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The Philosophy of History in Hegel, Heidegger, and Jaspers

Stephen A. Erickson

Pomona College

Stephen_Erickson@pomona.edu

Abstract: In this reflection I consider History as understood through Hegel, Heidegger, and Jaspers. Reviewing Hegel's claims that philosophy is both the child of its time and its time comprehended in thought, I note the French Revolution as decisive for Hegel's account of History. Reviewing Hegel's claim that History is now "over," I consider Hegel's view that History has been progressive and that the decisive historical period is the present. I turn to Heidegger's "decline" theory of the unfolding of philosophical ideas, reviewing the similarity between Hegel and Heidegger in viewing the history of philosophical ideas as the driving force of History. Noting the close connection Heidegger had to Nietzsche's understanding of the Greeks, I reflect on Heidegger's attitude toward the axial mind. Having considered Heidegger's notion that we must somehow get back into an authentic History, I end with a reflection on the virtues of Jaspers' humane blend of Enlightenment ideals with a contextualized historical sensitivity.

I wish to make some comments on History as a subject of philosophical reflection – an object of inquiry – first in Hegel, then in Heidegger, and finally in Jaspers. By comments I mean observations, not analyses, though I will also make a few recommendations along the way regarding the notion of History (and its future) as a fit topic for pursuit in what will turn out to be our particular time.[1]

Two claims might be said to dominate Hegel's view of the relation of philosophy to History, and we have heard them stated often enough: first, that philosophy is the child of its time; second, that philosophy is its time comprehended in thought.

That philosophy is the child of its time tells us, of course, that philosophy arises out of and is bounded by historically definable time periods, what we might call eras. Philosophy lives within these eras. They define philosophy and through them philosophy receives its nourishment and lives its life. In different time periods, it would follow, philosophy will not only live differently, but might be something different with respect to its goals and methods. The notion of philosophy as a timeless, unchanging or perennial activity must, thus, lose all but edifying force.

Stepping back for a moment from Hegel himself – who surely would have been most uncomfortable with the implications I have so far drawn from one of his own remarks – let us consider. Times do change. One era is in fact succeeded by another, though confirmation of this occurrence, even an initial judgment that it has actually happened, usually comes only retrospectively. But there is a genuine and even today an abiding

[1] An earlier version was published in *International Readings of Theory, History and Philosophy of Culture*, 21: "Dynamics of Values in Contemporary Culture," pp. 191-200, UNESCO-EIDOS publication, St. Petersburg, Russia, 2006.

mystery surrounding this circumstance. The underlying movement of time relevant to the transition from one era to its successor can be measured only externally by the ticking of the clock or by the flipping of the calendar. Historical time periods do rise and fall, come into being and pass away for timely reasons, but their temporally measurable durations, the durations of the temporal punctuations between them, and the proverbial Newtonian time line on which these various durations are placed, are external to the timeliness of differing eras and external, also, to the timing and the nature of the time involved in the transition from one era to another.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel tells us, following such figures as the brothers Schlegel and Novalis, "that time ripens slowly in hidden places." In terms of our normal sense of time this statement is at best poetic and at worst silly. But if we think of "time ripening" as "time periods" (eras or epochs) gestating and then emerging, declining and then disappearing, we can make much sense of Hegel's remark. We are usually well into an age – another term for era or time period – before we recognize it for what it is. And though a new era does not hide from us, it is often hidden from us by activities we engage in which belong to an era that, usually we say in retrospect, was soon passing or had essentially already passed.

