

Futurity, Omniscience, and the End of History: A Vindication of Hegel's Claim to Absolute Knowing

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*Take care, philosophers and friends, of knowledge, and beware of martyrdom!
Of suffering 'for the truth's sake'! . . . [Y]ou know that no philosopher so far
has been proved right, and that there might be a more laudable truthfulness in
every little question mark that you place after your special words and favorite
doctrines (and occasionally after yourselves) than in all the solemn gestures
and trumps before accusers and law courts.*

—Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

It would be neither unreasonable nor unprecedented to claim that the validity of Hegel's entire system hinges on its claim to "absolute knowing," the notion that a scientific system of the structural development of reality—considered at the metaphysical, physical, political, ethical, and religious levels—is not only possible, but also has been achieved in Hegel's philosophy. History, according to Hegel, has reached a standpoint from which it is possible for a speculative philosopher to see the broad trajectory of historical development, which is to say, the self-development of the Infinite Mind or Spirit.¹ World-history has reached its culminating moment: the thoughts of men and the thoughts of God coincide, and men are now able to understand history in its necessary connections. Human beings can, in the full sense of the word, *comprehend* history, *wrap* their minds around it in its totality, and know both the internal springs of its necessary movements and the tangible forms these movements take in the external, objective sphere—in the sense not of particular details, but of broad developments.

But this sort of historical claim poses a rather obvious question: If

1 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §5.

history has reached such a decisive stage, in which all the contradictions inherent in the unfolding of natural and human history have been sublated and overcome, what are we to make of the contradictions, conflicts, and antitheses that crop up *after* this point? How can we fit the *future* into what Hegel seems to present as a closed developmental system, which can produce no *substantially* new phases, stages, or moments? If, finally, all prior development has been teleologically oriented to a particular historical moment, how can we account for anything like contingency in the time leading to this decisive moment or spontaneity after this moment has been reached?

This question is not fatal to Hegel's system; rather, it is suggested by Hegel himself. Hegel does not see the reaching of this absolute vantage point as a culmination of history in the sense of a decisive conclusion—as though history has reached its final moment, beyond which there is nothing left to be discovered—but as the dawning of a “new era,” in which the unfolding of Spirit may take on new and unprecedented, but not unaccountable, forms.² The first step in demonstrating this claim is to show that the objection raised above—that Hegel's system cannot account for future developments—is legitimate. The interpretation of Hegel that sees his system as closing off the possibility of substantially new historical developments is both compelling and historically significant, and we must discern how we can reconcile the many occasions on which Hegel *does* speak in terms that suggest this sort of interpretation with the notion of an open and undetermined future, in which human beings can exercise real freedom. Indeed, it is perhaps a great irony that the *closed-system* interpretation of Hegel should be so prevalent—we find it in both the critical Voegelin and the sympathetic Kojève—for it was precisely Hegel's aim to show human beings that they are, according to the profoundest truth of their being, *essentially unlimited* and always already beyond every particular determination.

HEGEL'S SYSTEM AS THE CULMINATION OF HISTORY

The third part of *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophic Sciences*, the *Philosophy of Mind*, is a streamlined presentation of Hegel's “scientific system of . . . truth,” giving an account of the historical development of mind in nature, politics, religion, and philosophy.³ According to Hegel, the infinite,

2 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §11.

3 *Ibid.*, §5. The German *Geist* is translated variously as “mind,” or “spirit,” and carries the full connotative significance of both terms. It is, therefore, preferable to render it according to its contextual connotation, than rigorously to employ a single term when that term will often fail to convey the relevant meaning.

divine mind comes to a full self-knowledge by positing itself in concrete determinations—historical forms, whether animal organisms or religious communities—and then overcoming these successive determinations: in every overcoming of finitude, mind knows itself more fully as infinite.⁴ But since it is the mind of the philosopher that grasps this progressive self-consciousness, we can see why Hegel may have been accused of elevating himself into the place of the divine.

