An Introduction to

# Hegel

*Freedom, Truth and History*

Stephen Houlgate

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**Second Edition**

Stephen Houlgate

Blackwell
Publishing

*In memory of my father, Raymond Houlgate*

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# *Contents*

# *Acknowledgements to the Second Edition*

This book was first published in 1991 and comprised five chapters: on Hegel's philosophy of history, science of logic, political philosophy, aesthetics and philosophy of religion. For this second edition I have added five new chapters: two on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, two devoted wholly to the philosophy of nature, and one covering both the philosophy of nature and philosophy of subjective spirit. I have also made some revisions to the five original chapters. Most of these are minor and simply tidy up passages that were not quite as clear as I initially believed. In one or two cases the revisions are a little more extensive and have been made in order to accommodate the new chapters.

There is likely to be little surprise at the fact that I have added chapters on the *Phenomenology*. This is perhaps Hegel's most famous text and should have been treated more fully in the first edition. Eyebrows might be raised, however, at the inclusion of so much new material on the philosophy of nature. Hegel's philosophy of nature has often been dismissed with disdain. Scholars such as Michael Petry, John Burbidge and Dieter Wandschneider have shown beyond doubt, however, that Hegel's dialectical conception of nature is central to his philosophical project and very much rewards close attention and study. I hope that my account of Hegel's views on space, time, matter and life will help to open up the philosophy of nature to a much wider audience than hitherto.

I have benefited over the past thirteen years from conversations and correspondence with many friends and colleagues on both the *Phenomenology* and the philosophy of nature. I would like to thank the following especially for their enthusiasm, patience and invaluable insights: John Burbidge, Ardis Collins, Will Dudley, Cinzia Ferrini, William Maker, John McCumber, Michael Petry, Robert Stern, Kenneth Westphal and Robert Williams. I am also grateful to Steve Bosworth for making helpful suggestions for revisions to the first edition, to Thomas Posch for reading and correcting chapter 6 on the philosophy of nature with such care and to Kenneth Westphal (again) for reading through the whole manuscript with such scrupulous attention to detail. The five new chapters could not have been completed without two terms of research leave granted by the University of Warwick. The chapters on the *Phenomenology* also owe much to the graduate students and undergraduates at Warwick with whom I have studied Hegel's great work over the last few years. Thanks are due to all of them.

Most of all I would like to thank my loving family for all the big and little things they have done to help this new edition see the light of day. My wife, Mary, and my children,

Mark, Michael and Margaret, gave me wonderful support during the writing of the first edition, and they have been every bit as supportive and tolerant during the (mercifully much shorter) gestation of the second edition. Special thanks should go to our fourth child, Christopher, born in 1993, who so graciously agreed to play his football in the hall 'without commentary' when I was struggling to understand what Hegel was trying to say in some particularly knotty passages.

Stephen Houlgate
Kenilworth

# *Acknowledgements to the First Edition*

This book was started in 1986 in Edinburgh and completed in 1990 in Evanston. In the intervening years many friends, colleagues and students have helped to bring clarity to my thoughts on Hegel and, especially, to my attempts to express those thoughts in intelligible English.

I am particularly grateful to Jonathan Rée, both for suggesting that I write the book in the first place and for reading through and editing each chapter with such understanding and patience. Paul Gurowich, Vincent Hope, Nicholas Sagovsky and Robert Stern also read individual chapters and made many valuable suggestions as to how to improve them. For any remaining obscurities or infelicities of style, I take full responsibility.

In addition, I have profited over the last few years from many conversations with friends about Hegel and related issues. Those whom I would particularly like to thank for their, perhaps unwitting, contributions to the genesis of this book are Ken Alpern, John Burbidge, Tom Burdett, Paul Davies, Tim Engström, David Kolb, John Llewelyn, George Matthews, Ron Nahser, John Protevi, Sally Sedgwick, John Walker and Nick Walker.

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Finally, and most importantly, I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to my family: to my wife, Mary, for her good humour, her understanding and her love at all times, and to my children, Mark, Michael and Margaret, for their endless patience on all those days when we never did get to mend those toys and never did get to the park.

Stephen Houlgate
Evanston, Illinois
August 1990

# *Abbreviations*

The following abbreviations have been used to refer to the works of Hegel:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Werke* | *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, eds E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel, 20 volumes and index (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969ff). |
| *A* | *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). |
| *Enc* I | *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (with the *Zusätze*), trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991). This is a translation of the first volume of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* (1830) and is known as the 'Lesser Logic'. |
| *Enc* II | *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). This is a translation of the second volume of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* (1830). |
| *Enc* III | *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace, together with the *Zusätze* in Boumann's text (1845), trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). This is a translation of the third volume of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* (1830). |
| *HP* | *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). |
| *LHP* | *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson, 3 volumes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1892, 1955). |
| *LPR* | *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. P. C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart, with the assistance of J. P. Fitzer and H. S. Harris, 3 volumes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984–7). |
| *NP* | *Naturphilosophie.* Band I: *Die Vorlesung von 1819/20*, ed. M. Gies (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1980). |
| *PH* | *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, with an introduction by C. J. Friedrich (New York: Dover Publications, 1956). |
| *Phen* | *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, with analysis of the text and foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). |
| *PR* | *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, 1967). |
| *PRH* | *Philosophie des Rechts. Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*, ed. D. Henrich (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983). |
| *PWH* | *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet with an introduction by D. Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). |

| | |
|---|---|
| *SL* | *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, foreword by J. N. Findlay (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989). This text is known as the 'Greater Logic'. |
| *VNP Bon* | *Natur-Philosophie*, 'Nachschrift A', in W. Bonsiepen, 'Hegels Raum-Zeit-Lehre', *Hegel-Studien*, 20 (1985), 9–78. |
| *VNP 1821* | *Vorlesung über Naturphilosophie. Berlin 1821/22*, eds G. Marmasse and T. Posch (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002). |
| *VNP 1823* | *Vorlesung über Naturphilosophie. Berlin 1823/24*, ed. G. Marmasse (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000). |
| *VNS* | *Vorlesungen über Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft. Heidelberg 1817/18, mit Nachträgen aus der Vorlesung 1818/19. Nachgeschrieben von P. Wannenmann*, eds C. Becker and others, with Introduction by O. Pöggeler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983). |
| *VPG* | *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Geistes. Berlin 1827/1828*, eds F. Hespe and B. Tuschling (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994). |
| *VPN* | *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Natur. Berlin 1819/20*, eds M. Bondeli and H. N. Seelmann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002). |
| *VPR* | *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, ed. W. Jaeschke, 3 volumes (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983–5). |
| *VRP* | *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie, 1818–1831*, ed. K.-H. Ilting, 4 volumes (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1973ff). |

