Hegel and the Platonic Leap Down

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On November 14th, 1831 the greatest romantic philosopher in the world history of thought, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), died. Heidegger, along with Nietzsche, believed Hegel to be the one who completed the history of the philosophy of the Western Logos and the pinnacle of the history of philosophy and philosophy in general. If Plato was the philosopher of the beginning, then Hegel and Nietzsche were the philosophers of the end. In this sense, Hegel was the summative philosopher.

Everything is the otherness of the Other

Hegel’s political philosophy is very complex. It is based on his overall philosophical picture. As we have seen, every philosophy always has the possibility of eliciting a political dimension. Like Plato, Hegel in his philosophy of right makes this gesture, takes his whole philosophy and applies it to politics, i.e., he explicitly locates the place of political philosophy in the context of his philosophy as a whole. Through philosophy, he explains political philosophy, simultaneously clarifying politics through its metaphysical dimension.

In this respect, Hegel is a classical philosopher who implicitly includes political philosophy. In this sense, Heidegger was absolutely right when he said that if we understood The Phenomenology of the Spirit, then we could deduce everything else from it. As for reading, two fundamental works of Hegel’s are habitually suggested: The Phenomenology of the Spirit and Philosophy of Right.

Hegel’s basic idea is that there exists the primordial Subjective Spirit, the “spirit for itself” (German: der subjektive Geist). This point coincides with the theological thesis on God’s existence – the Subjective Spirit is God for Himself. In order to employ itself for the Other, this Subjective Spirit projects itself in the Objective Spirit (German: der objektive Geist) in which it becomes nature and matter, i.e., the subject projects itself in the object.

Note the fundamental difference here with the Cartesian topology which predetermined the structure of modernity. For Descartes, there is a dualism between subject and object, whereas Hegel tries to remove this dualism and overcome Kant’s epistemological pessimism through distinguishing matter or the object from the Spirit. In fact, this is nothing more than a development of the Kantian model of the absolute “I am,” but taken in a dynamic, dialectical model. If Fichte was a reaction to Kant, then Hegel is a reaction to Fichte, but in constant dialogue with Kant and Cartesianism.

Thus, Hegel argues that there exists the Subjective Spirit which reveals itself through the Objective Spirit via dialectical alienation. The Thesis is the Subjective Spirit and the Antithesis is the Objective Spirit, or nature. Therefore, nature is not nature since, according to Hegel, nothing is identical to itself, but everything is an otherness of the Other, hence the term “dialectic.”

The cycle of departure and return: the Absolute Spirit

In other words, there is the Subjective Spirit as such which projects itself as the Antithesis. And thus begins history. For Hegel, the philosophy of history is of fundamental significance because history is nothing other than the process of unfolding of the Objective Spirit which acquires at the new stage its spiritual component lying at its essence. But the first act of the Objective Spirit is to hide its spiritual character, to impersonate matter or nature, and then throughout history this otherness of the Subjective Spirit returns, by man and human history, to its essence.

But then this is a new essence; this is no longer the Subjective Spirit (the “spirit for itself”) nor a “spirit for another”, but a “spirit in itself.” In other words, the spirit returns to itself through its own alienation. Thus arises the cycle of departure and return, the latter of which was more important for Hegel than the departure. The latter creates the preconditions for the return, and the return, passing the entire cycle, returns to the Subjective Spirit itself, becoming the third spirit – the Absolute Spirit (German: der absolute Geist). That is, first there is the Subjective Spirit, then the Objective Spirit, and then the Absolute Spirit.

The Absolute Spirit, according to Hegel, unfolds over the course of human history and draws towards the end of history. The meaning of history is the Spirit’s realization of itself through matter. First the Spirit has itself, but is not self-aware, then it begins to realize itself, but does not have itself. Nature in and of itself harbors the preconditions of history because it is an element of history. Hence the history of religion, the history of societies, and as a result of the Spirit’s unfolding through history, it reaches its climax in the end of history, when the Spirit is fully conscious of and has itself. Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis. Thus, history is finished.

This is a general picture of Hegel’s philosophy, which has many nuances and complexities. Thus, according to Hegel, history moves positively, but this is a different positivism than that in the philosophy of the Great Mother. The titanic beginning implies that in the beginning there was lesser and then greater. In his reading of Hegel, Marx removed the Subjective Spirit and said that there is self-perfecting nature. Thus, he restored the philosophy of the Great Mother according to which everything grows out of matter and nature.

But Hegel is not Marx. In Hegel, this growth, this process, this movement from the bottom upwards is based on the fact that in the beginning there was a leap downwards. First the Spirit leaps and falls into nature, and therefore nature begins to grow, and nature is not so much other as it is the otherness of the Spirit. The Antithesis to the Spirit is not simply its opposite – for it itself is also such in removed form. The concept of “removal” in Hegel is very important, as the Antithesis does not destroy the Thesis, but removes it, absorbs it, and then demonstrates through the Synthesis.

Therefore, the Thesis is not absolute, and the Antithesis is not absolute. All of them are dialectically dependent. Only their Synthesis is absolute through which occurs the removal of the Thesis and the Antithesis. In this sense, the Hegelian understanding of history as the unfolding of the Spirit happens through phases: there is the (prehistoric) Subjective Spirit, the Objective Spirit, which manifests itself through history, and finally the Absolute Spirit, which manifests itself through the higher tension of history, through the creation of some kind of cultural and socio-political peak, the pyramid of the Spirit, which finally became the Absolute.