Hegel does not mince words with regard to his claim to have understood, in its inner movements, the progressive self-consciousness of the infinite God:

Only momentarily can mind seem to remain in a finitude; by its ideality it is raised above it, it knows that the limitation is not a fixed limitation. It therefore transcends it, frees itself from it, and this is not, as the intellect supposes, a liberation never completed, only ever striven for endlessly; on the contrary, mind wrests itself out of this progression to infinity, frees itself absolutely from the limitation, from its Other, and so attains to absolute being-for-itself, makes itself genuinely infinite.⁵

Mind is by its nature beyond every limitation. When mind becomes *aware* of a limit, it can always seek what lies *beyond* this limit, and it can in principle *transcend* every limit. Hegel writes elsewhere:

[I]nasmuch as we know something as a limit, we are already beyond it. . . . [T]he I, as knowing or thinking in general, is limited but knows about the limit, and in this very knowledge the limit is only limit, only something negative outside us, and I am beyond it. We must not have such absurd respect in the presence of the infinite.⁶

This being “beyond” every limit is the basis of mind’s becoming unlimited, infinite, and the sublation of each of these limits is a moment in the development of mind. Moreover, this transcending of limits is not (oddly enough) an unlimited or aimless process; rather, it pushes mind forward toward a definite goal. In other words, the mechanism for the development of mind is the sublation of antitheses. Mind is not merely aimless striving, nor is it some primal will that struggles to overcome everything standing in opposition to it; rather, mind reaches a culminating moment, a *telos*, in which it is *liberated* from every *Other*, and “attains to absolute being-for-

4 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §574.

5 *Ibid.*, §386.

6 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, 173.

itself, makes itself genuinely infinite.”⁷

This last claim needs further explication. When Hegel says that mind is liberated from every Other, this is *not* a reduction of the apparently intersubjectively shared world to a solipsism, as though the *individual* mind had discovered itself to be the whole of reality. The point is that mind no longer encounters what is *other* than it in the mode of an *Other*⁸—for mind knows that it is itself the rational principle, the internal principle of order in the whole of nature—so that no being encountered in the field of experience can appear to mind as anything less than a (more or less complete) externalization of mind itself (purely natural beings would be less complete, and human beings and social structures more complete). When mind knows itself to be all things, and all things to be nothing other than mind,⁹ it has no true Other, and therefore no limit. This is not to say that the mind knows all things, in the sense of the sort of Godlike omniscience that knows the number of hairs on an individual’s head, but mind can in principle know all things, insofar as they are externalizations or instantiations of the essential rationality of mind itself—that is, it can know the *rational structure* of all things because it is this rational structure.

But we must also make ourselves aware of the implicit presupposition underlying Hegel’s claim that mind can in principle reach an actualized and unlimited state. To know that mind is capable of sublating every opposition and going beyond every limit requires that one *complete* this movement oneself. The human mind that makes this claim and puts forward this systematic exposition of the unlimitedness of mind must itself have reached this actualized and unlimited state. Why? To declare definitively that mind is beyond every limit, one must presume oneself to be free of the sort of one-sidedness that has essentially blinded the previous thinkers in the philosophic tradition to the incompleteness of their mutually opposing claims about absolute truth. If Hegel sees mind as having synthesized and sublated all the contradictions, which are the necessary moments of its own development, then he must in turn see himself as having attained absolute knowing, a complete system of the knowledge of this necessary historical self-development of mind. Hegel not only presumes to have attained absolute knowing, but also sees himself, in an important sense, as standing outside of history: for to be immune from the one-sidedness that still grips the public and even the

7 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §386.

8 An *Other* is a being encountered in the mode of otherness, of being other than oneself.

9 In both senses: the considered object is mind, and nothing else; and, apart from mind, it is not, is nothing.

intellectuals of his day, he must be absolved from the sort of historical determination to which they are subjected.

From these observations, we can see the origins of some of the accusations of self-divinization that have been continually leveled against Hegel since he published the 1807 *Phenomenology*; Eric Voegelin's 1969 essay, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," exemplifies these accusations. Voegelin claims that Hegel, in supposing himself to have attained absolute knowing and exempting himself from the sorts of historical determinations he claims place limits on everyone else's thinking, sees himself as a new Jesus Christ, a messiah for the modern age.¹⁰ Hegel, according to Voegelin, absolves himself of his historical determination in order to be able to get a handle on history as a whole. In order to accomplish this self-absolution, "Hegel must . . . develop an imaginative project of immanent history, with the construction of ages that will include an ultimate age to be inaugurated by himself."¹¹ Hegel, according to Voegelin, elevates himself, quite seriously, to the place of God, the only vantage point from which he can see the whole of history in all its necessity without being implicated in its blind determinism. According to this interpretation, Hegel views history as having reached its goal in his philosophy. What development can be left for the world if his own system has encapsulated it all in an intelligible form?

