

ZUR DISKUSSION

Hegel's Hermeneutics of History

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Abstract: “To him who looks at the world rationally, the world looks rational in return. The relation is mutual.” This emblematic sentence illustrates Hegel’s philosophy of history as a hermeneutics of history which, opposed to the apriorism explicitly rejected, searches for its “empirical” verification in trying to “accurately apprehend” history. The much-celebrated “end of history” is not so much an empirical assertion about historical reality as a methodological requirement for an interpretative strategy founded upon the logical category of “true” or “genuine infinity”.¹

I. Ends of History

When Jean-Francois Lyotard declared the end of the “grand narratives” in 1979,² he not only summarized the “postmodern condition” in an emblematic way, but he also expressed a long-lasting mistrust towards the philosophy of history. The grand narratives of philosophical tradition, maintained Lyotard, were problematic in a twofold sense. Not only did they have a theoretical drawback, since in their attempt to offer an inclusive, complete picture of history they were condemned to suppress and conceal that which did not keep pace with their narrative enterprise, but they also had a practical drawback, since they functioned as “legitimations” of the violence and the oppressive practices so often encountered in world history. According to Lyotard, the legitimizing force of these narratives has been completely lost; indeed, most people have even “lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative”.³ Having freed ourselves from the oppressive homogenization, we can henceforth step into the game of difference, which reproduces itself and either gives birth to conflicts, or simply promotes a reciprocal indifference.

In this way it seems that a circle which opened two centuries ago in the Enlightenment could now close. As we know, it was Voltaire who first spoke of a “philoso-

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² Lyotard 1984, xxiv, 15, and *passim*.

³ Lyotard 1984, 41.

phy of history” in 1756;⁴ and it is not accidental that in the same period the use of the singular “history” is established, as a collective noun that, in opposition to the multiplicity of historical narrations of individual facts, approaches historical process as an autonomous field and attempts to conceive its entirety and to demonstrate its unity.⁵ Facing the collapse of the ancient and medieval world-view founded upon the revelation of a firm, perpetual order established by God, this unifying conception was compelled to point towards Man, who now undertakes the task of producing meaning himself. In his autonomy, Man explores the field of history as a field of human action and experience and as a new horizon of meaning. Metaphysics now becomes metaphysics of history, or, more precisely, the metaphysics of progress. History appears as a unitary, evolutionary process that, founded upon this *metaphysicum* of progress, leads necessarily to a better Man, to a better world, or to both.⁶

The “old quarrel”⁷ between the science and the philosophy of history still lives on, even if it mostly expresses the ingratitude of the latter towards a philosophy which helped history out of the role of an *ancilla theologiae* in the Enlightenment and afterwards. The philosophy of history was born with the Enlightenment – but does it really die with the aphorism of the “end of the grand narratives”? Ostracized by historians and despised by philosophers, philosophy of history nevertheless proves to be remarkably resistant. This is occasionally demonstrated by representatives of that science which traditionally has been the most hostile to the philosophy of history: by the historians themselves. Hayden White, for example, in the context of his monumental undertaking to reconstruct the framework of historical thought in the 19th century, did not hesitate to jointly analyze the work and the opinions of historians and philosophers, characterizing the contradistinction between philosophy and science of history as a “precritically accepted cliché”.⁸ This reproach actually corroborates Hegel’s insistence that the rationality of history is indispensable for its understanding and that the normal, “reflective” historiography is also full of conditions and presuppositions. More recently, Wolfgang J. Mommsen (1992) has stressed in the most explicit way that the concept of world history, although considered as outdated, remains a concept essential to the science of history; if the researcher wants to comprehend his object, he has to be able to incorporate it into the horizon of general history and consequently into the context of a philosophical approach to history.

If we remain awhile at the end of 20th century, we might be able to further enrich our inquiry. Ten years after Lyotard, in the midst of the turbulent summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama ascertained not only the end of narratives, but also the end of history itself. Having joined their forces in the context of Western democracies, the principles underlying both political liberalism and the free market have been established as the unique and worldwide incontestable option of social organization.⁹ In the same year

⁴ In his *Essais sur l’histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*. In 1765, Voltaire will publish his book entitled *Philosophie de l’histoire*.

⁵ See Koselleck ²2004, 26–42.

⁶ The *metaphysicum* of progress reappears in all grand narrations, even in those of Horkheimer and Adorno – here, of course, in a kind of inversion. See Nagl-Docekal 1996, 36–54.

⁷ The expression *palatia tis diaphora* is used by Plato in a different context in order to describe the ‘old quarrel’ between rhetoric and philosophy (*Republic* 607b).

⁸ White 1973, 427.

⁹ The position of the famous text on *The End of History* (1989) is summarized by Fukuyama himself in his 1992-published book: “Liberal democracy may constitute

the historian Lutz Niethammer had managed in an impressive study, whose title ties in with Arnold Gehlen, to trace the emergence and the dissemination of the French neologism *posthistoire* among German intellectuals of the 20th century. This notion of post-history implies that history has reached its end, being unable to produce anything substantially new and restricting itself to recycling variations of the past. While Fukuyama affirmed the termination of history from a perspective placing him in the right of the political spectrum, Niethammer revealed a wide circulation of the notion of *posthistoire*, which horizontally intersects all traditional political ideologies and had a large impact on left-wing intellectuals. It is not accidental that this notion attained the sympathy of thinkers as different as Carl Schmitt and Henri Lefebvre, Alexandre Kojève and Ernst Jünger, Arnold Gehlen and Theodor Adorno. As Niethammer shows, the announcements of *posthistoire* express nothing but a neo-romantic disappointment that arises out of the failure of the search for historical meaning: “The issue in the diagnosis of *posthistoire* is not the end of the world, but the end of meaning.”¹⁰

Admittedly or not, discussions on history are still carried out in Hegel’s shadow. *Nolentes volentes*, whenever they deal with history, philosophers and scientists, post-modern theorists and political analysts face this specter still reigning over their arguments, debates and disputes. This was the case for Lyotard, who clearly recognized the eminent representation of grand narratives in Hegel’s work. This was also the case with Hayden White, whose reproach of a “precritical cliché” aimed at the contradistinction between philosophy and science of history emerges as a recurrence of a Hegelian argument:

Even the ordinary, average historian, who believes and says that his attitude is entirely receptive to the data, is not passive in his thinking; he brings his categories along with him and sees his data through them.¹¹

Again, this was the case for *posthistoire*’s identification of the end of history with the exhaustion of historical meaning – for who else other than Hegel clearly saw history as a source of meaning? Finally, and more clearly, this was the case with Fukuyama, who explicitly regarded Hegel as his intellectual ancestor; Fukuyama interpreted the way opened up by Napoleon’s victory in Jena and concluded during the summer of 1989 in Berlin as an accomplishment of the rational principle of freedom and as a proof of the prevalence of ideal principles. His position of the “end of history” became subsequently a newspaper slogan, but at the same time it helped to improve Hegel’s image in the Anglo-American world. *Hegel redivivus*, or just Hegel for the feuilleton?

Nevertheless, Fukuyama supplies more than a popularizing reading of Hegel. Especially in his 1992-published book he dedicates himself to the generally frowned upon enterprise of establishing a comprehensive theory about the entire world history, which, in addition, should be grounded upon a new ontology of the human psyche. However,

the ‘end point of mankind’s ideological evolution’ and the ‘final form of human government’, and as such constituted the ‘end of history’” (1992, xi). And he adds: “If we are now at a point where we cannot imagine a world substantially different from our own [...], then we must also take into consideration the probability that History itself might be at an end” (1992, 51).

¹⁰ Niethammer 1989, 9. For an overview on the notion of the “end of history” see especially Steenblock’s informative paper (1994).

¹¹ W 12, 23 / H 31 / R 14 / S 11 / N 29. – See Bibliography for abbreviations. We refer to the English editions (R, S, N) without pointing out our translation alterations.

if anyone is rehabilitated in this enterprise, then it is not Hegel, but Alexandre Kojève and his own reading of Hegel.¹² It is well known that Kojève's reading transforms or even variously distorts Hegel's ideas. In view of these complicated ways of transmission and perception, it seems to me urgently necessary and worthwhile to return to Hegel himself and to think anew his own issue. This interest does not coincide with the motivation so prevalent in the last years to reconstruct the 'authentic' Hegelian diction by means of publishing different transcripts of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. To the extent that Hegel-philology aims exclusively at such a reconstruction, it seems to abandon the spirit in favor of the diction. In particular the perspective of the so called *Entwicklungsgeschichte* may cast some light on the detail; it tends, however, to often miss the disputed *Sache* of the Hegelian philosophy of history. In our view, this *Sache* can indeed be approached and described divorced from the celebrated issue of the "end of history". Is every philosophy of history in the long run bound to finally accept this hypothesis – as it might seem in view of the debates of the 20th century? Can a unity of history be mastered only in the form of a historical closure, or could we likewise conceive of a unity open to the future? And above all: What does Hegel himself think of the "end of history"? In what respect and to what extent is it justified to attribute this notion to him?