# *Chronology*

1770 20 March: Friedrich Hölderlin born in Lauffen am Neckar. 27 August: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel born in Stuttgart. Wordsworth and Beethoven are born in the same year.

1775 27 January: Friedrich Schelling born in Württemberg.

1776 American Declaration of Independence.

1777 Hegel attends the Stuttgart Gymnasium until 1788. His reading during this time includes Homer, Thucydides, Sophocles, Aristotle, Cicero, Tacitus, Horace, Shakespeare, Klopstock, Lessing and Schiller.

1781 Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* published.

1783 20 September: Hegel's mother dies.

1785 Hegel begins writing a diary, partly in Latin. Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* published.

1788 October: Hegel and Hölderlin begin studies in theology and philosophy at the Tübinger Stift. During their time at the Stift the two students develop a close friendship with one another and with Schelling (after he enters the Stift in 1790).

1789 14 July: The storming of the Bastille in Paris marks the beginning of the French Revolution, which is greeted with enthusiasm by students at the Stift.

1790 Hegel receives MA degree. Kant publishes his *Critique of Judgement.*

1792 Fichte's *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* appears.

1793 Louis XVI guillotined. Hegel graduates from the Tübinger Stift. Autumn: He becomes house tutor with the family of Captain Karl Friedrich von Steiger in Bern. Kant publishes *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone.*

1794 Fall of Robespierre. Fichte begins to publish his *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge.*

1795 Schiller's letters on the *Aesthetic Education of Man* published. Hegel works on 'The Life of Jesus' and on 'The Positivity of the Christian Religion'.

1796 Hegel (or Schelling or Hölderlin) writes the *Earliest System-programme of German Idealism.* Napoleon's Italian campaign.

1797 January: Hegel moves to Frankfurt am Main to take up a tutorship which Hölderlin had arranged for him with the family Gogel. Summer/Autumn: Hegel drafts fragments on religion and love.

1798 Schelling becomes Professor of Philosophy at Jena on the recommendation of Goethe. Hegel works on Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals.* Napoleon's Egyptian campaign.

1799 14 January: Hegel's father dies. Hegel writes the 'Spirit of Christianity and its Fate' and works on Sir James Steuart's *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy.*

1800 Schelling publishes his *System of Transcendental Idealism.* September: Hegel completes his 'System-fragment'.

1801 January: Hegel joins Schelling at the University of Jena. Begins lecturing as Privatdozent on logic and metaphysics. His first publication, an essay entitled *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, appears. He completes his dissertation *On the Orbits of the Planets.*

1802 Hegel lectures on natural law. He begins publication of the *Critical Journal of Philosophy* with Schelling. Publication continues until the summer of 1803 when Schelling leaves Jena. Articles by Hegel published in the journal include *Faith and Knowledge, The Relation of Scepticism to Philosophy* and the essay on *Natural Law.*

1803 September: Hegel prepares manuscript known as the 'System of Speculative Philosophy', which includes material on the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of spirit.

1804 12 February: Kant dies. 2 December: Napoleon crowns himself Emperor.

1805 February: Hegel appointed Extraordinary Professor at Jena through the help of Goethe. 9 May: Schiller dies.

1806 July: Hegel draws his first regular stipend at Jena. October: He completes manuscript of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as Napoleon defeats the Prussian troops at the battle of Jena.

1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* published. 5 February: Christiana Burckhardt (*née* Fischer), Hegel's landlady and housekeeper in Jena, gives birth to his illegitimate son, Ludwig Fischer. (Ludwig is raised in Jena by the sisters-in-law of Hegel's friend, the publisher Karl Friedrich Frommann, until he is taken into Hegel's own home in 1817.) March: Hegel moves to Bamberg to become editor of a newspaper. Autumn: Period of reform begins in Prussia, initially under Freiherr von Stein, then under Karl von Hardenberg. This lasts until 1813.

1808 November: Hegel moves to Nuremberg to become rector of the Aegidiengymnasium. One of his tasks at the Gymnasium is to teach speculative logic to his pupils.

1811 15 September: Hegel marries Marie von Tucher (born 1791).

1812 Napoleon's Russian campaign. Volume 1 of the *Science of Logic* (the Logic of Being) published. 27 June: Hegel's daughter, Susanna, born. She dies on 8 August.

1813 7 June: Hegel's son, Karl, born. Volume 2 of the *Science of Logic* (the Logic of Essence) published. Kierkegaard, Wagner, Verdi and Georg Büchner born.

1814 29 January: Fichte dies. 25 September: Hegel's son, Immanuel, born.

1815 Napoleon defeated at Waterloo.

1816 Volume 3 of the *Science of Logic* (the Logic of the Concept) published. Hegel becomes Professor of Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. At Heidelberg he lectures on the history of philosophy, logic and metaphysics, anthropology and psychology, political philosophy, aesthetics and the *Encyclopaedia.*

1817 First edition of the *Encyclopaedia* published.

1818 May 5: Marx born in Trier. Hegel is recruited by the Prussian Minister for Religious, Educational and Medical Affairs, Karl von Altenstein, to become Professor of Philosophy at the University of Berlin, where he remains until his death. During these years in Berlin Hegel's philosophy gains in popularity among academics and amateur philosophers from the business world and the professions, and Hegelianism develops into a philosophical school.