But perhaps an alternate, and less hostile, point of view should be admitted before we attempt a defense of Hegel—lest this interpretation seem a straw man. Alexandre Kojève, who interprets Hegel in light of Marx's thought, and for whom Hegel's self-elevation to the place of the divine is the breakthrough moment of the quintessentially atheistic philosophy,¹² writes, "History itself must be essentially finite; . . . universal history must have a definite *end*."¹³ And again: "We know that for Hegel this end of history is marked by the coming of Science in the form of a Book—that is by the appearance of the Wise Man or of *absolute Knowledge* in the World. This absolute Knowledge being the *last* moment of Time, that is a moment without a *Future*."¹⁴ It is telling that Kojève takes as Hegel's explicit meaning what Voegelin takes to be the implicit arrogance underlying Hegel's thought; namely, Hegel's claim to have brought human development and history to its *denouement*. Both Hegel's supporters and detractors, then, have been among those who see Hegel as pointing to an

10 Voegelin, "On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery," *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 213-255.

11 *Ibid.*, 218.

12 See Bloom's introduction (x-xii) to Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

13 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 148.

14 *Ibid.*, 148.

“end of history,” after which there is no future.

THE INFINITUDE OF MIND

What is to be made of Hegel’s claims that, on the one hand, he has some peculiar and privileged historical vantage point, and on the other, that history has come to an end and there can be no future? Careful attention to Hegel’s words shows the former claim to be both authentically Hegelian *and* reasonable, and the latter claim to be a (perhaps understandable, if not justifiable) misinterpretation of Hegel’s admittedly convoluted way of speaking.

First, then, the objections to the Voegelinian-Kojèveian interpretation—since it is always easier to critique than to defend. The basic problem with the view that Hegel’s thought entails an “end of history” is the tendency of this approach to conflate the “absolute” and the “ultimate” with what might be called the “over-and-done-with” in a way that distorts Hegel’s meaning. There can be no mistake: Hegel certainly understands history as having an end or “final aim,”¹⁵ but this “final aim” must be understood in the technical sense of a “goal” toward which the process invariably tends. This final aim is the *truth* of the development of mind, final in the sense of a *final* cause, as the truth toward which history is moving, which is itself the animating principle of the whole. This “end” of history has more in common with the Aristotelian God than with any imagined time period in which the category of futurity has somehow withered up and vanished.

Here, a complication arises. For Hegel, “Mind is not an inert entity but is rather what is absolutely restless, pure activity, the negating or the ideality of every fixed determination of the intellect.”¹⁶ Once mind has attained its goal, it could be argued, it exists as a static entity—for its dynamism is premised on the sublation of antitheses. The conflict itself could be briefly stated thus: How can Hegel simultaneously maintain both that mind is actually infinite, unlimited in the sense of always *beyond* every limit, and that mind has a truth, in the sense of a teleological completion or fully actualized stage of development? At least to our normal way of thinking, whatever has a developmental goal has a limit. In ordinary language, we might call this limit its *nature*. A flower, for instance, does not grow unlimitedly; it assumes a certain shape, and once it fills out its proper proportions, its development ceases. A thing cannot be complete without having some implicit limit, and cannot continue to be active unless it is in some way incomplete—hence the need of animals to eat.¹⁷

15 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §549.

16 *Ibid.*, §378.

17 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §§425-6.

Why does the same not hold true for the development of mind? If all the historical antitheses and contradictions have been sublated, what is left that can propel mind on—and *toward* what can it be propelled, if it has already actualized its implicit *telos*? And how can we speak of the completion of mind's development without supposing some sort of limit, a point past which it cannot develop without ceasing to be what it is? To put the matter more radically: How can we say that that which is without limit *is anything*, since the only terms we have whereby to define something's nature, or more specifically its *quiddity*, is the specific limit on just what that thing is?

These are just the sorts of problems that point us almost inevitably in the direction of admitting and acknowledging the mind's radical otherness in relation to all other beings. The first step in answering these questions is to remind ourselves of why, according to Hegel, mind develops in the way it does—namely, by means of this circuitous process involving the positing of various untrue determinations that must eventually be sublated. Again, for Hegel, this talk of the development of mind refers, in the first instance, to divine mind—which develops historically—and, second, to human mind—which in its essential developmental moments *mirrors* the gradually unfolding self-understanding of the divine. No doubt, this process seems, at first glance, a rather roundabout way to get from one point to another—especially when the goal is self-knowledge.¹⁸ It is worth quoting Hegel at length to get a feel for just why this process is taken to be necessary:

What belongs to external nature is destroyed by contradiction . . . But mind has the power to preserve itself in contradiction and, therefore, in pain. . . . Ordinary logic is, therefore, in error in supposing that mind is something that completely excludes contradiction from itself. On the contrary, all consciousness contains a unity and a separation, hence a contradiction. . . . But contradiction is endured by mind, because mind contains no determination that it does not recognize as a determination posited by itself and consequently as a determination that it can also sublimate again. This power over all the content present in it forms the basis of the freedom of mind.¹⁹