Hegel's explicit allusions to an "end of history" are not frequent; more precisely, there exists only one reference, in the "Introduction" to the *Philosophy of History*:

World history goes from East to West; for Europe is the end of history par excellence, just as Asia is its beginning.¹³

This phrase attempts to figuratively attach time to space, historical flow to geographic coordinates, and undertakes this in a way that does not facilitate, but rather impedes the comprehension of the issue in question. If, for example, Europe is the end of history in the sense that it is West, then it is not an end at all – for, as Hegel will shortly point out, the literal meaning of "west" (or "east") is "entirely relative", depending on the observer. The text stresses then that "in world history there is a *kat' exohen* East", since the opening of history is located in the Kingdoms of Asia. For the West, however, we do not encounter an analogous assurance. Could we, therefore, suppose that in world history there does not exist a "*kat' exochen* West", i. e., that there does not exist an "end of history"? Such an argument *ex silentio* is probably not enough to prove that this unique reference to the "end of world history" was simply a metaphor capable of being misunderstood (and consequently unsuccessful). More important is a previous phrase in the same text that calls America "the land of the future, whose

¹² See also Anderson 1992, 279–375. – One and a half centuries before Fukuyama, the end of history was already proclaimed by the Hegelian historian K. L. Michelet, who maintained in his book *Geschichte der Menschheit in ihrem Entwicklungsgange seit dem Jahre 1775* (Berlin 1859–60) that Germany, France and America were in a balance situation which justified the expectation of permanent stability and peace.

¹³ W 12, 134 / H 243 / R 92 / S 103 / N 197. This passage belongs to the part of text reconstructed from the notes of the students attending the lectures. Another passage characterizing the Mediterranean as "the beginning and end of world history, its rise and decline" (W 12, 116 / R 91 / S 88; the phrase does not appear in H and N) cannot be considered in our view as a real contribution to the issue of the "end of history".

world-historical importance has yet to be revealed in the time to come".¹⁴ How can the "end" of history in Europe be made compatible with its "future" in America?

History, as Hegel repeatedly reminds his reader, constitutes a "progress in the consciousness of freedom", a long process of "its *application* in worldly reality" and of the "penetration and transformation of worldly situation" by it.¹⁵ In general, and at the moment regardless of Hegelian thought, this progress could mean two different things:

- (a) an infinite movement of permanent enrichment and perfection, in the course of which each stage of world history takes on the experiences and achievements of the prior ones and raises them to a higher level – yet without a final conclusion;
- (b) an eschatological course towards a clearly determined objective; its fulfillment is the end of history, which terminates historical movement and change.

In a surface approach, both versions could find support in Hegelian passages. The accentuation on the "infinite difference between the principle[...] and that which is real"¹⁶ appears to confirm the first option; we could thus maintain that Christian-German Europe represents only a prevalence *an sich* of universal freedom, which, however, is separated from its actualization by an infinite distance that will never be completely traversed. It is characteristic that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel speaks of his own time not as an end or finalization, but as a "time of birth, of the transition into a new era",¹⁷ while the First Preface of *Encyclopaedia* also points out that "a new era has dawned in the realm of science as well as in that of politics".¹⁸ Finally, the text on *Philosophy of History* explicitly characterizes world history as a "course still in progress".¹⁹

On the other hand, there exist numerous passages that seem to exclude the first option and confirm the second one. Progress should not be considered as "a mere increase in quantity",²⁰ but as a complete achievement of the objective of world history; in its course, spirit "gradually arrives at the consciousness and the willing of truth; this dawns within spirit, which finds its main points and finally arrives at full consciousness":²¹ Spirit "has [already] reached the knowledge of what it is".²² In another passage, Hegel points out that from the Enlightenment on, with the dominance of the principle of Reason, "we reach the *last stage in history, our world, our own time*".²³ Is this stage "the last" ("das letzte") in the sense of "the more recent", or in the sense of "the final one"? The second version seems to be reinforced by another passage, according to which "the Christian world is the world of completion; the principle [of universal freedom] has been accomplished, consequently the end of the days has fully come".²⁴

¹⁴ W 12, 114 / H 209 / R 90 / S 86 / N 170. Later in the *Lectures* a similar statement is made about the body of Slavonic nations, which "hitherto has not appeared as an independent element in the series of formations that Reason has assumed in the world. Whether it will do so hereafter, is a question that does not concern us here; for in history we have to do with the past" (W 12, 422 / S 350).

¹⁵ W 12, 32 / H 62–3 / R 21–2 / S 18 / N 54.

¹⁶ W 12, 33 / H 63 / R 22 / S 19 / N 55.

¹⁷ Hegel 1977, 6 (transl. modified) / W 3, 18.

¹⁸ W 8, 12–3.

¹⁹ W 12, 40 / H 87 / R 28 / S 25 / N 74.

²⁰ H 74 / N 64.

²¹ W 12, 73–4 / R 56 / S 53.

²² H 183 / N 151.

²³ W 12, 524 / S 442.

²⁴ W 12, 414 / S 342.

In accordance with these last passages that seem to support version (b), we could therefore suppose that history according to Hegel has indeed come to an end. If history is a progress in the consciousness and the realization of freedom going through the stages of 'One – Some – All', as Hegel repeatedly summarizes,²⁵ then the third and last stage must constitute a final, terminal and insuperable point, for it is an accomplishment that does not permit any further progress to emerge. Has history, therefore, indeed come to its end with the implementation by the Germanic nations of the Christian principle that man is *per se* free? Have we been experiencing a kind of eternal epilogue since then, an era that does not contain anything but the empirical realization of the principle of universal freedom? And was Fukuyama presumably right in presenting liberal Western democracies as incarnations of this third stage and as definitive confirmations of the Hegelian outline? We could then not only assume that the future will not present any radically new historical achievements, but also that it will flow on and on as a dispassionate and lethargic confirmation of the principle of universal freedom that appeared in Modern Times and seems to conclusively prevail.

An examination of the character of these assumptions might nevertheless prove more useful than their hasty confirmation. We might then realize that the famous "end of history" only indicates an attitude *towards the future* – and thus presents, at least within a Hegelian framework, a deeply problematic position. Hegel's explicit references to the future are rare, but clear. On the occasion of Epicurus and his view on death, Hegel does not hesitate to agree that future things "do not concern us – neither their existence nor their non-existence; they need not, therefore, cause us uneasiness. This is the right way to regard the future."²⁶ The only explicit Hegelian reference to the future which appears as a prediction thus remains the one that characterized America as the "country of future". This phrase, however, not only seems to contradict the phrase placing the end of history in Europe, but is itself problematic *in toto*, since it transgresses the limits posed by the very subject matter discussed here, namely history as facing the past. This is why Hegel hastens to clarify: "As a land of the future, [however, America] is of no interest to us here; for in history we are concerned with what has been and with what is."²⁷ History stops intrinsically in the respective present.²⁸

²⁵ For example, see the passage just after the unique reference to the "end of history" (W 12, 134 / R 93 / S 104): "The East knew (and knows) that only One is free; the Greek and Roman world that Some are free; the Germanic world knows that All are free."

²⁶ W 19, 331. Even "the absolute consciousness does not know anything about the future as such", for "within the future no form can be perceived" (W 18, 501). At the end of the lectures on *Philosophy of History* Hegel discusses the conflict between liberal positions and state force, concluding that "unsteadiness and unrest go on. This collision, this nodus, this problem is that with which history is now occupied, and whose solution it has to work out in the future" (W 12, 535 / S 452). This statement is rather a diagnosis of the present situation than an estimation of the future course of history.

²⁷ W 12, 114 / H 210 / R 90 / S 87 / N 171.

²⁸ A historian like Collingwood (1994, 120) was able to interpret Hegel here with more sobriety than many philosophers: "History must end with the present, because nothing else has happened. But this does not mean glorifying the present or thinking that future progress is impossible."