What defines Hegel's particular time for Hegel? The best answer is probably The French Revolution. For Hegel it had a specific meaning which he discusses in that section of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled "Freedom and Terror." The main issue is the relation of social, political and cultural institutions to the needs and legitimate interests of human beings. Are those needs and interests being met? If not, might they come to be met through reform? If not, then revolutionary action is required. Why? Because humans are meant to be free, and freedom does *not* mean being left alone and uninterfered with, thus allowed to do what you want. This is a notion of freedom that through Isaiah Berlin is popularly known as the negative conception of liberty. As we know, this notion has woven its way through the works of such thinkers as Hobbes, Locke, Constant and Mill, and forms a significant portion of the fabric of any contractarian utopia. For Hegel, on the other hand, and by contrast, freedom means finding your interests and needs nurtured, reflected, recognized, acknowledged, responded to and met in the various institutions that form the milieu in which your life is led.

The meaning of the French Revolution – which for Hegel defines his specific time – is thus freedom itself, positively construed. Therefore, the meaning of Hegel's very time is itself this same freedom as just defined: a complementary congruence between institutional realities and human interests and needs, individual and social.

As we know, the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* is concerned, always, to bring the meaning of things, which Hegel often calls their certainty, to their truth, i.e., to bring the purposes of things to their conceptual completion and actual fulfillment. So if the meaning of the French Revolution is freedom, how is this freedom then achieved? In one sense – and it must be carefully qualified – the answer is that for Hegel positive freedom is brought about in part through terror, at least terror is involved. How so? What we are told in the "Freedom and Terror" section of the *Phenomenology* is that the destruction of an existing order may have one of three outcomes: continuing chaos, a better order or a worse order. At that agonizing and often extended moment of uncertainty regarding the outcome of an intended and accomplished institutional convulsion, the honest and appropriate response to the existing and transitional situation is terror, for the transition itself as genuine transition is terrifying. Groundlessness exists. There is no place to stand.

But in Hegel's retrospective judgment, as we well know and which elicited Marx's outrage, the transition worked out positively — perhaps not altogether in France, but in Prussia, where the *purpose* of the French Revolution, its "truth" could have its gains, the achievement of positive freedom, consolidated by non-revolutionary means. Hegel, thus, saw his era as the era of freedom, positively defined, and the purpose of philosophy as reconciliatory, *i.e.*, as showing how it was the case that various forms of institutional reality on the one hand, social, political, and cultural, and the needs and legitimate interests of individuals on the other hand, coincided and could be rationally comprehended as harmonized.

Often noted, and rightly I believe, is that Hegel cheats in multiple ways. Since many of these bear on senses of History that succeed Hegel's, a few of them deserve mention. First, Hegel's time periods, the eras of central concern to Hegel, are essentially Western. The narrative that constitutes their sequence works its way through Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, and Florence to Prussia, albeit with various useful detours and pit stops along the way. Second, what first appeared to be somewhat separated, if not separate time periods, turn out through a rationally retrospective lens to give sequential rise to one another, with each successor

accumulating the essential components of its predecessor. Assumed is that there *are* essential components, that they unfold in an historical sequence, and that they can be comprehensively preserved, appreciated, and made institutionally accessible in the present. Thus, though Hegel does say, and is often so quoted, that philosophy is the child of its time, he does not actually quite mean it. Hegel only means it, if we accept the qualifying claim, not so covert in Hegel, that Hegel's time is comprehensive and consummatory.

If these – and a few other – assumptions are granted, History, of course, has been completed. Not only is it completed in the sense that all of the essential components of previous time periods have been accumulated into the present, but it is completed in the sense of now being over. History for Hegel is now over in that: (a) freedom in the positive sense has been recognized and, if not fully achieved, at least mapped in extensive outline and catalogued with respect to its specifics within an affirmative and reassuring categorical system. And (b) all essential human possibilities have been made institutionally and individually available in a co-respondent and mutually reinforcing way. And (c) all that could happen subsequently comes to be construed either as a falling away from or a failure to achieve these circumstances. "Falling away," presumably, would be a nearly uniquely Prussian possibility, whereas "failing to achieve" might occur nearly anywhere else and certainly outside of Europe for some time to come.