It is not the case that mind simply finds itself in a world of beings to which it needs to haphazardly relate itself, nor that for the sake of this relation it must develop itself in terms of improving its subjective grasp of these external objects. On the contrary, the diversity of the beings in the world

18 Ibid., §465.

19 Ibid., §382.

is itself a result of mind's inner self-differentiation. The mind, in itself, is both thinking activity and thought content; in thinking itself, mind has already posited an Other for itself. This Other is the *logos*, the mind's having itself as the object of its thought.²⁰ There can be no world, let alone a multiplicity of diverse beings, unless there is a principle of otherness within mind itself—in this case, we might say, in God himself. God cannot know himself as himself, in his fullness and completeness, until he has completely *lived out*, so to speak, this relation to his Other and pushed this dichotomy of his self and his Other to the point where he finally knows his Other to be his self and his self to be his Other.²¹ The entire unfolding of the world is, so to speak, God's getting to know himself in all his determinations.

The reason why this process of self-recognition and self-awareness must proceed through the determinate forms which are outlined in the *Philosophy of Mind*, is, as Hegel argues, that mind, in sublating every determinacy it encounters and coming to understand that determinacy as a moment, albeit a sublated one, of its own consciousness, essentially comes to know itself *through* the process of its own unfolding. In this continual sublation of the mind's opposition to the Other, mind concretely comes to know itself as already beyond every determinacy and every limit. Every relationship mind enters into, and every Other it encounters and sublates by knowing it as mind, enriches the self-knowledge of mind—because mind is revealed in the Other. Only by the appropriation of this Other into mind's own medium, its own "material," is this revelation completed—only when the apparent Other enters into mind's own medium (say, in the form of the universal) does mind really know itself to be the implicit principle of rationality standing behind the whole natural order. This sublation of the opposition between the self and the Other is also the ground of the scientific intelligibility of the world. Only by fully exploring the richness of its self-differentiation, of its *difference-in-identity*, is mind finally able to attain being-for-self, a completely actualized self-understanding, a knowledge of itself as all things and all things as itself.²²

What has all this to do with the question of mind's unlimitedness and of its possible completion? If anything, one might suspect that the foregoing has shown that mind is finite, for only by encountering and sublating all of its moments is it able to reach a state of absolute being-for-self, absolute knowing. One might be tempted to interpret this as signifying

20 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §574. (Cf. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, SW | 347.)

21 *Ibid.*, §385.

22 *Ibid.*, §566.

that mind must run through an inventory of all that is implicit within it—an inventory which is necessarily finite, since otherwise it could never be completed—and that once it has completed this inventory, it would know itself fully, since it would know everything it contains, everything within itself. But this is closer to omniscience than absolute knowing in the Hegelian sense of the term, for omniscience is the Godlike knowledge of each and every particular, while absolute knowing is a comprehensive insight into the structural forms through which this spiritual development unfolds historically. The point of the above discussion is this: Mind proves itself to be pure negativity, the radical Other of every fixed determinacy, by its ability to sublimate and overcome every Other that it encounters; because it stands as the Other to every *fixed* determinacy, mind reaches beyond the antithesis of self and Other. Mind's attainment of completion is not brought about by its enumerating the infinite items in its treasure-store of implicit content, but by its eventual realization that, because mind itself is the absolute Other in relation to every object it encounters, it is itself always already beyond *every* limit implied by these objects, always beyond even the sum total of them, always, in short, absolutely infinite. This is precisely why absolute knowing cannot be thought of as omniscience, for the content available to mind, being implicitly contained in mind itself, is *a priori* just as infinite as mind's potential receptivity to content. While the broad historical forms of mind's unfolding can be definitively determined—for this is the condition of its knowing itself as absolutely infinite—the particular content of the individual occurrences filling this history can never be deduced. This content is infinitely rich, being itself the product not only of the divine mind, but also of the individual free human beings, who volitionally actualize the content within themselves in a spontaneous and unpredictable (though not irrational) way.

In this way, mind can be simultaneously completed and unlimited. Mind can only be said to be truly infinite when it has reached completion, and it is only complete once it has attained its proper infinitude. Initially limited by historical, cultural, and religious circumstances, its truth is only attained by the sublation of every contradiction, every limit. This ability of the mind to absolve itself of any fixed determination—this is Hegel's essential insight: In grasping it, one can begin to see what Hegel means when he claims to have reached the vantage point of absolute knowing.