This Hegelian “*agnosticism of future*”²⁹ does not only reflect a diagnosis of the limits of human knowledge and a self-limitation of Reason, but also the very character of the Absolute, which is real only in so far as it is realized. A well-known passage from the Preface in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* stresses that philosophy, moving towards the Absolute, does not separate itself from its own time, but essentially comprehends it.³⁰ Even more important is another famous passage from the same text:

As the *thought* of the world, [philosophy] appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its complete state. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.³¹

This positive, affirmative agnosticism should make us cautious when considering the view of the famous “end of history”. Both a prediction that a certain end of history *will* come about or an ascertainment that the end has *already* arrived represent judgments on the future, which *intrinsically contradict* not only the nature of history, but also Hegel’s philosophical self-understanding, according to which “prophesizing is not the business of a philosopher”.³² Philosophy of history, just like every philosophical activity, is a form of knowledge *never prospective, but eminently retrospective*.³³ If this were not the case, if this knowledge aimed at the future and were able to grasp it in advance, then the creative freedom of spirit to produce its forms in an “inexhaustible variety”³⁴ would be impeded.

II. A Hermeneutical Circle

The philosophical apprehension of world history is founded upon a “simple thought of Reason: that Reason rules the world”.³⁵ The historical realization of Reason as freedom, however, is not a scheme implanted upon history, but an ascertainment drawn out of the historical phenomenon itself: “We must take history as it is, and proceed historically, empirically [...]; history must be apprehended accurately.”³⁶ The rejection of every ‘aprioristic’ construction or invention thus constitutes the starting point of Hegel’s attitude towards history.³⁷ The *proteron*, the first element we encounter in his-

²⁹ Hölscher 2001, 331. Collingwood also stresses that “as Hegel put it, the future is an object not of knowledge, but of hopes and fears” (1994, 120).

³⁰ Hegel 1991, 21 / W 7, 26.

³¹ Hegel 1991, 23 / W 7, 28.

³² H 210 / N 171.

³³ It is obvious that such a ‘retrospective’ philosophy of history is already far away from that of the Enlightenment or of Kant. It is not a servant of political ideals or utopian aspirations, but has freed itself from every normative dependence or practical objective. As Schnädelbach stresses in view of Hegel (2000, 57), “the meaning of history is here exclusively a theoretical, declaratory one”.

³⁴ W 12, 98 / S 73.

³⁵ W 12, 20 / H 28 / R 12 / S 9 / N 27.

³⁶ W 12, 22–3 / H 30–1 / R 13–4 / S 10–1 / N 29.

³⁷ W 12, 22 / H 31 / R 13 / S 11 / N 29. Furthermore, Hegelian teleology does not permit its interconnection with an “extramundane intelligence”, even though this

tory, is neither spirit nor Reason, but the very historical process which advances as a long chain of incidents and events. This colorful mosaic, especially the incidents of decline, destruction, loss and negativity entailed in its pieces, confronts us with the question of whether or not this succession includes some *meaning*; in other words, whether it is determined by some form of *unity*. This naked facticity is the absolute *proteron* of the historical field and every philosophy of history that recognizes this priority unfolds as a *hermeneutics of history*.

Hegel does not deal with a history of his own, different from that of a historian, or from what common sense holds history to be. The difference between the philosopher and the historian is not a difference in object, but rather a twofold difference in their respective attitudes. First, in approaching history philosophically, Hegel attempts to grasp it in its entirety, beyond any spatial or temporal restrictions; philosophy of history is possible only as universal world history. Second, Hegel articulates explicitly something that both the historian and common sense perform, without being conscious of it; he approaches history by *thinking*:

The philosophy of history is nothing more than the *thoughtful* consideration of history – and thinking is something we cannot give up. For man is a *thinking* being, this is what distinguishes him from animals.³⁸

This simple reminder not only appears to coincide with the outcome of the discussions throughout the 20th century that led to the nearly unanimous recognition of the decisive theoretical burden inherent in every historical investigation, but also appears to overcome the myth that historical events are pre-given data which have to be perceived passively by a value-free observer. The so called raw historical facts are nothing but products of interpretation. The philosophical approach to history is thus the natural conclusion and completion of an attitude that had already begun with “original” historians like Herodotus or Thucydides and consists in a thoughtful, rational approach and assessment of historical events.³⁹

The possibility of a philosophical approach to this sequence of events, that is to say, the legitimacy of the philosophy of history itself, is, of course, everything but obvious. It is demonstrated only to the extent that it has been proved that history can be a philosophical subject, i. e., a subject to be approached *sub specie rationis*, in the light of Reason. This, however, does not imply an emanative production, a *deductio* of history from the heights of Reason, or from the concept. Reason does not *create* history, but *rules* it. It does not exist outside history, being opposed to it or in an external relation, but is to be sought *within* history. Until its empirical confirmation, the thought of Reason is nothing but a heuristic principle only to be confirmed by empirical history: “It is the consideration of world history itself that must reveal it as a rational process, as the rational, necessary course of the world spirit.”⁴⁰ The insight that “Reason rules the world” does not appeal to a hyper-historical truth of metaphys-

would serve the restricted intellectual needs of religious “piety”. The genuine teleological principle is accomplished with the knowledge of the “immanent determinateness” of an aim, and not of some “element heterogeneous” to it (Hegel 1969, 735 / W 6, 438).

³⁸ W 12, 20 / H 25 / R 10 / S 8 / N 25.

³⁹ Even original history is a form of transposing facts “into the realm of intellectual representation” (W 12, 11 and 544 / H 4 / R 3 / S 1 / N 12).

⁴⁰ W 12, 22 / H 30 / R 13 / S 10 / N 29.

ical or theological origin, but functions as elementary condition of the possibility of understanding world history. The assumption of Reason lies at the heart of Hegel's historical method precisely because this method is a *hermeneutics* of history: a method that attempts to comprehend history, a method that seeks *meaning* in the historical Becoming. The only controversial question is finally this: In turning towards history, do we search for meaning, or for the non-sense of evil and disasters, of destruction and indefinite negation?

The search for historical meaning is formulated in a phrase emblematic of Hegel's view on philosophical history (although this phrase has caused various misunderstandings): "To him who looks at the world rationally, the world looks rational in return. The relation is mutual."⁴¹ Do we have here a logically prohibited *petitio principii*, a vicious circle admitting that we extract from history only what we insert into it? Here Hegel apparently paraphrases the famous Kantian determination of *a priori* knowledge, according to which "all we know *a priori* about things is what we ourselves put into them".⁴² Hegel's implicit allusion involves, however, a deep shift in meaning; not so much because this position is now applied to the field of experience and history instead of being applied to *a priori* knowledge, but rather because, according to Hegel, Reason is by no means imported into history as something external to it. Reason is sought within history from the very beginning (rational look at the world) and is discovered inside it (rational response of the world).

If we examine the logical structure of the sentence, taking into consideration the "mutual" character of the relation, we realize that its content is remarkably simple. It states a reciprocal relation between the rational view (p: 'whoever looks at the world rationally') and the rational content revealed to this standpoint (q: 'the world looks rational in return'). The rational viewpoint is thus a *necessary condition* of the rational content: only those who view the world rationally find its rationality (q → p), or, in order to grasp history's rationality, we should first seek it. In effect, we encounter here a Hegelian contribution to the old problem of knowledge, as contrived by the Sophists and reconstructed in Plato's *Meno*: "It is impossible for a person to search either for what he knows or for what he does not. He cannot search for what he knows, for he knows it and has no need to search; and he cannot search for what he does not know, for he does not even know what to search for."⁴³ The Socratic answer will appeal to the "recollection" and also lay the foundation for the Aristotelian position formulated in the *Posterior Analytics* (71a 1–2): "All intellectual teaching and learning proceeds from pre-existent knowledge." Hegel's view effectively reiterates this position. At the same time he offers an outline of the scheme that will explicitly emerge in the philosophy of Heidegger, as well as in modern philosophical hermeneutics: the so called "circle of understanding". We seek rationality on the basis of a "preexisting knowledge", and the way we view something is reflected upon the object of our view itself.⁴⁴

⁴¹ W 12, 23 / H 31 / R 14 / S 11 / N 29.

⁴² Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, B xviii.

⁴³ See *Meno* 80e; cf. also *Euthydemus* 276a–277c.

⁴⁴ We have to point out, however, that Hegel's hermeneutical circle remains closer to traditional hermeneutics than Heidegger's because it takes place between the whole and its parts, without putting emphasis on the interpreter. Here the philosopher is urged to overcome his individuality and to adapt to the unique and unifying perspective of Reason. – Hegel's view has also been called a "hermeneutic circle" by Bubner 2001, 37.