Note once more that on this account philosophy, construed first as reconciliation of thought with the world but then soon as the articulate recognition that this reconciliation has already taken place, becomes less the child of *its* time, than the adult for all times. It becomes this adult because all times get construed as living not just in the past but, in their humanly essential components, in the present, in Hegel's time.

Note still once more, for it is critical to Hegel's account of History, that progress is assumed, but that complete accumulation is claimed as well. Perhaps the best single term for this sense of History is History as Preservation. Clearly Hegel saw this as one of his very major bequests to posterity, a bequest first made possible through his historical acquisition of those ideas which define the philosophical West. For Hegel this acquisition had been made fully and convincingly possible through the further and extraordinarily happy circumstance that the full sequence of relevant ideas had reached their completion only, but also definitively in Hegel's own time. Proof of their definitiveness could be found, Hegel was in turn convinced, through Hegel's and then our Hegelianly indebted capacity to comprehend these ideas within and as a system. If anyone were to doubt this strong strain in Hegel's philosophy of History, they need only read the last page of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here he more or less states it, and through making the claim guides us toward seeing the whole of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the preface to his subsequent philosophical writing.

The essential historical period for Hegel, thus, *is* the present. But in another sense History itself has now collapsed. It has collapsed as something past, for what matters of the past is now fully found in the present. And History has collapsed as future as well, for the future is only possible as the further discovery, recapitulation and/or recapture of this present. What might be "future" can only be further detail, latent in a present, Hegel's present and ours, already essentially and comprehensively – though not thereby exhaustively – articulated.

Hegel's celebration of History is simultaneously its extinction and wake. All the essential sounds of History are symphonized in the present, Hegel's present. Moving "forward" in calendar time, after Hegel, all that is possible are re-soundings — perhaps themselves resounding. Otherwise there can only be disharmony, atonality, muted sound, possibly just noise, or silence.

I will return to the notion of silence in a few moments, for, as I will soon suggest, it is within that silence which is offered through Hegel as an unattractive and therefore implausible alternative to Hegel's own philosophy of History that a deeply disharmonious and discordant, if nonetheless poignant and even somewhat appealing Heidegger finally comes to live.

But first a footnote to what I have said regarding Hegel. Hegel not only said that philosophy was the child of its time. He also said that philosophy was its time comprehended in thought. Hegel could not only say this, but also believe that the project of comprehending his time fully in thought was possible, because he unwaveringly – dialectical machinations notwithstanding – distinguished the essential from the accidental. It was this distinction that not only drove his account of History, but gave him the confidence to believe that he had comprehended History, had comprehended History fully, and thus, when all was said and done, had buried it with a dramatic conceptual eulogy to console those for whom its death would be experienced as a loss.

A moment ago I connected Heidegger with silence. But there is much Heidegger, or should I say

many Heideggers, before this silence is reached. Heidegger shares with Hegel – apparently an occupational hazard for German philosophy professors – the view that the history of philosophical ideas is the driving engine of History itself. Unlike Hegel, however, Heidegger understands the historical sequence of philosophical ideas to demonstrate not progress but decline, a conceptually accelerated, if also growingly sophisticated falling away from a set of encounters most extraordinary.

For purposes of brevity I am going to recount this, in fact largely enduring dimension of Heidegger's philosophy of History as a story. Once upon a time there was an extraordinary sense of wonder and amazement over the fact that things were and how they were. There arose the emerging and enduring, *physis,* out of which later came physics. Intimately and unavoidably intertwined with *physis* there simultaneously emerged a letting things be, *logos*, out of which all too soon came reason, logic, and eventually manipulation and technology.

Though it would not have been within the very limited confines of Heidegger's even more limited supply of generosity to admit such, were it in fact the case, Heidegger's account of the extraordinary advent of *physis-logos* is perfectly compatible with and might have been influenced by long conversations with Jaspers, in whom an account of something called "the dawn of the axial age" had been gestating. For Jaspers the axial age – explored by Heidegger most explicitly and without attribution in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, circa 1935 – involved the bifurcation of our human world into reality and appearance, liberation and bondage, enlightenment and confusion, light and darkness, and somewhat later, eternity and time. At the dawn of the axial age human life gradually unfolded, to those who sought to comprehend it, as a journey: through appearance to reality, from bondage to liberation, out of confusion to insight, through darkness and toward the light.

