom in history: though no transcendent force plans the development of history, it moves in the direction of freedom because of a human longing to be free. The spirit of freedom guides subjects unconsciously toward history’s ultimate endpoint. In the most sophisticated form of this reading, the dialectical logic of historical development doesn’t determine specific events but relies on a series of contingent events to achieve its aim.

The majority of the significant interpreters of Hegel writing today—Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou, Rebecca Comay, Sally Sedgwick, and Susan Buck-Morss, just to name a few—avoid the *Philosophy of History* like the plague. When one sees how much fun Hegel’s opponents have with this work, it’s tough to blame them. Karl Popper’s sarcastic quip—“it was child’s play for his powerful dialectical methods to draw real physical rabbits out of purely metaphysical silk-hats”—hints at the extent of the ridicule heaped on this work.²⁵ Those who do discuss it, such as Robert Pippin, do so in much the same way that Kojève does—through their reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the project of mutual recognition that they find in that text. The *Philosophy of History* is anathema because it seems impossible to reconcile it with the materialism that these interpreters (along with most contemporary subjects) share.

Hegel’s account of history is unabashedly idealist. Hegel envisions subjects driving the movement of history through their commitment to realizing their ideas. It is not “the mode of production of material life” that triggers historical transformation but the idea of freedom, which is why this work from Hegel, more than any other, leads Marx to want to turn Hegel on his head.²⁶ Of course, Hegel thinks more clearly standing right side up, and when we consider the *Philosophy of History* in light of the *Science of Logic*, its runaway idealism diminishes.

Freedom ceases to exist as an idea separated from any material origin and becomes the ideal correlate of the structure of being. Though subjects pursue freedom as an end, neither God nor some amorphous humanist impulse has given them this end. It is the product of God’s

.....
²⁵ Popper 1966, p. 27.

²⁶ Marx 1970, p. 20.

failure, a failure shared with all being. The contradiction of being rather than the idea of freedom becomes the engine of history. The self-division of being is the material cause of the development of human history that Hegel recounts. If Hegel himself never articulates this, it nonetheless is apparent from the way that he describes freedom throughout his philosophy.

Why History Doesn't Seem Over

When Hegel lectured on the philosophy of history in the 1820s and early 1830s, he could still feel the aftereffects of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions. It seemed as if the freedom deriving from the recognition of the contradictory status of all authority would change the world irreversibly, enabling the philosopher to announce the end of history. But the two subsequent centuries did not bear out Hegel's certainty that the recognition of freedom had become ineluctable. What we have witnessed in the time since Hegel's death has been a desperate search to erect a new authority that would avoid God's humiliation.

This turn toward authority is not a rebirth of history but rather a neurotic response to its end. If Hegel did not predict this reaction against contradiction, it was because he was not yet Freud and lacked a theory of neurosis. The neurotic subject confronts the absence of a substantial authority and rather than taking up the freedom that this absence grants, this subject fantasizes an authority not riven by contradiction. Hegel never spends any time in the *Philosophy of History* dealing with those who want little to do with the freedom of contradiction, but this position is far more prevalent today than the one that accepts freedom without asking for assurances from the Other.

The two basic forms that the neurotic reinstitution of authority takes today are naturalism and fundamentalism. The naturalist sees the natural world as bereft of contradiction and thus capable of acting as an authority for the subject. According to this position, the subject's freedom disappears in the face of the dictates of its nature. In its most popular form, naturalism envisions the gene as the noncontradictory figure of authority. The self-identical gene knows what it wants and pursues its aim with a ruthless purpose. Though subsequent scientists have complicated the picture that Richard Dawkins lays out in *The Selfish Gene*, his classic text still provides the most compelling account of the gene as the contemporary authority figure. He writes, "The genes are master programmers, and they are programming for their lives. They are judged according to the success of their programs in coping with all the hazards that life throws at their survival machines, and the judge is

the ruthless judge of the court of survival."²⁷ The position that Dawkins espouses here is a neurotic one because it evinces the belief that genes know what they want, that they have a purposiveness not at odds with itself.

In this sense, genes take up the position once occupied by the pre-Christian God. They are more appealing than the Christian God because they have not yet succumbed to the crucifixion, which enables them to retain the status of an undivided authority. It would be interesting to see a gene die on the cross, which would allow the believer in the self-identical gene to discover the freedom of the Christian. Dawkins does not believe himself to be a believer, but this disavowal of belief permits it to function all the more vehemently.