If, however, the relation is “mutual”, then the reverse should also be the case. The rational viewpoint should also be a *sufficient condition* of the rational content; i. e., it is enough to view the world rationally, in order to have its rationality revealed ($p \rightarrow q$). But why should we accept the validity of this implication? Why should we reject the possibility of a meaningless, or fallible rational viewpoint and its collapse before an absurd reality? Hegel’s answer here is clear. If we seek rationality, then it will be revealed to us simply because it exists. Hegel’s appeal to his students is thus: ‘Search for meaning, and you will find it; ask history, and it will answer to you’. His hermeneutic circle does not entail a spurious metaphysics of Reason, but points once again to the necessity of an “empirical” corroboration of its presence. “Accurate apprehension” is only the rational one. This assumption, however, requires permanent confirmation. When we view history in a rational way, we discover the rationality it involves. Only this hermeneutic circle can overcome the phantom of an ‘objectivity’ of historical facts without collapsing into relativism. As for the notorious “trust in Reason”,⁴⁵ this is not a trust in a *transcendent* substance, but in a *transcendental* constant – in the condition of the possibility of comprehending history at all.⁴⁶ If Reason goes beyond experience and has to be presupposed in order to be discovered, then the only intention of exceeding experience is to return back to it. The thought of Reason is nothing but the method of meeting a fundamental demand, namely, that of “saving” the historical phenomena.

Within this framework the distinction which has been particularly popular during the last decades between critical and speculative philosophy of history seems to lose its validity.⁴⁷ According to this distinction, critical philosophy of history is an epistemology of history, a form of methodology that deals with history as a scientific activity and poses questions concerning the character of historical knowledge and truth, the meaning of a historical ‘fact’ and the relation between objectivity and interpretation within historical narration (*historia rerum gestarum*). Speculative philosophy of history, for its part, is said to refer to history as a genuine succession of the real facts themselves (*res gestae*) and seeks a unique thread that really connects and conducts them. Hegel is usually classified as an advocate of “speculative” philosophy of history. If we take into account the decisive methodological observations he contributed, this seems one-sided. But it is even wrong, if we realize that Hegel’s enterprise has been an *avant la lettre* attempt to undermine and to reject that distinction itself. Starting from a superficially paradoxical linguistic coincidence in the meanings of “events” (*res gestae*) and “narration” (*historia rerum gestarum*), which are both comprised within the notion of “history”, Hegel will point at the “common internal source” of the two meanings.⁴⁸ History is Reason’s history – and here the genitive is to be understood as a *genitivus subjectivus* as well as a *genitivus objectivus*. The force of Reason, its synthetic power, pertains not only to the field of ‘objective’ history, but also to ‘subjective’ nar-

⁴⁵ W 12, 21 / H 30 / R 13 / S 10 / N 28.

⁴⁶ This is the only sense of *a priori* permitted in history: “One must be *a priori* familiar with [...] the principles, just as Kepler [...] had to have an *a priori* acquaintance with ellipses, cubes, and squares, and with ideas of their relations before he could invent his immortal laws from empirical data” (W 12, 87 / H 168 / R 68 / S 64 / N 138–9). For the rest, aprioristic inventions should be left “to those ingenious professional historians, who are not uncommon among us [Germans]” (W 12, 22–3 / H 31 / R 13–4 / S 11 / N 29).

⁴⁷ See Walsh ³1967, 15–7 and *passim*. For a critical approach of the distinction see O’Brien 1985, 174–80.

⁴⁸ W 12, 83 / H 164 / R 64 / S 60 / N 135.

ration, and finally achieves the identification of both. In fact, the subjective side of narration coincides with the objective side of facts – in the form of an identity of identity and non-identity. More generally, as we know from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the separation of thought and reality, of facts and reflection, is a separation produced by the reflective consciousness. This separation then needs to be suspended within a philosophical reflection of reflection which Hegel calls *speculation*.

III. Discerning Historical Meaning

Historical ‘material’ is composed of the deeds and activities of acting subjects seeking the satisfaction of their own intentions, needs and interests. The course of history needs this ‘material’, but is not determined by it: “The individuals and nations, in seeking to satisfy their own interests, are at the same time the means and tools of something Higher and Broader, of which they know nothing and which they fulfill unconsciously.”⁴⁹ Precisely this ability of human activity to produce results that deviate from the individual intentions of acting subjects Hegel calls the “cunning of Reason”.⁵⁰ This phrase has caused several misapprehensions and disputes but is, in fact, only one among many metaphors employed in the text.⁵¹ It is a figurative, anthropomorphic depiction of the relation between the universality of Reason and the individuality of human actions which does not raise any particular philosophical claims in itself. Characteristically enough, a previous appearance of the pattern of “cunningness” is met not only in the Kantian explanation of the competition with which nature accords to subjects,⁵² but also in Adam Smith’s description of the market as an “invisible hand” which leads each individual “to promote an end which was no part of his intention [...] By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”⁵³ In any case, Hegel’s “cunning” does not imply a Reason which, as a quasi subject, intrigues behind historical humans and effects the exploitation of their actions for some selfish plans. In fact, “cunningness” denotes the necessity of mediation to be carried out within history between universal Reason and individual human deeds: Human actions generate results different from those intended by the acting persons, and history is not an aggregate of disparate events, but rather a progress towards the realization of a certain final objective. The “cunningness” does not denote some evil or devious intentions of Reason, but rather affirmatively records

⁴⁹ W 12, 40 / H 87 / R 28 / S 25 / N 74.

⁵⁰ W 12, 49 / H 105 / R 35 / S 33 / N 89.

⁵¹ In other passages history is compared to a “theatre”, “scene” or “stage” (W 12, 29, 34, 44, 75, 107, 115 / H 53, 151, 191 / R 19, 23, 31, 58, 84, 90 / S 16, 20, 28, 54, 80, 87 / N 46, 126, 155), to a “painting” or “picture” (W 12, 35, 97 / H 80 / R 24, 75 / S 21, 72 / N 69), or to a “tapestry” (W 12, 38 / R 26 / S 23).

⁵² See the well-known passage from the “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose”: “Individual men and even entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature. They are unconsciously promoting an end which, even if they knew what it was, would scarcely arouse their interest” (Kant² 1991, 41).

⁵³ Smith 1981, 456. In §199 of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* on “Estate” (W 7, 353), Hegel seems to have been influenced by these considerations of A. Smith.

these two features of human action and of history respectively. Reason *does not coerce* individuals to act in a certain way, but *subsequently benefits* from these actions in letting them serve its own objectives.

The relation between the end-goal of Reason and the “means” employed toward its realization points to the Kantian distinction between “internal” and “external teleology”, which has been characterized by Hegel as “one of Kant’s greatest services to philosophy”.⁵⁴ In contrast to the common, “external” perception of teleology that considers means as something “consumed in the realization of a purpose that lies outside them”,⁵⁵ “internal teleology” denotes the intrinsic affinity between goal and means, as it is expressed, e. g., in the relation between an organic unity and its parts. Despite the objections occasionally formulated,⁵⁶ the relation between the rational intention of world history and the means employed by it can only be considered as a clear instance of *internal teleology*. Reason “does not need an external material”,⁵⁷ nor do humans relate to it “as ‘means’ in that entirely external sense”. To the contrary, they “participate in the rational goal and are therefore ends in themselves”.⁵⁸

In describing the role of Reason in history, Hegel opposes himself to the two extremes of *apriorism* and *historism*. *Apriorism* first appears in Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History” (1784); in the last paragraph of this text, however, Kant stressed:

It would be a misinterpretation of my intention to contend that I meant this idea of a universal history, which to some extent follows an *a priori* rule, to supersede the task of history proper, that of *empirical* composition. My idea is only a notion of what a philosophical mind, well acquainted with history, might be able to attempt from a different angle.⁵⁹

Fichte, on the contrary, sketched out an opposition between aprioristic and aposterioric history; although he recognized the empirical approach of history as “genuine history” (“eigentliche Geschichte”), he asked the philosopher to abstain from it:

The philosopher who deals with history as a philosopher follows that *a priori* unfolding thread of the world plan, which is clear to him without history at all. His use of history is by no means one that aims at proving something by it, for his theses have already been previously proven and are independent of any history.⁶⁰

In his numerous rejections of an aprioristic approach, Hegel distances himself not only from Fichte, but also from the Kantian distinction itself. Dividing between an aprioristic and an empirical element in history is artificial and erroneous, and history has to proceed in any case “historically, empirically”. The philosopher should not only have a wide knowledge of the historical process, but also remain in a permanent dialogue with the empirical material.

⁵⁴ Hegel 1969, 737 / W 6, 440.

⁵⁵ W 8, 362 (*Encyclopaedia*, §205, Addition).