1819 August/September: The Karlsbad Decrees are passed authorizing press censorship and closer surveillance of universities in Germany. In the period of crackdown shortly before the decrees are passed, one of Hegel's students, Leopold von Henning, is arrested.

1820 October: *Philosophy of Right* published.

1821 Hegel lectures for the first time on the philosophy of religion. 5 May: Napoleon dies.

1822 Hegel travels to the Rhineland and the Low Countries, where he sees paintings by Rembrandt and van Dyck. In Berlin he lectures for the first time on the philosophy of history.

1824 The Brockhaus *Konversationslexikon* includes an account of Hegel's life and philosophy. Hegel visits Vienna where he attends several operas by Rossini.

1826 Hegel founds the *Yearbooks for Scientific Criticism.*

1827 Second edition of the *Encyclopaedia* published. Hegel visits Paris, where he sees Molière's *Tartuffe* and an operatic version of *Oedipus at Colonus.* He also sees the central section of

the van Eyck Altarpiece in Ghent and paintings by Memling in Bruges. October: He visits Goethe in Weimar on the way home to Berlin.

1830 Hegel is Rector of the University of Berlin. Third edition of the *Encyclopaedia* published. July: Revolution in France.

1831 January: Hegel decorated by Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia. 28 August: Ludwig Fischer dies in the East Indies. 14 November: Hegel dies in Berlin (probably of a chronic gastrointestinal disease) without learning of his son's fate. 24 December: A contract is signed by Hegel's wife, students and friends for the publication of his collected works.

1832 22 March: Goethe dies.

1835–6 D. F. Strauss's *Life of Jesus* is published, marking the beginning of a conscious split between Left, Right and Middle Hegelians.

1841 Schelling called to the University of Berlin by Friedrich Wilhelm IV to counter the influence of Hegelianism. L. Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* published.

1843 7 June: Hölderlin dies in Tübingen.

1848 Marx and Engels publish the *Communist Manifesto*.

1854 20 August: Schelling dies in Switzerland.

# *Introduction*

Opinions about Hegel are, to say the least, mixed. Some see in him 'a thinker of great argumentative strength and depth of vision' and are profoundly convinced of the 'originality and permanent interest of his ideas'.[1] One recent commentator has even claimed that Hegel's philosophy is so important that existential and political problems in today's world 'cannot be adequately approached by those not thoroughly experienced in Hegelian dialectical analysis'.[2] Others are somewhat less certain of the value of Hegel's philosophical enterprise. Bertrand Russell, for example, thought that almost all Hegel's doctrines were false; Karl Popper saw little more in him than 'bombastic and mystifying cant'; and Arthur Schopenhauer, who was his colleague at the University of Berlin in the early 1820s, complained bitterly about the countless minds that had been 'strained and ruined in the freshness of youth by the nonsense of Hegelism'. As far as Schopenhauer was concerned, most of his philosophical contemporaries were beneath contempt, but

> the greatest effrontery in serving up sheer nonsense, in scrabbling together senseless and maddening webs of words, such as had previously been heard only in madhouses, finally appeared in Hegel. It became the instrument of the most ponderous and general mystification that has ever existed, with a result that will seem incredible to posterity, and be a lasting monument of German stupidity.[3]

Intemperate though such remarks may be, it has to be admitted that a casual glance at a work of Hegel's such as the *Science of Logic* is more likely to confirm Schopenhauer's judgement than persuade the unbiased reader of the incisiveness and logical precision of Hegel's thinking. Consider, for example, the following sentences, chosen at random from the *Logic*:

> Negation as quality is negation simply as *affirmative*; being constitutes its ground and element. The determination of reflection, on the other hand, has for this ground reflectedness-into-self. Positedness fixes itself into a determination precisely because reflection is equality-with-self in its negatedness; its negatedness is consequently itself a reflection-into-self.[4]

Given that much of Hegel's writing is like this, it is not hard to see why his work has met with something less than universal acclaim during the one hundred and seventy years since his death. Indeed, it is pretty hard to understand how Hegel has found any philosophical friends at all.

Yet, as has often been pointed out, despite the apparent obscurity of his thought, Hegel has in fact had an unparalleled impact on the modern world. Marx's conception of historical dialectic and his analysis of capitalism are heavily indebted to Hegel; Kierkegaard's existentialism was developed in response to Hegelian philosophy; and the work of many modern theologians (such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and modern aesthetic theorists (such as Theodor Adorno) would be inconceivable without the background of Hegel's ideas. Dewey's pragmatism, Gadamer's hermeneutics, Habermas's social theory and Derrida's deconstruction, indeed the whole modern interest in historical understanding, have all been deeply influenced by Hegel. Even modern analytic philosophy, which was severely critical of Hegel for most of the twentieth century, is indirectly his progeny, since two of its founding fathers, Russell and G. E. Moore, were originally drawn to Hegelian ideas and spent much of their subsequent careers trying to refute what they perceived to be their early Hegelian errors. Given the extraordinary way in which Hegel's thinking pervades modern intellectual life, it seems to be undeniably true that 'no one today who seriously seeks to understand the shape of the modern world can avoid coming to terms with Hegel'.[5]

Yet a more important reason for engaging with Hegel's ideas, in my view, is that, despite their difficulty, they are actually of great value and relevance to current social, political, aesthetic, theological and philosophical discussions. I do not share the opinion of some commentators that 'the Hegelian synthesis, if ever a genuine possibility, has broken down beyond all possible recovery'.[6] To my mind, Hegel's is still a viable philosophical endeavour with important things to contribute to modern debates, particularly the debates about historical relativism, poverty and social alienation, the nature of freedom and political legitimacy, the future of art and the character of Christian faith. The purpose of this book is to try to explain what Hegel has to say to just such issues and to show that, contrary to what his detractors claim, his philosophy is still worthy of serious and thoughtful consideration.