We can see a similar example of belief in the noncontradiction of the gene in a discussion that took place in a film course that I recently taught. While explaining the concept of the femme fatale in film noir to a group of students, I showed the scene in which Gilda (Rita Hayworth) first appears in the film *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946). In this famous scene, the camera cuts to Gilda with her long hair covering her face, and she flips her hair back in order to reveal her face to both the other characters in the film and to the spectator. This is a classic image of the femme fatale establishing her allure. But rather than seeing this as either a sexist image of the woman or a bold assertion of femininity (or both at the same time), the students labeled it an instance of "peacocking"—someone displaying her reproductive appeal to prospective mates interested in propagating their genetic material. As the students (to a person) proclaimed, we choose our sexual mates on the basis on an unconscious instinct that seeks out the best genes in possible sexual partners. A woman with hair like Rita Hayworth's, they reasoned, undoubtedly possesses excellent genetic material. The students might not know their desire, but at least their genes do. For them (and for Richard Dawkins), the gene is a noncontradictory authority that provides refuge in the modern abyss of freedom.

Naturalism is not, however, the only neurosis at work today, though it is the most widespread. The other neurosis, while exponentially more rare, is much more visible. Fundamentalism of all stripes does not rediscover the substantiality of authority in the obscurity of a gene but prefers a more grandiose form. The embrace of God, nation, or ethnicity as an undivided authority amid the contradictions of modernity enables the fundamentalist to exist in this world without confronting its consequences.

.....
27 Dawkins 2006, p. 62.

But because the modern world denies the existence of any substantial authority, the fundamentalist must resort to extreme acts to assure herself or himself of the authority's presence. By blowing up a nightclub or shooting an abortion provider or participating in ethnic cleansing, one acts in order to provide proof that the authority is an authorized authority. The fundamental act is an effort to substantialize the authority, but the act inevitably undermines itself. If the authority really were substantial, such acts would be unnecessary.

The fundamentalist attempts to reignite history and deny the crucifixion by sustaining the idea that God still exists in the beyond, where the divine can remain substantial and avoid the pitfalls of contradiction. The fundamentalist's version of God defies revelation, which means that fundamentalist Christians must betray the core tenet of their own religion. But the question for the fundamentalist runs deeper: if God exists beyond all revelation and thus beyond all contradiction, how can the subject receive the divine message? The very fact that the believer hears from God indicates that God too is a subject and not just a substance.

Both the naturalist and the fundamentalist try to work around the end of history and its irreducible contradiction. They seek out an identity that can be what it is. But for the modern subject this position is only ever a neurotic fantasy that collapses when confronted with the exigencies of the modern world. Contradiction and its correlate of freedom continue to bombard the neurotic subject with revelations of non-identity at the heart of their authority's identity. One never escapes contradiction for good through the neurotic fantasy because this fantasy nourishes itself on contradiction. It stages what it avoids.

When we recognize the radical implications of Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and the proclamation there of history's end, we can reconcile ourselves to its outsized position within the popular image of Hegel. Even though the interpretation of this work depends on a reference to the *Science of Logic*, it nonetheless has something important to tell us about our contemporary condition. The *Philosophy of History* is not just a way of avoiding Hegel. It is also a path leading to the most pressing questions of contemporary politics.

The end of history is not the end of politics. In some sense, it marks the beginning of political contestation in its most authentic form. Rather than struggling for freedom, subjects must now struggle for the form of life most adequate to their freedom. The liberal capitalist answer has clearly revealed itself as wanting. Its failure stems directly from its basic misconception of freedom as the absence of overt constraint and its superstitious investment in the market as an authority without

contradiction. Attempts to realize a communist society have betrayed contradiction through adherence to either the laws of history or the apotheosis of the party leader. These two failures leave the field of politics open. We have witnessed how freedom will not manifest itself. It remains to be seen how it will.

- BIBLIOGRAPHY:
- Cooper, Barry 1984, *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Croce, Benedetto 1915, *What Is Living and What Is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel*, trans. Douglas Ainslie, London: Macmillan.
- Dawkins, Richard 2006, *The Selfish Gene*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- Fukuyama, Francis 1989, "The End of History?," *The National Interest*.
- 1991, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press.
- Grier, Philip 1996, "The End of History and the Return of History," in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, ed. Jon Stewart, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 2011, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Volume I: Manuscripts of the Introduction and Lectures of 1822-3*, eds. and trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1956, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree. New York: Dover, 1956.
- 1970, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- 1971a, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- 1971b, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- 1995, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- 2010, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kojève, Alexandre 1947, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. Raymond Queneau, Paris: Gallimard.
- Losurdo, Domenico 2004, *Hegel and the Freedom of Moderns*, trans. Marella Morris and Jon Morris, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Maker, William 2005, "Hegel's Logic of Freedom," in *Hegel's Theory of the Subject*, ed. David Grary Carlson, New York: Palgrave.
- Marx, Karl 1970, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya, New York: International Publishers.
- Maurer, Reinhart Klemens Maurer 1965, *Hegel und das Ende der Geschichte: Interpretationen zur "Phänomenologie des Geistes"*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- McCarney, Joseph 2000, *Hegel on History*, London: Routledge.
- Popper, Karl 1966, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume 2: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Smith, Stephen B. 1989, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj 2012, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, New York: Verso.

C
R
I
S
I
S
&
C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E
/

Volume 4 /
Issue 1