⁵⁶ Cf., e. g., Fulda (1965, 204–6) who, on the basis of a simplifying interpretation of the “cunning of Reason”, considers the structure of world history as a case of external teleology.

⁵⁷ W 12, 21 / H 28 / R 12 / S 9 / N 27.

⁵⁸ W 12, 50 / H 106 / R 36 / S 33 / N 90. Cf. also McCarney 2000, 123–9.

⁵⁹ Kant ²1991, 53.

⁶⁰ *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (Berlin 1806), Ninth Lecture.

A further reference to Ranke⁶¹ evokes *historism* (in the sense of historical positivism) and undertakes its *avant la lettre* refutation, even before its constitution as a distinct historiographic approach. Hegel maintains here that the exhaustive collection of material and the enumeration of details not only makes the past more vague and unclear, but also supports the abolition of the active role of the intellect. Apriorism is reproached with deforming the very historical object itself. Historism, in contrast, is reproached as being naïve, since it states that historical ‘facts’ can be grasped as such without the mediation of categories. In opposition to these two strategies, Hegel’s hermeneutics of history presupposes the categories of Reason, without affirming a supposed ‘objective’ historical *Ansich* which is prior to all human knowledge. Even the common historian knows very well (although he occasionally forgets) that without records there are no facts. Without ‘subjectivity’, there is no ‘objectivity’; without the contribution and presence of Reason, there is no historical subject matter. The ‘facts themselves’, the so called ‘raw’ data, remain an imaginary construction of a naïve, positivistically fixated scientific stance. This judgment, however, does not lead to relativism; admitting the role of subjectivity does not imply surrendering to the inclinations and inventions of a subjective methodological arbitrariness. Certain historical categories are more suitable than others, for their application is imposed by the very nature of the subject. History is the field of action and growth of spirit, which realizes itself within history by knowing itself. Since “freedom is the only truth of spirit”, its historical course constitutes a process of self-production and self-knowledge as freedom: “[T]he world history is the progress in the consciousness of freedom” and at the same time the worldly “application” of this principle.⁶²

Each historical approach signifies an attempt to select the essential elements in an ocean of insignificance, raising these to focal points of meaning and comprehending the relations among them. The philosophical approach to world history is the consistent and thorough implementation of this attitude. It is consistent because this approach alone possesses the categories and criteria for distinguishing the essential from the insignificant. It is also thorough because it applies these categories to the whole of the worldly presence of spirit, i. e., to the whole of world history. If history is history of spirit, then it is the history of its free growth and revelation: it is the *history of freedom*. The relation to freedom is thus the unique criterion of meaning in world history, the only criterion for discerning between essential and inessential. This distinction is Hegel’s permanent concern and task. Nothing is more important to him than distinguishing eminent real history from what we might call *parahistory*.

This parahistory can appear in various modes, two of which seem most important. The first resides in the field of *res gestae* and takes the form of *contingency*. The second is found in *historia*, when this is presented as a “litany of lamentations”⁶³ for the all too frequent presence of sorrow, infelicity and villainy in the world. Concerning contingency, Hegel will insist that each attempt to obtain meaning from history cannot but reject the role of chance in it. This is eminently the case for the philosophical approach to history: “Contingency is the same as external necessity, that is, a necessity which

⁶¹ This reference to Ranke (W 12, 553 / H 15 / N 19) remains unique throughout Hegel’s work and was probably added to the manuscript during the winter 1828/29. Ranke would reject world history, insisting that “only God can have a knowledge” of it (from Ranke’s *Nachlass*, published in *Historische Zeitschrift* 178 (1954), 301).

⁶² W 12, 30, 32 / H 62–3 / R 21–2 / S 17–9 / N 54.

⁶³ W 12, 51 / H 107 / R 37 / S 34 / N 91.

originates in causes which are themselves no more than external circumstances.”⁶⁴ This perspective does not seek to expel the accidental from reality, but to keep it out of the area of the comprehensible and the meaningful. Hegel knows that an *a priori* expulsion of contingency would demonstrate an instance of “spurious”, vulgar idealism. Therefore, he neither denies its presence in history altogether, nor tries to enclose reality within the bonds of an ‘iron necessity’. He only repeats an assessment which in fact should be considered as almost self-evident: If contingency is by definition that which remains unrelated by having no connections to other facts and situations, then it obviously cannot be included in any context of meaning, nor be considered in its cross-correlations, nor be mediated; it remains incomprehensible. The accidental is eliminated from history not because it does not take place, but because it lies beyond the limits of comprehension, i. e., beyond the limits of proper history.

An analogous determination and delimitation of the historical field takes place along with the attacks on the “moral embitterment”, which occasionally determines our attitude against history.⁶⁵ This is neither an attempt to deny the prevalence of unhappiness and malice in the world, nor a step towards its aesthetic nullification. Hegel’s only concern here remains the corroboration of the insight that such a moralistic attitude has no relation with proper history and its issues, that it cannot grasp the essential elements of historical movement. Historically real (*wirklich*) is only the historically effective (*wirkend*). The ‘selection’ and nomination of historical events is not an arbitrary act, but reflects the effect carried out by historians and is determined only by it. In the light of world history as a history of freedom, pain and evil are revealed as something real, but also “subordinate and overcome”; historical knowledge does not reject them, but functions as a “reconciliation” with them.⁶⁶ The main aspect of this reconciliatory knowledge provided by history is the insight that freedom is the goal realized in it. This historical freedom is not a metaphysical entity, but has an exclusively *political notion*, being “realized through the freedom of each individual”.⁶⁷

History, as history of spirit, is a process of creating knowledge, while historical reflection preserves and amplifies this knowledge. However, the knowledge provided by history has nothing in common with the morals often sought in the narratives it entails. In the *Lectures* Hegel repeatedly attacks this expectation, which we might call *historical didacticism*:

Rulers, statesmen, and nations are told that they ought to learn from the experience of history. Yet what experience and history teaches us is this: Nations and governments have never learned anything from history, nor acted in accordance with the lessons to be derived from it.⁶⁸

First, Hegel stresses that history does not repeat itself – how could this be possible, if it is the history of spirit and if spirit is distinguished by its inexhaustible productive creativity and freedom? Spirit never degenerates into a replication, an imitation or a simulation of itself! Second, the scene of world history is so diverse and multifaceted, that it can always fulfill the most disparate claims searching in the past for ‘examples’ facilitating a present, practical orientation. The encouragement to pay attention to his-

⁶⁴ H 29 / N 28.

⁶⁵ W 12, 34 / H 80 / R 24 / S 21 / N 68.

⁶⁶ W 12, 28 / H 48 / R 18 / S 15 / N 43.

⁶⁷ H 64 / N 55.

⁶⁸ W 12, 17 / R 8 / S 6.

tory so that the ‘mistakes of the past’ are not repeated is not only naïve, but also distorts of the essence of historical knowledge. This knowledge has as much practical significance as any theoretical knowledge. It fulfils its conciliatory function not whenever we demand in it a shelter from an unbearable reality, but when the reconciliation becomes real by being institutionally realized. This realization takes place within the *state*.

IV. *State and History*

World history focuses on the state and is delimited by it. Firstly, the state is the object of philosophical world history, for only this embodies the realization of freedom. Secondly, the state is the fountain of historical narration itself, and in this sense it is the genuine subject of all history. Hegel maintains an empirical confirmation of the claim that historical recording takes place only where a state exists: “It is the state which first supplies a content which not only is appropriate to the prose of history, but in fact creates it.”⁶⁹ The link between state and history, as well as history’s placement within practical philosophy, is Kant’s (and to some extent also Herder’s) heritage, which acquires particular importance with Hegel.⁷⁰ While history for Kant constituted a field of moral progress and development, for Hegel it remains equivalent to *political history* (in the broad sense of the political). And while for Kant a cosmopolitan state constituted the expected conclusion of history, for Hegel the state functions primarily as an initial requirement and a fundamental condition of the possibility of history.

The relation between state and history, however, is not always determined with the necessary clarity; and this does not denote a subjective weakness of Hegel, but rather a difficulty intrinsic to the present subject matter. In short, we believe that the relation between state and history opens up a wide field of tensions whose acidity can hardly be neutralized. The poles of these tensions are, on the one side, the substantial determination of each state as an end in itself and, on the other side, its transitory character as a specific moment of world history. Thus, on the one side we could point at emphatic formulations such as: “every state is an end in itself”, or “state is the realization of freedom, i. e., of the absolute end-goal – it is end in itself”.⁷¹ On the other side, however, these states are subjected to the same impermanence that pertains to every historical product. The approach of world history in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* starts precisely from this assumption: The states, as well as the spirits of particular nations (*Volksgeister*), present themselves here as samples of “particularity”; their independence is inherently “exposed to contingency”.⁷² Similarly, the *Encyclopaedia* insists on the “restricted” character of a *Volksgeist*, whose “independence is something secondary” and thus “passes into universal world history”, in which it only constitutes a transitory rung.⁷³

⁶⁹ W 12, 83 / H 164 / R 64 / S 61 / N 136.