In the past forty years there has been a revival of interest in Hegel that has led to the publication of some excellent studies of his work.[7] Many of these studies, however, are quite specialized and do not cover all aspects of Hegel's mature thought, preferring instead to concentrate on his phenomenology or political philosophy. There is, therefore, still a need, in my view, for a comprehensive introduction to Hegel's philosophy that can help to render the whole range of that daunting but immensely rewarding body of thought accessible to non-specialists. With this book I try to offer such an introduction.

The book covers almost all of the main areas of Hegel's mature philosophical system: the philosophy of history, the sciences of logic and phenomenology, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of subjective spirit, political philosophy, the aesthetics and the philosophy of religion. I have not dealt directly with Hegel's lectures on the history of philosophy (though I have briefly considered his relation to one or two of his philosophical predecessors, such as Descartes and Kant); nor have I included any discussion of Hegel's early writings, i.e. those written before the publication of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807. I trust, however, that readers whose main philosophical concern is with these particular areas will nevertheless find the issues that the book does cover to be of interest.

The interpretation of Hegel that is presented in this book is, I believe, a distinctive one. First, in contrast to most other commentators, I have taken seriously Hegel's claim to have developed a *presuppositionless* philosophy.[8] Furthermore, I have tried to show that Hegel's claim to presuppositionlessness can be seen to be quite compatible with his emphasis on the historical context within which philosophy emerges, if we recognize that, according to him, a philosophy that takes nothing for granted but develops all its concepts itself is

demanded by the modern historical claim to freedom. The concept of freedom will thus turn out in my account to be central to Hegel's thinking and to be the one that connects the concepts of history and truth.

Second, I have given a lot of attention to Hegel's largely neglected philosophy of nature. I try to show that Hegel's account of nature is not the product of ignorance and arrogance (as some have thought), but is a sober, intelligent and well informed exploration of the natural world. Furthermore, I argue that Hegel's philosophy of nature should not simply be dismissed as an aberration, but forms an essential part of his presuppositionless philosophy of freedom.

Third, I have concentrated more than is usual on Hegel's treatment of art and religion, the two spheres of absolute spirit that prepare the way, in his view, for true philosophy. Sadly, too few commentators on Hegel have paid close attention to his lectures on aesthetics, despite the fact that they contain some of the clearest and most accessible statements of his ideas. His philosophy of religion has been studied more frequently, but there is still much disagreement among philosophers and theologians about whether his claim to be a Christian philosopher can be taken seriously. In this book I will try to defend his claim, and show that he views religious experience – together with aesthetic experience – as essential to human wholeness, openness and freedom.

The account of Hegel's philosophy that I offer here is by no means exhaustive and may not be as critical of Hegel as some readers would like it to be. No doubt it also raises many more awkward questions about Hegel than it answers. However, the aim of the book is not to erect an impregnable defence around Hegel's ideas, nor to embalm them in detailed, historical scholarship. It is to kindle an interest in Hegel among those who have no prior knowledge of him or have previously regarded him with suspicion or trepidation, and to encourage them to engage with his ideas themselves. If this book succeeds in helping one or two readers to work their own way into the *Science of Logic* or the *Philosophy of Right*, it will have served its purpose well.

# 1 *History and Truth*

## The Historicity of Thought and Civilization

Perhaps the best way for a modern reader to approach Hegel's philosophy is to see it as challenging the claim that our experience of the world can ever be direct and unmediated. The idea that we could have simple, immediate access to things has been called into question from within both the 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions of philosophy, so whether our philosophical home is in the writings of 'analytic' thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Quine and Rorty, or of 'continental' thinkers such as Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida, we should find Hegel's critique of the concept of unmediated knowledge intelligible, familiar and possibly even congenial.

Throughout his writings, Hegel stresses that we cannot ever simply perceive what is, without preconditions or presuppositions, because all human consciousness is informed by categories of thought which mediate everything we experience. In his lectures on the philosophy of history, he suggests that the first duty of the philosophical historian could be said to be that of 'accurately apprehending' the facts of history. However, he points out that expressions such as 'accurate' and 'apprehend' are not as straightforward as they seem.

> Even the ordinary, run-of-the-mill historian who believes and professes that his attitude is entirely receptive, that he is dedicated to the facts, is by no means passive in his thinking; he brings his categories with him, and sees the data he has before him through them. . . . Whoever looks at the world rationally will find that it in turn assumes a rational aspect; the two exist in a reciprocal relationship.[1]

What is present at hand is thus never simply 'given' to us in a pure, unmediated form. Rather, the world we encounter is always experienced through a framework of categories which we cannot set aside. We must certainly be open to the facts, in Hegel's view, but we must realize that we can only be open to them from within a specific perspective.

In his philosophical *Encyclopaedia* (1830) Hegel calls this framework of categories the 'metaphysics' which informs all our experience. At other times Hegel uses the word 'metaphysics' to refer to the traditional philosophical enquiry into the essence of the soul or the nature of being, or to a particular mode of understanding, namely that which seeks to comprehend objects in the world as either one thing or the other – as either finite or infinite,

for example – and which is unable to think of anything real as uniting opposite qualities within itself. Here, however, 'metaphysics is nothing else but the entire range of the universal determinations of thought, as it were, the diamond net into which everything is brought and thereby first made intelligible'. Every form of human consciousness thus has its metaphysics, its 'instinctive way of thinking, the absolute power within us of which we become master only when we make it in turn the object of our knowledge'.[2] And one might add that this is true even of modes of thought – such as pragmatism – which deny that they adhere to any particular set of definitive principles. However 'unprincipled' or 'undogmatic' consciousness might wish to be, it will always presuppose some sort of 'metaphysics', according to Hegel. Hegel is, of course, well aware that human beings perceive the world through the network of their emotional, physical and practical needs and interests as well as through the network of their categories and concepts. However, he believes that those emotional, physical and practical interests are themselves mediated by the categories of thought, and that consequently these categories are most important in determining our world-view.