HEGEL AND THE NEW ERA

The final question, then, is: How can a mind which has surpassed every limit and overcome every opposition have a future, if historicity and futurity are defined in terms of the necessary confrontation and sublation of these very antitheses? As Kojève remarks, "History itself [is] essentially finite; collective Man (humanity) must die just as the human individual dies; universal History must have a definite *end*."²³ Does Hegel have any response to this accusation? Is the student of Hegel who accepts the broad claims of his philosophy forced to admit that, contrary to all common sense, nothing of historical import has happened since 1807?

Both Kojève and Voegelin fundamentally misunderstand the way in which Hegel's system can be said to be the culmination of historical development, for both take it as self-evident that Hegel sees himself as a new religious figure, who has ushered humanity into a final age in which all the wounds of life are healed, all the tears wiped away from our eyes.²⁴ To be sure, Hegel saw the rational state along with its religious community of confession and forgiveness as the goals of historical development,²⁵ but his system is unique in that its basic mode of operation is one in which every hitherto existing form (of consciousness, of religion, of art) is ultimately understood to be but one side of a larger picture, which must be taken in its proper context.

This is not to suggest that Hegel saw his system as a one-sided, incomplete moment in a further historical development. On the contrary, just because Hegel's system has unlocked and laid bare the hidden mechanisms operative behind historical development, this does not mean that history has been brought to an end or that the future has become an impossibility. Instead, we have been translated into a new age in which the possibility of truly rational existence is finally unlocked in this laying bare of the hidden springs of history: The human being who understands the conditions that give rise to various possibilities and has it in his power to actualize or not actualize these conditions is the supremely free human being. Precisely because Hegel's system is a *system*, a general framework that can by its very nature account for the conditions giving rise to broad historical developments, it is able to provide the conditions for a truly rational freedom.

Hegel clearly does not claim to have attained omniscience. This fundamental misunderstanding is the only basis for an interpretation of

23 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 148.

24 *Ibid.*, 95-8.

25 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §§541-2.

the Hegelian notion of history like Voegelin's or Kojève's. If Hegel's claim is that he has put forward a means of understanding all the particular details of every historical phenomenon, then there is indeed an end of history, for only if history has come to an end could one possibly enumerate all the specific details of its various developments. Hegel can tell us a great deal about the development of culture, about the broad movements of history, but individuals of every age have been, and will continue to be, more or less spontaneous. Their opinions may coincide with those prevalent in their time, and their actions may be determined in large measure by their particular epochs, but this is not to say that, with sufficient examination of historical facts in light of the system, they could be deduced or predicted scientifically. To possess this sort of knowledge is beyond what can be considered credible, and is certainly beyond what Hegel claims to have accomplished.

For these reasons—and specifically the unlocking of rational freedom through the absolution of the human individual from historical determination—Hegel calls the age after the attainment of absolute knowing a “new era.”²⁶ If human beings have always been characterized more or less by spontaneity, by their tendency to be not wholly determined or determinable by any set of external circumstances, how much more will this be the case for human beings who are truly free of the influence of external, historical circumstances—namely, for those living in rational societies, who are free and know themselves to be free? The rational human being, the human being who has understood the Hegelian system and attained the suprahistorical vantage point of absolute knowing, is uniquely free because knowledge of the conditions that tend to determine one's actions and one's understanding of the world frees one from being determined by those conditions.

It is a frequent criticism of Hegel that he unjustly assumed himself to be outside of history, in order to make his claims to have understood the nature of history as a whole. But the fact of the matter is that freedom is precisely this being outside of one's particular cultural and historical situation—not in the sense that one is not shaped by and ultimately a part of one's community, but in the sense that one is not finally determined by it. Hegel is no more guilty of exempting himself from the influence of history than any philosopher who has ever made a claim to have attained absolute truth; he only seems more audacious than his forebears because he claims to have understood that our ideas about truth are shaped by our particular historical circumstances, and to have transcended this

26 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §11.

limitation. This understanding is self-knowledge, and it is precisely what sets Hegel apart from his philosophic predecessors.

Hegel writes, in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, "The principle of modern states has enormous strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfillment in the *self-sufficient extreme* of personal particularity, while at the same time *bringing it back to substantial unity* and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself."²⁷ It is the rational society, in other words, that enables its members to have both communal fulfillment and radical personal freedom. Likewise, it is only because history has reached its *end*, its culmination, in the potentiality for absolute knowing, that human beings are substantially free to have futures that are rational, spontaneous, and unpredictable.

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27 Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §260.

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