Hegel and the idea of the German state

Where does political philosophy figure here? Clearly, in some sense history becomes political. Hence why in Hegel there is the concept of the evolution of political systems, models, and regimes as moments of becoming of the Absolute Spirit. Politics is the crystallization of the Synthesis. Political history is the movement of the Spirit to becoming Absolute. Politics is the history of the absolutization of the Spirit.

Hegel establishes a hierarchy between different political forms. On the one hand, this is an evolutionary hierarchy since each regime is better than the previous. But, unlike Marx’s ideas, this evolution is at the same time not only a reflection of the Antithesis, and it is not the development of matter or nature. This is the distinguishing of the Spirit which was originally inherent in matter and nature. As follows, there is no materialism here. We are dealing with a complex scheme which combines the Platonic option (in the beginning there was Spirit, not matter) and the evolutionary model (in which we begin to consider history from the Antithesis, which is reminiscent of the idea of the Great Mother). Marx amputated the Platonic part, hence his reinterpretation of Hegel in an exclusively materialist sense. But Hegel is more complex.

Another important point in Hegel is how he defines the political end of history, the peak of the becoming of political history and the expression of the Absolute Spirit. Here Hegel says something interesting about Prussia and the German state. The Germans did not have a state, so historically there was no such expression. Thus, the Germans absorb the logic of world movement, and the Prussian-German state is the expression of the Absolute Spirit. All of history is thus a prelude to the formation of Germany in the 19th century. Hegel said that great peoples are those who have either a great state or great philosophy. He said that the Russians have a great state, while in the 19th century the Germans had no state whatsoever. As follows, the Germans must have great philosophy – and then a great state.

The most striking is that Hegel formulated the philosophy of a great German state before Germany appeared. He forged this theory while he himself lived in a fragmented Germany of principalities that was anything but a powerful and strong state. Hegel assembled Germany, endowed it with an intellectual mission, and created, along with Fichte and Schelling, the idealist, romantic concept of German statehood as an expression of the Spirit becoming Absolute. The peak and the end of history, according to Hegel, is therefore the German state.

Moreover, Hegel thought that the most optimal political system is an enlightened monarchy dominated by political Hegelian philosophers, the bearers of the Synthesis of the whole world Spirit who recognize the logic of world history. Hegel considered himself to be a prophet of philosophy, humanity, and Germany, and in some sense he was a mystic. Methodologically, Hegel’s philosophy was absolutely rational, but it was irrational in its premises. He substantiated the idea that civil society, the French Revolution, and the Enlightenment epoch were another, dialectical moment in the formation of enlightened monarchy. Civil society is that out of which monarchy grows, and which monarchy abolishes. Thus, Hegel was a mystical monarchist who considered the logic of history to be the path of different political forms towards Russian monarchy.

It is no surprise that this idea was taken by the Italian fascists, especially in the theory of the Italian state of Giovanni Gentile, who was a Hegelian. Paradoxically, neither fascism not Nazism can be seen as representative of classical nationalism. In these two worldviews, there were certain elements that do not lend themselves to being considered as classical or even radical forms of European bourgeois nationalism, because in this case the addition of the Hegelian instance in the form of the Subjective Spirit, and all of the metaphysics of history which Gentile laid in the foundations of the theory of Italian fascism were simply Hegelianism applied to Italy.

Despite the fact that he is considered a classic of political philosophy, Hegel is a rather complex, compound case. His political philosophy does not mirror the ideology of the Third Way, and Marxist theory was built on metaphysically truncated Hegelianism. In other words, “left” Hegelianism became the basis of the Second Political Theory, and “right” Hegelianism influenced some of the peculiarities of the Third Political Theory. Moreover, the Hegelian idea of the end of history was taken up and applied to the liberal model by his student, Alexandre Kojève [1], his follower Francis Fukuyama, and other philosophers. Marx applied the “end of history” to communism, Gentile to the state, and some Hegelian philosophers to the triumph of liberal world order. Therefore, the latter said, civil society is not a prolegomena to monarchy (as Hegel himself believed), but the peak of the development of human civilization.

This ideas was taken as a premise by Francis Fukuyama, who employed the term “end of history.” This term was of fundamental importance to Hegel insofar as it marked the final moment of the Spirit’s achievement of its absolute phase through history, the dialectical moment of the Spirit’s return to itself, in itself, and for itself – the Synthesis.

Thus, we can find in Hegelianism all three of the classical ideologies of modernity, but this does not mean that Hegelianism can be qualified from the point of view of any one of them. Hegel is broader than all the political theories of modernity, and therefore does not lapse into them. As follows, in Hegelianism there is that which was pilfered in fragments by the three political ideologies of modernity, as well as that which was not taken, such as the idea of the primordial Subjective Spirit which precedes any downward movement. This element of the primordial Platonic leap, Neoplatonism, which then transitions into more or less progressive-evolutionary topologies, allows us to refrain from classifying Hegel as one of the philosophers or political philosophers of modernity, because, as we have seen, the paradigm of modernity does not presume any prior matter component.

A non-liberal, non-Marxist, and non-fascist reading of Hegel allows us to reveal his components for an alternative to modernity and integrate him into the Fourth Political Theory. Through this operation, we move Hegel from the epoch of modernity in which he lived and thought into another context. This is another Hegel, another political philosophy of Hegel in which the focus is on the Platonic leap downwards. This part of his philosophy did not, and indeed could not receive political embodiment in the framework of the paradigm of modernity. Nevertheless, it can find expression in the context of the Fourth Political Theory.

Footnotes:

[1] The Russian philosopher Aleksandr Kozhevnikov changed his name to Alexandre Kojève after emigrating.