In claiming that all human consciousness presupposes certain categories of thought Hegel is following in the footsteps of the greatest philosopher of the German Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, second edition 1787) Kant put forward the view that the mind is not simply the passive recipient of sensations produced by the things around us, but is also active in understanding those sensations in terms of certain categories and principles which it itself brings to bear on its experience. When we make a judgement such as 'the sun caused the stone to become warm', we are not simply describing what we perceive, in Kant's understanding, because – and here he follows Hume – we do not actually *perceive* any causal connection. All we perceive is the appearance of the sun and then the stone becoming warm. We make sense of what we perceive, however, in terms of the concept of causality which we ourselves bring to experience. For Kant, therefore, we do not simply accept what is given to us by perception, but we are active, rational beings who understand what we perceive in terms of concepts and categories which our own thought supplies.[3]

Hegel follows Kant and stresses that we presuppose categories and concepts in all our dealings with the world. However, he differs from Kant in two important ways. First of all, since, for Kant, the categories that we bring to experience are the products of our own thought, all we are entitled to claim is that *we* make sense of the world in terms of these categories. We are not entitled to claim that the world is *itself* structured in accordance with them. Kant maintains that as rational beings we have to organize our experience in terms of categories such as cause and effect, and that experience is organized in the same way by all of us. The ordered world that we experience is thus objective and real as far as we are concerned; but what the world might be like in itself we cannot tell. Indeed, Kant is not simply an agnostic about the nature of the world in itself. He suggests very strongly that it is *not* organized in terms of our categories: the categories through which we comprehend the world allow us to see the world in a light that is peculiar to us, but they do not allow us to see things in the true light in which they themselves stand. From such a position, it is clearly not too great a step to the view, adopted later by Nietzsche, that the world which we experience is made up of layer upon layer of human interpretation or fiction.

From Hegel's perspective, however, Kant's position rests on an unjustified assumption: namely that what we ourselves produce through our own thought cannot be true of things in themselves, that what we bring to bear on the world cannot be true of the world itself. For Hegel, by contrast, our categories do not keep us at one remove from the structure of things; rather, they are the very preconditions which give us access to the structure of

things.[4] Our categories do not confine us within the alleged limits of human experience; they equip us to see and understand what *is*. We may come to the world predisposed by our reason and understanding to see it in a certain way, but the structure of our concepts and categories is identical with, and thus discloses, the structure of the world itself, because we ourselves are born into and so share the character of the world we encounter. This is not to say that all the particular judgements we make regarding, for example, causal connections in the world are correct, or that we always have a complete conception of what causality entails. But it does mean that we can rest assured that causality is a constituent feature of the world we inhabit, and not just a concept that we 'impose' on things.

Hegel thus agrees with Kant that we bring categories to bear on the world we perceive, but, in contrast to Kant, he maintains that those categories make possible genuine knowledge of the world itself and do not simply bring order into our own 'limited' human experience. For Hegel, it is only because our minds are conceptually prepared for the truth of things that we can gain access to that truth. The truth does not simply spring out at us; we must come to meet it in the right frame of mind. We must ourselves actively bring the truth to light, if that truth is to be known at all.

The second difference between Hegel and Kant is equally fundamental and concerns the question of history. For Kant, the conceptual framework through which we see the world is peculiar to us as rational beings and does not give us access to things 'in themselves'. However, that framework is fixed and universal for all finite rational beings. It constitutes the unchanging, timeless grid that gives to human experience a uniform conceptual structure. Different scientists and philosophers may have propounded different theories about the world, but the fundamental categories of human understanding with which these scientists and philosophers operated – categories such as unity, plurality, possibility or necessity – have remained constant, in Kant's view, throughout history. They were conceived by Aristotle in basically the same way as by Kant himself.

In Hegel's eyes, things are not so simple. Certain categories – being, for example – may well be universal; but others, such as cause and effect, or force and expression, are to be found, according to him, only in more advanced cultures. Furthermore, all concepts – those that are universal and those that are not – are conceived and understood by different ages and civilizations in different ways. The categories of thought are not fixed, eternal forms that remain unchanged throughout history, but are concepts that alter their meaning in history. The categories that, for Kant, constituted the permanent transcendental framework of knowledge thus constitute, for Hegel, the changing *historical* preconditions of knowledge.

But if this is so, then Hegel faces a considerable problem. We have seen that he differs from Kant in considering the categories to be the conditions which make knowledge of the world in itself possible. Yet, in his view, categories change in history, whereas the world – at least the natural world – is presumably always governed by the same laws. How are these two Hegelian claims to be reconciled? The solution to this problem, according to Hegel, is that the categories of thought do put us in contact with the world itself, but they do so more or less adequately in different ages and cultures. Hegel's conviction is that the categories as they are conceived in his own 'dialectical' philosophy are the categories in which the structure of being is fully revealed. These dialectical categories – which we will consider in more detail in the next chapter – thus represent the conceptual presuppositions which Hegel deems appropriate for the modern, fully self-conscious age. However, Hegel believes that the ways in which the categories have been understood by other civilizations, by earlier periods of European civilization and indeed by some of his own – less sophisticated – contemporaries in modern Europe also give us visions of the truth. It is just that

those visions are simpler, less refined, less developed than that offered by dialectical philosophy. In Hegel's view, what previous ages and civilizations have thought about the world has often been crude and primitive; indeed, it has often been inextricably fused with gross errors and distortions of the truth. But it has never been wholly misguided. However alien a civilization may seem to us, however 'irrational' its understanding of the world may be, something of the truth always shines through. So the fact that our conceptual presuppositions have changed in history does not of itself mean that none of them can put us in touch with the truth. Rather, it seems that historical changes in our categories are what have allowed the truth to become gradually more apparent and accessible.