⁷⁰ For an excellent analysis of the implications of this practical affiliation, cf. Angehrn 1981.

⁷¹ W 12, 56 / H 16 / R 41 / S 39 / N 19.

⁷² W 7, 503 (§340). On the necessity of a transition from state to history, see also Angehrn 1981, 344.

⁷³ W 10, 347 (§548).

The same tension also lies at the bottom of the difficulties we face when we are invited to comprehend the way historical changes take place, or even to take a certain standpoint while these happen:

This universal [i. e., the spirit of a nation], which every individual must activate, so that by this activity the whole of ethical life is sustained, is countered by a second universal, which expresses itself in the large history and which makes it difficult to comply with ethical life. The origin of this second universal has already been discussed, in connection with the progress of the Idea [...]. Since an ethical whole is limited, it has above it a higher universal which creates in it an internal rupture. The transition from one form of the spirit to another is exactly this sublation of the previous universal (as a particular one) by thought. That higher universal, so to speak the next genus of the previous species, is already inwardly present, but has not yet established itself; and this makes existing reality unstable and fragmentary.⁷⁴

The tension between the universalities of state and of world history signifies a deeper opposition between the perspectives of *synchrony* and *diachrony*. Examined synchronically, a state is an end in itself, a realization of freedom. Diachronically, however, it is nothing but a finite creation of spirit among many others, which will expire and thus serve the eternity of its instigator. This tension takes the form of an open clash only in transitional periods. It simmers permanently, however, and remains actively present in every historical moment, giving expression to the conflicting claims of the two forms of spirit: the objective and the absolute. The place of world history within the system is revealing for this tension. In the *Philosophy of Right*, as well as in the *Encyclopaedia*, world history is the conclusion of the inquiry on the state and at the same time it refers beyond it. The philosophical world history is *the assignment of state within the horizon of absolute spirit*.

The questions posed by this transition from state to history, from the finitude of the formations of objective spirit to the truly infinite absolute spirit, have long been located, yet not sufficiently examined. We think that this transition can and should be hermeneutically employed for an elucidation of the character of mediations achieved within a free state, as well as for the distinction between absolute and objective spirit. In any case, the finitude of a particular state and of a *Volksgeist* does not make a state an incomplete form of freedom. It probably means, however, that each form of realization, however perfect, remains subject to decay. The products of objective spirit have only a partial and incomplete knowledge of this inventive process, hence also of the historicity that pertains to them. The almost instinctual self-preservation of these forms creates claims and expectations of eternity, which shatter against the ironic refractions implied by the perspective of totality. The systematic integration of "World History" in the *Philosophy of Right* reminds us that each state is a particular, temporally limited individuality. No state form (i. e., not even the form described in the *Philosophy of Right*) can permanently solve the difficulty of mediation between the universal and the particular, the collective and the individual, the substantial and the subjective. This issue cannot but emerge again and again in different ways, requiring anew an answer to a new question. This answer is provided by the spirit itself that, contrary to the individual *Volksgeister* and their states, eternally multiplies its material and develops itself by inventing new oppositions and new forms of mediation, new and richer intellectual productions.

⁷⁴ H 96 / N 81–2.

The ‘systematic’ problems, however, do not end here. In fact, they become even more intensive, if we take into consideration that, as a part of objective spirit, history is an organic part of the system, but simultaneously remains a necessary condition of it. It has often been remarked that the historicity of the system does not pertain only to the philosophy of spirit, but also to the *Logic*. We could consequently speak of a *systematicity of history* and of a *historicity of the system* – two observations that open up a wide field of necessary clarifications. However, although history makes up a part of the system, the way it develops and progresses is not identical with that of the *Logic*. The course of history is not a result of logical production – for what would this mean in respect to history? When philosophical history is requested to grasp the “necessity” of historical progress as a “progress in the consciousness of freedom”, then this necessity is not a logical one, but rather a necessity of facts, emerging through the historical past and only out of this. This seems to be Hegel’s insinuation when he repeatedly reminds us that the philosophical approach of history does not coincide with “speculative” knowledge.⁷⁵ The very ascertainment that Reason dominates history is a truth, whose “real proof [der eigentliche Beweis] belongs to the knowledge of Reason itself; in world history [that ascertainment] only manifests itself [erweist sich]”.⁷⁶ Moreover, as we shall see shortly, the very concept of philosophical world history is grounded upon a purely ‘tangible’, concrete historical condition: upon the manifestation of the principle of universal freedom in Modern Times and upon its gradual predominance.

V. On the Logic of History

Although the issue of an end of history in the sense of its termination does not (and cannot) arise *eo ipso* in Hegel’s writings, the relevant discussion is not completely out of place: It legitimates itself with respect to the famous *Endzweck* of history. This compound word, a conceptual coupling of “ending” (Ende) and “goal” (Zweck), recurs permanently in the Hegelian text as an indispensable condition of a rational approach of history. This is a characteristic passage:

Even if we look upon history as a slaughter-bench, at which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states and the virtues of individuals have been sacrificed, our thought is necessarily confronted with the question: To what, to which end-goal have these monstrous sacrifices been offered? [...] The events that present such a grim picture for our gloomy sentiments and brooding reflection have to be seen as the *means* for what we claim is the substantial determination, the absolute end-goal, i. e., the true result of world history.⁷⁷

Obviously enough, Hegel sees here two possibilities. The one consists in treating historical facts as individual incidents or as a succession of disasters, trials, infelicity and

⁷⁵ Cf. the following statements: “This is not the time or place for a speculative exposition of the idea of spirit” (W 12, 29 / H 53 / R 19 / S 16 / N 47); “this is a knowledge belonging to speculative philosophy, that freedom is the only truth of spirit” (W 12, 30 / R 20 / S 17); “this is speculative, and it treated in its general form in *Logic*” (W 12, 40 / H 87 / R 28 / S 25 / N 74).

⁷⁶ H 29 / N 28.

⁷⁷ W 12, 35 / H 80 / R 24 / S 21 / N 69.

death and as a continuous predominance of indefinite negation which leaves behind only ruins – a position that seems to anticipate Walter Benjamin’s impressive account of *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history.⁷⁸ The other possibility is a rational approach of facts and an understanding of their unity, their integration in a totality with distinct form and content. The first approach is punctual and discontinuous; the second is linear and continuous.

Identifying the rational with the fulfilled and the complete has a long tradition, beginning with the outset of philosophy altogether, i. e., with Parmenides from Elea.⁷⁹ A homologous conviction is articulated by Hegel, when he stresses that “the true is the whole”.⁸⁰ Understanding, Hegel believes, is always holistic and universalizing; it starts from an anticipation of meaning and takes shape as a projection towards the unity of a completed, meaningful totality. This Hegelian conviction also applies to history: either it will be conceived and understood as a totality, or it will remain unknown. In other words, we either undertake a philosophical approach of world history as a rational *and completed* meaningful process, or we descend into the multiplicity of conflicting or contradictory open-end views and narrations, such as those attempted in the various types of traditional historiography. However, while an intellectual grasping of the totality of the motionless and rigid Parmenidean *eon* is always possible (to the extent that we reflect the irreconcilable opposition between Being and Non-Being), the entirety of

⁷⁸ In the ninth of his famous Theses “On the concept of history” (1939/40), Benjamin refers to the “piles of debris” left behind by “that storm which we call progress” (1991, 697–8). It is an open question whether Benjamin refers here to the Hegelian text, or if he implicitly and unintentionally affirms what Hegel presented beforehand as the unique alternative for those unwilling to seek in history the Reason that dominates it. Benjamin’s fragmentary text acknowledges the need of comprehending history, but this understanding allows debris to remain debris, without linking it to a principle or an aim exceeding it. The angel of history would also “like to dwell” in the past, to “make a whole out of what has been smashed”; Benjamin recognizes, however, that this is impossible: the angel finally fails, “propelled” by the storm. We could probably see here a confirmation of Hegel’s position that the ruins as such are not comprehensible – regardless of Benjamin’s suspicion that where the angel fails, God could succeed (be it a religious Messiah, be it the God of the revolution). – Benjamin could also appear as an antipode of Hegel’s conception of history as a “history of the victors” (see also Bubner 2001, 38). But this would be a valid description only if one added that Hegel does not worship various specific victors: The only genuine victor in history is spirit and the prevalence of its freedom. If the course of spirit is presented as an advance that neutralizes every resistance, Benjamin’s exclamation in the sixth of the Theses would be here yet again in place: “Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.” From another perspective, however, Hegel’s undertaking functions as a monumentalization and a ‘salvaging’ of the dead, as far as their deeds have become a means of realization of freedom within world history. Truly ‘dead’, i. e., abandoned to oblivion, are thus only those who have not been able to link their action with this course of spirit, or who have tried to resist it.