It is not hard to understand Heidegger – all reference to possible Jasperian influence aside – as standing, or at least through heroically intuitive re-appropriations of pre-Socratic fragments, attempting to stand, at the dawn of this axial age. If little else is certain, something that is evident is that Heidegger not only thought philosophy had begun in wonder, but that the only hope for philosophy and, thus, for humanity as philosophy's child, was that philosophy return to that wonder which had spawned it and, possibly simultaneously, had also spawned we humans in our specific humanity.

Considerably indebted to a subtle, though not thereby particularly controversial reading of Nietzsche, Heidegger understood the rise of post-Socratic Athenian philosophy as introducing or at least highlighting and intensifying the time/eternity bifurcation in axial thinking. The journey of human life not only sought a way out of appearance, bondage, confusion, and darkness, it also sought escape from time. The goal of the journey was not just reality, liberation, enlightenment and light. It was also eternity. In Heidegger's account the early axial experience of *physis* became transformed into the quest for what lay behind *physis*, the metaphysical, something soon identified with form or primary substance. For this metaphysical pursuit to offer hope of success, *logos*, which was first a focused and benignly concentrated "letting things be," got transmuted into "reason," "dialectic," "logic," "episteme," and, more generally, conceptual thought.

The result of this assault of Greek metaphysical philosophy upon human axial history was from Heidegger's point of departure catastrophic. Once the enduring and abiding became the eternal and unchanging, the goal of History – the quest of the religions of the "Book" Platonized – became the escape from History. It was acceptable for appearance to belong to time, and thus History, but for time, and thus History to belong to appearance, progressively implied that time, and thus History, were just appearance. Beyond them and intimately intertwined, it came to be believed, were reality and eternity, a reality that was eternity, and an eternity that, equally, was the only true reality.

For Heidegger, thus, the task is not to bring History to completion. Neither is it to bring History to its end or help us find ways to escape or transcend it. Pardoxically, the task is to get us back into History. It is not that we have ever actually left it, but the deep spiritual therapy needed is to make unavoidable the understanding that time and, thus, History are the only place we can ever be. It is as if Heidegger were claiming that "the fall of man" were not a fall into *time*, but in fact a deeply deceptive quest or possibly even deluded belief that we existed in our essential being outside of time. If there was a fall, on this Heideggerian account, the fall was from within time toward a nonexistent domain outside of time. Humanity has thereby lost any authentic History. If much of religious thinking later in the axial age involved delivering us *from* time and

History, Heidegger's thinking strove to return us to History, to push our thinking back into that inescapable History we had never left.

A moment ago I mentioned the notion of authentic History. If philosophical History has been for Heidegger the further fixating of a misguided because a-historical purpose, the transcendence of time and History, what then might an authentic History look like?

An anti-enlightenment thinker significantly indebted to romanticism and figures such as Fichte and Herder, Heidegger understands History to be the History of a people who are the bearers of something spiritually significant. To be such bearers becomes especially significant, even desperately important, in the wake of the death of God, Nietzsche's proclamation which on Heidegger's reading is Nietzsche's accurate but for Nietzsche himself not fully comprehended announcement that the axial age had ended – however many decades or even centuries might be required for this circumstance to be fully absorbed?

Without an eternal and liberating reality beyond appearances – in short, without religion as traditionally and Platonically conceived – something else must sustain human existence. And what might this be? For Heidegger it appears to be a people. It is a people not so much because they so choose as because they are chosen, but because it is their *Geschick*.