Now if all consciousness rests on conceptual presuppositions, we can have no immediate access to a simple, independent standard such as 'fact' by reference to which we could compare and evaluate different sets of presuppositions. The criterion which enables us to decide between rival sets of presuppositions – if there is one – must thus be found within the conceptual presuppositions of consciousness itself. Precisely how Hegel judges between different conceptual frameworks or cultural viewpoints will be considered later in this chapter. What I wish to stress here is simply that he is conscious that different civilizations *do* have different conceptual presuppositions. Indeed, he maintains that all the major differences between civilizations are reducible to the differences in the categories they employ. A civilization whose conceptual presuppositions are not explicit, but are embedded in myth and poetry, will be different from one that has articulated its categories in a rational form in philosophy or science. Similarly, a civilization that sees the heavens and human society as peopled by free individuals will be different from one that conceives of the world as governed by an all-powerful natural or divine necessity. In Hegel's eyes, the way in which a civilization understands itself and its world gives that civilization a distinctive historical character. Significant changes within civilizations, and major developments within history as a whole, are not just the products of technological advances, therefore, or of population growth or chance discoveries; they are results of profound changes in the categories – in the 'metaphysics' – which govern human life. 'All revolutions, in the sciences no less than in world-history, originate solely from the fact that spirit, in order to understand and comprehend itself with a view to possessing itself, has changed its categories, comprehending itself more truly, more deeply, more intimately, and more in unity with itself.'[5]

Hegel's views bear a striking resemblance to the theory put forward by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Like Hegel, Kuhn is critical of the idea that experience provides us with a neutral stock of data that is permanently present for all to see. Natural science – which is Kuhn's main concern – is thus not simply a matter of collecting facts and giving ever more sophisticated interpretations of them. For Kuhn, as for Hegel, we do not first have immediate experience of things and then interpret them; we only have experience of things within a certain framework of conceptual presuppositions in the first place. What we see, therefore, we always see through what Kuhn calls a 'paradigm'. We are always *looking at* the same world, since the world of nature does not change with the emergence of new scientific theories; but what we *see* changes according to the paradigm we presuppose.

Since remote antiquity most people have seen one or another heavy body swinging back and forth on a string or chain until it finally comes to rest. To the Aristotelians, who believed that a heavy body is moved by its own nature from a higher position to a state of natural rest at a lower one, the swinging body was simply falling with difficulty. Constrained by the chain, it could achieve rest at its low point only after a tortuous motion and a considerable time. Galileo, on the other hand, looking at the swinging body, saw a pendulum, a body that almost succeeded in repeating the same motion over

and over again ad infinitum. And having seen that much, Galileo observed other properties of the pendulum as well and constructed many of the most significant and original parts of his new dynamics around them. From the properties of the pendulum, for example, Galileo derived his only full and sound arguments for the independence of weight and rate of fall, as well as for the relationship between vertical height and terminal velocity of motions down inclined planes. All these natural phenomena he saw differently from the way they had been seen before.[6]

For Kuhn, as for Hegel, intellectual revolutions are thus brought about not simply by the discovery of new facts, but by changes in the fundamental concepts which we employ to understand things, by the transformation of the network through which we deal with reality. Where Aristotle saw one world, Galileo, Newton and Einstein saw another one – one that did not simply spring out at them from what they observed, but that emerged from their new conceptual paradigm.

Hegel and Kuhn are clearly very different thinkers, however. Kuhn's concern is with the history of science, whereas Hegel develops a more all-embracing theory of historical change. Kuhn is concerned with specific changes in scientific outlook, often within relatively recent history; for example, since Galileo. Hegel, on the other hand, is concerned with the broader sweep of history and is as interested in the differences between the cultural perspectives of the ancient Chinese and the Romans as in those between scientists and philosophers working within the same civilization or period. Kuhn's account of the reasons behind the changes or 'shifts' in paradigm which interest him is also quite different from the account given by Hegel of the historical changes with which he is primarily concerned. New scientific paradigms for Kuhn are produced in response to inexplicable anomalies in nature encountered in older paradigms, and are accepted in part because they seem to explain more things than earlier paradigms did, or because they seem to explain familiar things better. However, changes in paradigm are also governed by what Kuhn calls 'aesthetic' features, such as the greater simplicity or economy of the new paradigm, by changes in scientific convention or custom and by historical accidents, such as fortuitous technical innovations. Moreover, although new paradigms are marked by a movement away from primitive beginnings towards greater articulation and specialization, there is, for Kuhn, no endpoint to the process of scientific development, no final arrival at the 'truth', because no theory, in his view, however sophisticated it may be, can ever anticipate or explain all the facts with which it might be confronted. Kuhn's model thus presents us with a potentially infinitely extendable development of new, more sophisticated paradigms.

By contrast, the profound changes that interest Hegel have been produced, in his view, not simply by our response to anomalies in nature, or by changes in convention, but by our becoming more conscious of our freedom and potential for self-determination, and more aware of the way in which that freedom is to be realized and fulfilled in the world. In contrast to the scientific exploration of nature, this process of growing *self*-awareness has an endpoint: namely when we become fully conscious of the fact that all human beings have the potential to be free, self-determining agents. From a Hegelian perspective Kuhn lacks sufficient consciousness of and interest in this pattern of increasing self-awareness that underlies the most important historical changes in our conceptual frameworks.

Yet, despite these differences, the positions of Hegel and Kuhn are similar. Hegel should be seen as a thinker who is just as sensitive to the historical character of human knowledge, and to the different historical preconceptions that underlie different civilizations and forms of life, as are many twentieth-century writers. He is acutely conscious that in order to understand other civilizations one must uncover the distinctive preconceptions that inform them. All civilizations are *human* civilizations and therefore will have some features

in common. All will have to cater for natural human needs, for example, such as the need for food and sexual satisfaction. However, all civilizations have their own distinctive way of thinking about things, in Hegel's view, and do not therefore share one universal, neutral framework of belief or understanding.