⁷⁹ Parmenides calls his Being “complete” (*teleston*, B8.4) and “completed from every side” (*tetelesmenon pantothen*, B8.42–3), offering a further argument in B8.32–3: “it is not right for Being to be incomplete; for it is not in need: if it were, it would lack everything” (cf. also Thanassas 2007, 52–4).

⁸⁰ Hegel 1977, 11 / W 3, 24.

history-in-motion can be grasped only after the spirit has completed a certain circle within it. Why, however, does this course of fulfillment and completion of historical motion have to receive the form of a “goal”? In short: because history is spirit and not nature. Nature is rational, but its unique aspiration is its permanent self-reproduction; its movement is the superficial appearance of a profound immobility, in the form of an eternal return of the same. Spirit, on the contrary, is essentially a subject: it acts, it achieves and it accomplishes; all this is only teleologically possible, on the grounds of specific ends. The rationality of history thus indicates the teleological character of the spirit’s movement.

History is nothing but the course of development, self-display and self-knowledge of the spirit. This phrase entails no traits of an enigma or a mystification. Spirit is not a mysterious, strange substance that remains hidden, pulling the strings of history, but rather represents *in the first place* nothing but the totality of the human world, comprising everything that is somehow linked with humans and their activity. This is, in our view, the only starting point appropriate for an adequate understanding of the concept of spirit. The diversity and multiplicity of purposes is thus integrated into the unity of historical process and can be understood within this. Comprising the structured totality of human activity, the spirit proceeds like every other activity: It commences from a certain beginning and points towards a certain end of its endeavors. An end-goal (Endzweck) in history is thus necessary, to the extent that we recognize it as the history of spirit. The reminder that the notion of an “end-goal” always “implies that this goal is to be realized, accomplished” remains essential for understanding the significance of this notion within history.⁸¹ The main, fundamental concern of the philosophical treatment of history consequently lies in the diagnosis of the goal pertaining to the spirit’s movement, as well as in the quest of whether and to what extent this goal has been achieved. There is no point to referring to a goal without simultaneously posing, quasi analytically, the demand of its realization. One of the elements of romantic heritage Hegel categorically opposes is the notion of an ‘eternal approach’ of a goal, which could never be completely reached. The end-goal of history is nothing but the completion of “the progress in the consciousness of freedom”. This goal is not simply intended, but also realized; namely, by Reason.

The expectation that this notion of an end-goal also provides the answer to the question of the end of history would, nevertheless, prove to be hasty. The ambiguity of the texts determined above (see I.) concerning the possibility of a conclusion to historical progress also emerges in view of the end-goal. On the one side, Hegel stresses that “the end-goal of the world [...] has [already] been realized”.⁸² On the other side, since the “aim of world history” is that the “spirit shapes itself as nature, as a world that is appropriate to it”, he does not hesitate to point out that “there still remains work to be done”, until the “spirit attains its reality, until it becomes conscious of itself in the real world”.⁸³ These two passages reproduce the hermeneutic dilemma from which our discussion began: A progress that has arrived to its end, but also has an infinite distance to cover; an end-goal that has been realized, but also stays behind its accomplishment. In fact, what we face here are representations of *the logical relation between finitude and infinity* within the sphere of history.⁸⁴ The contradictions encountered emerge only if

⁸¹ W 12, 29 / H 50 / R 19 / S 16 / N 44.

⁸² W 12, 28 / H 48 / R 18 / S 16 / N 43.

⁸³ H 256–7 / N 208–9.

⁸⁴ As far as we know, the relevance of this conceptual pair for the question of the “end of history” has virtually been pointed out only by Bourgeois (1994, 16–7) – who,

we persist in a one-sided, non-dialectic perception and assessment of these ontological categories.⁸⁵ Eliminating the contradiction between finite and infinite has been, as we well know, one of Hegel's most decisive concerns, aiming, inter alia, at bridging the romantic schism between the finitude of particularity and the infinity of the Absolute. Hegel points out that an infinite, as opposed to a finitude, declines into a "spurious infinity", into an external negation of finitude, and becomes itself finite due to this externality; it thus condemns itself to an eternally unsuccessful attempt of overcoming this acquired finitude. "True" or "genuine infinity", on the contrary, is a process within which the infinite "comes to itself in its other".⁸⁶ In contrast, therefore, to a "spurious infinity" which is illustrated as a straight line extending *ad infinitum*, genuine infinity is illustrated as "a circle, a line which has reached itself, closed and [is] wholly present, without *beginning* or *end*".⁸⁷ Should history also be illustrated by such a picture?

If not previously, then at least now we can realize how "end" and "end-goal" lead into the core of Hegel's philosophy of history – and at the same time show the necessity of transcending it. Such a transcending of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* appears indispensable; the scaffold of *logical categories*, in particular the pair of terms finitude/infinity, is indispensable here for their adequate understanding. As it must have already become clear, "spurious infinity" and finite termination are reflected in the considerations of history. Each historical present constitutes a limit of the historical process, beyond which an infinitely extended future opens up. When this limit becomes a "barrier", then we are forced to choose between two options: History either (a) has an infinite distance still to cover, or (b) has already finished, i. e., entered into the ultimate immobility of a present that is expected to last eternally. This contradiction is nothing but a result of an unmediated opposition between spurious infinity and incomplete finitude. The philosophical treatment of history, however, is possible only as an elimination of this contradiction; the present is not an impassable barrier, but the point of completion of the circle of a history which, as "truly" or "affirmatively infinite", permits its understanding as it meets itself in the points of its completions, without being limited by them.⁸⁸ Whenever we try to grasp history in its entirety, history finds in its present *not an "end", but a point of completion*. This point cannot be

nevertheless, finally proposes a rather un-Hegelian distinction between universal history and its empirical content (1994, 20–1).

⁸⁵ This is ultimately the inadequacy of an interesting paper of Berthold-Bond (1988), of which we took notice after the present publication was completed. The author outlines the tension between understanding teleology as a "completely final end" or as an "epochal conception", but sees this tension as a "conflict" which cannot be "*aufgehoben*" (1988, 16) and decides to opt for the second alternative. In other words, he insists on a contradiction between infinity and finitude and opts for the latter.

⁸⁶ W 8, 199 (*Encyclopaedia*, §94, Addition). The relation between finitude and infinity is examined in the chapter "Dasein" in the first book of the *Science of Logic* (Hegel 1969, esp. 137–150 / W 5, 149–66), as well as in §§92–5 of the *Encyclopaedia-Logic* (W 8, 197–203).

⁸⁷ Hegel 1969, 149 / W 5, 164.

⁸⁸ The importance of the completion of a historical circle for understanding history has also been stressed by Bubner (1991, 22), who assigns a "completion character" to Hegel's thought throughout ("Abschlusscharakter"; 1995, 124). Bubner also points out that each "ending defines itself [not absolutely, but] in relation to a [specific] task" (1995, 124; varied in 1991, 22).

irrevocably identified with a specific historical period or situation, nor does it denote a terminal point that interrupts historical movement and excludes a future enlargement of its circle. As a point of completion, each present formulates a *claim to mediation*, thus permitting philosophical knowledge to emerge as an intellectual grasping of its own age. As a necessary commencement of the retrospective intellectual movement of historical mediation, the completion of the present is not a specific era, an empirical part of historical reality, but a *methodological prerequisite* of Hegel's hermeneutics of history. The present completion is the manifestation of the circle of true infinity within history, the point where true infinity "comes to itself in its other".