But who or what chooses them? The Heidegger who is enduringly influenced by Nietzsche, and at best benighted through arrogance and misunderstood political opportunity, comes, however briefly, to see the people themselves, his people, choosing themselves. After the death of God, not only does the transcendent go, with it departs chosen-ness as well, except as a collective act of will. We can safely see what has been called Heidegger's decisionism as very much alive in at least a significant portion of the thirties. The account of History it suggests has a remarkable and further parallel with something else in Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was prone to think of History as a series of long and insignificant detours in the service of a few great individuals. His list once included Goethe, Heine, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and himself. Gradually the list suffered attrition born of disillusion or anger, and we know that by his end, tragically documented in *Ecce Homo*, only Nietzsche remained on that list. I suggest that Heidegger at one point understood peoples in a similar manner, but there were and always remained for him just two such peoples: the Greeks, and the Germans, speakers of those two "most spiritual of languages," Greek and German. A middle Heidegger, neither early not late, partly under the influence of Nietzsche, saw actual history as ordinary in a manner beneath philosophical interest – not, by the way and as we know, an atypical stance taken by a number of philosophers of History – and Heidegger saw two peoples, one long ago and his own people in his own post-Weimar Republic time as worthy of an authentic History and having had or possibly soon having one.

And there is the later Heidegger, for whom not only the gods, but Being and History have fled, for whom all that remains for us regarding History is a waiting and expectant silence and even silence about this silence, for, as is finally stated, and deliberately as a posthumous remark, "only a god can save us."

When we turn to Jaspers we find subtleties found neither in Hegel nor in Heidegger. In one sense Jaspers might be termed a pre-Hegelian enlightenment thinker. Made more influential through the writings of Habermas, communicative reason plays a major role in Jaspers' thinking. Through what Jaspers sometimes simply calls communication – which involves the recognition of differing perspectives and the attempt at least to understand, if not always to overcome them – people and peoples are granted equal standing and mutual recognition in a process reciprocal comprehension. The dignity of people as peoples receives acknowledgment and support.

Jaspers, however, is not an "enlightenment" thinker, if by this is meant someone oblivious to the importance of History or someone optimistically and confidently directed toward its progressive completion or its end. For Jaspers we are enmeshed in History, and, having knowledge neither of its origin nor of its goal, are in no position to know its purpose nor to glimpse beyond it toward its presumptive ground (or grounds). To recognize oneself as enmeshed in History has as a consequence a considerable measure of humility regarding any claimed narrative meaning to History.

For Jaspers as well, to experience oneself as historical and thereby grounded by History, is also to accept that History may not be one's only ground. If Hegel turns eternity into History and then reabsorbs History into a present that collapses History, then Jaspers, through *Existenz*, accepts History as unavoidable and as unavoidably suggestive of a ground that transcends it and upon which it may rest.

If Heidegger spurns eternity in the name of a specific, post-Nietzschean History, and then, flees this History, or at lest its overt acknowledgment, in the name of a yet to be found future History, Jaspers finds glimpses of an elusive Transcendence while always

acknowledging his and our historical circumstances, our pluralized hopes and in some painful ways our human guilt over opportunities lost and actions committed.

There is a strong tendency to demand a unified narrative History, unifying and simultaneously convincing. In its absence there is an equally strong tendency toward understanding History as incommensurable and non-communicate histories, histories very much conflicting and plural. Perhaps worse, there is the abandonment of hope with regard to narrative philosophical History and an abdication of historical reflection in deference to those painstaking and deservedly respected gatherers and their gatherings of information. Jaspers, however, shows us another way — or perhaps it is many ways: These many ways involve living in the largely irreconcilable tensions of varying Historical narratives that co-exist in our twenty-first century, Histories either ignoring or speaking at, not *to* each other. In his notion of communication and the humility that the recognition of our entanglement in History requires of us, Jaspers may suggest our one hopeful, though never safe nor sure philosophical opportunity to reinstate and to explore the philosophy of History.