In stressing the unique historical specificity of different cultures in this way, it is likely that Hegel was greatly influenced by Goethe's one-time friend and collaborator, Johann Gottfried Herder. In an essay on Shakespeare published in 1773, Herder criticizes French classical dramatists and dramatic theorists for treating Aristotle's general characterizations of Greek tragedy as timeless, universal rules for tragedy which could still be applied in seventeenth-century France, rather than as descriptions of a historically specific form of Greek art. In Herder's view, by considering the Aristotelian 'unities' of time and action to be required by universal rules of tragedy, French dramatists such as Racine abstracted these principles from their historical context – that is, from their relation to the Greeks' understanding of their own history and mythology – and deprived them of their historical meaning. Shakespeare, on the other hand, was far more in tune with the spirit of the Greeks because he departed from Aristotle's alleged rules and gave expression to a specifically English view of the world, just as the Greeks had given expression to their own myths and values in their drama.[7]

For all his Enlightenment faith in reason, Hegel learned Herder's lesson well. For him, philosophical ideas, religious beliefs, aesthetic forms and political constitutions do not have a permanent, unchanging validity, but are the specific products of specific times and places and must be understood in the context of the time and place in which they emerged. In the lectures on the history of philosophy Hegel makes this point particularly clear.

> The specific form of a philosophy is thus not merely contemporaneous with the specific shape of the people among whom it arises. It is not merely contemporaneous with this people's constitution, form of government, moral and social life and the skills, habits and conventions involved, its undertakings and endeavours in art and science, its religions, wars, and foreign affairs. . . . Philosophy is the supreme blossom – the *concept* [*Begriff*] – of this entire shape of history, the consciousness and the spiritual essence of the whole situation, the spirit of the age as the spirit present and aware of itself in thought.[8]

This is not of course to say that, because a philosophy or a work of art is produced in one age, its interest is confined to that age. Philosophical principles and aesthetic values from a past age can be appreciated by us and can be recognized as intimating truths to which we subscribe, even if we can no longer produce works of art or think about the world exactly as that past age did. Hegel's position does mean, however, that we cannot simply take over the philosophical, religious, aesthetic or moral ideas and practices of another age or civilization lock, stock and barrel, any more than another civilization could simply adopt our practices. As far as philosophy is concerned, we may be able to incorporate some Platonic or Aristotelian principles into our present point of view and even continue to employ Aristotelian logic in many areas of enquiry (as we also still use Euclidian geometry), but there can now no longer be any fully fledged Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics or Epicureans, because we belong to a different and, in Hegel's opinion, freer and more sophisticated age. Similarly, although the artistic techniques and achievements of earlier ages may be passed down through history, be appropriated by each new age and, as in the case of Greek art, even be seen as unsurpassed, the aesthetic practices of today can no longer follow those of Aeschylus or Sophocles. And as far as the political constitution and the concrete organization of social life are concerned, Hegel believes that we inherit almost no permanent

legacy from previous civilizations, except for abstract and highly general principles such as that government should be just and that insight and virtue should guide the rulers.

Hegel's conviction that all the practices and institutions of a civilization are intimately related to one another marks his position as one of holism. Yet his view is not simply that the various aspects of a civilization have great influence on one another. He claims that the aspects of a civilization are united much more deeply than is implied by the concept of 'influence' because they all reflect and give expression to the same basic *character* of the culture. Hegel understands how complex and multifaceted individual civilizations can be and he does not underestimate that complexity. But he wants to highlight what differentiates each civilization – ancient Greek civilization, Roman civilization or modern English, French or German civilization. What gives a civilization its specific identity, he claims, is the principle which constitutes 'the common character [*Gepräge*] of its religion, its political constitution, its ethical life, its system of justice, its customs, and also of its science, art, and technical skill'.[9] This does not mean that everywhere we meet a general name such as the 'British' or the 'Irish', we necessarily encounter a distinct culture or civilization, but rather that it is only where we encounter a common *character* informing the beliefs and practices of a community, and where the community is thereby distinguished as a community, that we can talk of a unified society or culture.

Note that Hegel's view is different from what has sometimes been taken to be a similar position in the writings of Karl Marx. Marx – at least in the interpretation of his thought which I find most persuasive[10] – sees technological change, change in the material forces of production, as the primary determining factor in history. Ideology, belief and forms of social organization are products of such technological change for Marx. In Hegel's view, on the other hand, what is primary in a society is its general character or 'spirit', and the development of the technological power of a culture or society itself stems from the kind of character the society has. This is why different civilizations have made differing use of technological innovations, such as printing, which have been invented by different civilizations at different times. As Hegel points out in the lectures on the philosophy of history, the Chinese

> knew of many things at a time when the Europeans had not discovered them, but they did not understand how to make use of what they knew of, such as, for example, the magnet and the art of printing. . . . Gunpowder, too, they claim to have invented before the Europeans, but the Jesuits had to make their first cannons for them.[11]

Hegel does not claim that every detail of a civilization's history is explicable in terms of its general character. The attempt to establish what causes specific things to happen in a society requires specific historical or sociological study: such things cannot be accounted for by general theories about the civilization's make-up. However, Hegel thinks that in all the manifold events and interactions in a civilization's history the basic character of that civilization can be discerned, and it is that character which interests him. The most important thing to identify in a civilization, for Hegel, is thus not this or that specific occurrence or achievement, but the fundamental spirit which makes the civilization what it is. And this spirit or character is equated by Hegel not simply with the contingencies of race or geographical location – although these factors do play a role – but with a civilization's mode of *understanding* the world and itself. 'The legislature, the whole situation of a people is based solely upon the conception which its spirit has of itself, on the categories which it has.'[12]

Here one must guard against misinterpreting Hegel, however. He is not simply asserting that we are modelled according to our own self-image. He insists that a people's (or indeed an individual's) image of itself may not always be a just one. It is not the favoured image we have of ourselves that makes us what we are. Rather, our character is constituted by the fundamental self-understanding – the basic shared assumptions, some of which are conscious and some unconscious – manifest in our practices, creative activity and labour, as well as in our beliefs. To determine the character of a people, therefore, we must not only attend to what a people says about itself and the world, we must also examine how it lives and what it does. These fundamental values and assumptions are not a mere ideological superstructure built upon a material or physiological base, for Hegel, but constitute the substance of society.