Is it, however, always possible to acquire an understanding of this totality (be it a totality in motion and development)? As previously stressed, the unity of history originates out of the teleology of a goal innate in it, i. e., freedom. Only *ex post* is it possible to discern and identify this goal, only after it has emerged and begun to realize itself – and this takes place (as repeatedly stressed in the *Lectures*) in the Modern Times. The unity of world history and its philosophical evaluation are revealed only with the modern emergence of the principle of freedom. Discerning this principle as the goal of history is possible not as a hypothetical *Sollen*, but only after this goal has revealed itself in its realization. Only now, in the field of this completion, can we satisfy the claim to mediation made by the present. The realization of the final goal of history and the viability of its rational understanding constitute here two aspects of the same issue: They do not denote a cause-effect relation, but both constitute homologous implications of the spirit, which fulfills its goal by returning to itself and comprehending its substance as freedom. In this way, a circle of the spirit's worldly course is completed – and this course can be understood philosophically. Philosophical world history could not have emerged in another period, for only now, facing the realization of this goal in the Modern Times, can we discern the route, the orientation and the unity of that course. The conclusion finally drawn might seem paradoxical, but we can formulate it explicitly: A philosophical treatment of world history was possible only after the French Revolution, which is to say only after the historical commencement of freedom's realization in the world.⁸⁹

This does not mean, of course, that the course of spirit has to terminate here. Spirit realizes the goal that has been revealed as its own, but neither does this predispose its future activity, nor does it disrupt its freedom. We could even assume that spirit apparently does not tire, nor becomes exhausted, nor feels fatigue, nor yearns for the lethargy of a tranquil immobility. If Modern Times are distinguished by anything, then it is not for the transition of history in a period of essential motionlessness, but rather by the very first emergence of a possibility to philosophically conceive history. In this sense, the possibility of an "end" also emerges here for the first time – as a point of completion which does not claim uniqueness, but closes the present circle of spirit

⁸⁹ A similar observation is made by Pompa, when he stresses that philosophical history "is possible only when the idea has completed its process of development in history" (1991, 25). Subsequently, however, Pompa approaches the "end of history" in the sense of "the end of events in the future" (1991, 27) – although this identification of history with mere "events" could not have been intended by Hegel, and has neither been proposed by the advocates of an "end of history". Pompa's conclusion is convincing, when he admits "end" as "the end of a particular phase" of the spirit, whose "history can never come to an end" altogether; but he finally ascertains a "foreclosure of the past" as necessary, although unacceptable, Hegelian consequence (1991, 31–3).

and reveals that its substance has been freedom. This completion does not exclude the further extension of the circle, which can reach other closures in different ways, thus revealing different totalities each time.

Philosophical world history is consequently based on a factual condition: on the revelation of the character of history as a course of freedom. This ontic dependence does not mean, however, that philosophy of history remains tied to the sphere of objective spirit and its particular, finite creations.⁹⁰ At the end of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel emphasizes that the spirit “seems to have succeeded in [...] apprehending itself as absolute spirit” and that world history “seems to have reached its goal”. The reservation he hastens to articulate is, however, characteristic:

In the deeds and life of history, as well as those of art, [spirit] brings itself forward with consciousness; it has knowledge of various kinds of its reality, yet they are only kinds. In [philosophical] science alone it knows itself as absolute spirit; this knowledge, or spirit, is its only true existence.⁹¹

If history has an absolute goal, this is to achieve and establish the unity of the objective and absolute spirit – in a mediation accomplished not within historical facticity, but only in the realm of the concept:

In face of the thought, of the concept, no limited form can remain firm. If there were something which the concept could not digest or resolve, this would remain as the highest fragmentation or discontent. But if something of the kind did exist, it could be nothing other than thought which comprehends itself, for thought alone is inherently unlimited and all reality is determined within it. Thus, fragmentation would cease to exist and thought would be satisfied in itself. This would be the end-goal of the world [...]. Progress is not indeterminate, *ad infinitum*, but there is a goal, namely the return upon itself. There is a cyclic movement here: the spirit seeks itself.⁹²

Consequently, the existence of a last, definitive and eternally enduring historical formation proves to be a phantasm which, if it became real, would provoke a situation of utmost “fragmentation” (“Zerrissenheit”). Only the philosophical treatment of history provides a mediation that is capable of conceptually ‘digesting’ history, which is constantly in motion. Only the concept and the thought can embody the ontological category of true infinity and meet themselves in the finite historical completions, without declining into finitude themselves. The claim to mediation articulated by each present-day is a demand addressed to the absolute spirit; it can only be fulfilled philosophically. The *systematic position* of the philosophy of history as a transition from the objective

⁹⁰ For the limited, restricted character of the creations of the objective spirit, cf. § 340 of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

⁹¹ W 20, 460.

⁹² H 180–1 / N 149. Shortly before, Hegel repeated his denial of understanding world history as an infinite succession: “This advance appears to be a process *ad infinitum*, according to the notion of perfectibility – a progress that eternally remains distant from its goal. But even if, in the advance towards a new principle, the content of the preceding one is comprehended in a more universal sense than before, it is at least certain that the new form emerging will again be a determinate one. In any case, history is involved with reality in which the universal manifests itself in a determinate form” (H 180 / N 149).

into the absolute spirit thus marks a transformation of the question about the “end” or the “end-goal” of history: a *metabasis* from the question of the objective feasibility to a question of philosophical-theoretical reflection.

Hegel’s nomination as a prophet of the eternal preservation and strength of Western democracies consequently proves to entail more than an interpretative ‘error’.⁹³ It involves a retreat from Hegel’s inquiry and a limitation of the scope of the hermeneutic challenges initiated by it. Assigning Hegel the belief in an eschatological “end” of history only reflects the needs and wishes of a popularized Kantianism, which, for its part, condenses the old, secularized expectations of the Enlightenment. Contrary to Kant, Hegel can neither sympathize with the anticipation of a cosmopolitan state that will guarantee “eternal peace”, nor can he propose a specific state form as the goal of the historical process. Hegel, of course, does not cease emphasizing that world history proceeds through three distinctive ‘stages’, the last of which entails the recognition of the principle of universal freedom, or the consciousness that “the human as such is free”.⁹⁴ This freedom is achieved as an institutional mediation between totality and subjectivity, the individual and the state – this mediation, however, always remains contestable and uncertain, permanently liable to disruption or failure. If we can learn anything from Hegel’s philosophy of history, then it is primarily the insight into the *fragility of freedom*, i. e., the insight into the historicity and mortality of each historical production, of each finite creation of the objective spirit. The “final goal” of history cannot be the establishment of a specific sociopolitical system without an expiration date – and this because *every* historical product, as finite, has a date of expiry. The need for mediation emerges permanently, over and over again; freedom forever remains an arguable issue.

Just as the *Science of Logic* is completed when the object has totally submitted itself to the method and has been completely mediated, so the philosophical treatment of history completes itself when no residues of immediacy remain to bother by their very presence.⁹⁵ This completion does not denote an empirical end or a unique and fixed stage. On the other side, it is not hetero-determined and limited by the openness of the future. The truly infinite meets itself in its finite historical completions without consuming itself in them. Hegelian teleology needs these completions, but without declining into a (theologizing or anthropocentric) eschatology. *Hegel’s teleology is not eschatology*: It does not imply the ascertainment of a specific *telos* and the eternal affirmation of its substantial content. Neither are the present completions terminations of history, nor do they denote an interruption of spirit’s or thought’s activity, nor the spreading of a serene tranquility. Since the Absolute itself is not a fixed point or magnitude, but a process and a becoming, these completions will probably be followed by new commencements and prolongations.

⁹³ We should note, however, the following cautious remark by Fukuyama: “We are interested not in Hegel *per se*, but in Hegel-as-interpreted-by-Kojève, or perhaps a new, synthetic philosopher named Hegel-Kojève. In subsequent references to Hegel, we will actually be referring to Hegel-Kojève, and we will be more interested in the ideas themselves than in the philosophers who originally articulated them” (1992, 144). Fukuyama’s ambition is of course to install himself as the “synthetic” philosopher hidden behind the mask “Hegel-Kojève”. – For a first, informative presentation of the legendary Alexandre Kojève, see Anderson 1992, 309–324.

⁹⁴ W 12, 31 / H 63 / R 21 / S 18 / N 54.

⁹⁵ See Bubner 1995, 124–5.

Just as each era requires a philosophy that will discover and express its real content, so is the totality of world history in need of a hermeneutics that, filtering the infinite sum of bare facts, connects them into a rational composition full of meaning. The familiar exploration and illustration of the relation between a specific action and fact with its context or the integration of facts and actions into a broader totality (a logical undertaking, well known to all of us) is the ultimate content of the rhetorically intensified statement that "Reason rules the world". The path from the polymorphic surface of an era towards its deeper content, from the variety of impressive incidents towards the forces that genuinely determine it, is the linkage of these facts with the totality of world history. This linkage is at the same time complete and open to the productivity of the spirit that guides its course.

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