This substance is manifest throughout the practices of a culture, but Hegel believes that it is seen most clearly in the culture's religion, for it is in the beliefs and practices of its religion that a people gives expression to what it reveres and values most highly. It is in its religion that a people reveals whether it respects the dignity of humanity or subordinates humanity to the dictates of a harsh natural or divine power, and whether it conceives of humanity as capable of compassion for others or as born to aggression or even cruelty. 'Religion', Hegel says in the philosophy of history, 'is the place where a people defines for itself what it holds to be true.' In part this means what a people thinks about nature, but more importantly it means what it holds to be true of humanity itself. In religion, therefore, we give expression to our own fundamental self-understanding, to the categories through which we comprehend our own spiritual life. Indeed, Hegel says that it is the same conception of spirituality or of individuality that 'in religion . . . is represented, revered and enjoyed as God; in art . . . is depicted as an image and intuition [*Anschauung*]; and in philosophy . . . is recognised and comprehended by thought'. And because religion, art and philosophy give expression to the same substantial self-understanding of a people – to the same conception of truth – they must belong together within one culture and one state. 'This particular form of state can only exist in conjunction with this particular religion, and only this particular philosophy and this particular art can exist within this state.'[13]

Hegel is very concerned that we should not be misled by superficial similarities between the religions or philosophies of different cultures. We should not be seduced, as some of his contemporaries were, into saying that Chinese philosophy, the philosophy of the Eleatics (such as Parmenides) and Spinozism are all 'basically' the same, because all are founded on the principle of the unity of being. In his view, such judgements overlook what is specific about Chinese, Eleatic and Spinozistic conceptions of unity and disregard the specific cultural contexts from which these philosophies emerged. Like Wittgenstein, therefore, Hegel wishes us to eschew abstract generalizations and to attend to forms of life in their particularity.

When considering another civilization, we can interpret its myths and explain meanings that were not explicit within the civilization itself. Or we may, as in the history of philosophy, attend only to the principles that have been explicitly articulated by past philosophers themselves. But we must always be sensitive to, and seek to bring out, the specific problems and questions, beliefs and presuppositions that occupied the particular civilization in question. We must thus not seek in the writings of an ancient philosopher more than he can deliver, and so must not seek in the writings of the Greek philosopher Thales, for example, the kind of principle which only a Jewish or Christian theologian could have entertained. In Hegel's judgement, we must not expect that the questions which interest us will necessarily find answers in philosophers who belong to a different cultural world, because our questions stem from our civilization and our beliefs – from our 'paradigm', to

use Kuhn's word – and would not necessarily even be intelligible to someone from a different culture. There are no unambiguous common standards of judgement which could be agreed upon by all ages and civilizations, therefore – except such principles as that we all need to eat – because we are all children of our time and understand things in the terms which our civilization and time permit.

To this extent Hegel shares the views of twentieth-century writers like Kuhn or Richard Rorty who stress the absence of a 'permanent, neutral, ahistorical, commensurating vocabulary' in human history.[14] Yet Hegel differs from such writers in one very important respect. For Kuhn, paradigm changes are ultimately the result of non-rational factors, such as shifts in convention. The developments in history which Hegel examines are, likewise, clearly not the product of purely rational argument. Christianity did not conquer the world through the power of its syllogisms. The early Christians did not refer to a common set of principles that they shared with the Romans, Jews and Greeks and *demonstrate* that theirs was the religion which was most rational or which did most justice to some common human experience of the world. Rather, Christianity ushered in a profound shift in human self-understanding which was not self-evidently compelling to all, indeed which could only appear foolish to most Romans, Greeks and Jews. Yet, although Christians and their predecessors may have had different and incompatible fundamental assumptions, Hegel believes that there was in fact a compelling reason for the adoption of the new religion, namely that Christianity represents a higher and more profound form of human self-awareness or self-consciousness.[15]

This is where Hegel and more recent writers like Kuhn and Rorty diverge. Hegel argues that the most important changes in history have involved shifts in the categories through which human beings understand their world, but that these have not been mere shifts in historical convention. They have been shifts brought about by humanity's growing self-awareness.

It is important to stress straight away, however, that Hegel does not see all change in viewpoint or all historical change as the result of increasing human self-awareness. Much in history, for him, is the product of custom or of contingent developments, and much therefore indicates no particular advance in human self-understanding. Some occurrences in history in fact testify to nothing other than humanity's enduring capacity for barbarism and destruction. The actions of the Mongol hordes under Genghis Khan and Tamburlaine, for example, are understood by Hegel in this way. Hegel thus clearly does not believe that we are all marching gloriously to full self-awareness in all that we do. Yet he does believe that within the manifold vicissitudes of human history there is an identifiable strand of development from humanity's initial, primitive self-understanding to the much more enlightened perspective of the modern age.

Hegel justifies this belief by examining what he sees as the fundamental characters or principles informing different historical civilizations and by comparing them with one another. He does not claim to give an exhaustive account of the civilizations he studies, but he does believe that he can identify the fundamental beliefs of a civilization which enable us to situate it historically in relation to other civilizations. What he looks for in a civilization is the extent to which it is or is not conscious of human self-determination or *freedom*.

## Comparing Civilizations

The main difference, for Hegel, between African and Asiatic civilizations on the one hand, and the civilizations of ancient Greece, ancient Rome and the modern world on the other,

is that the latter were and are informed by a lively consciousness of the significance of individual freedom, whereas in the former (at least prior to the influence of the Europeans) such consciousness has been largely dormant or indeed wholly lacking. In Hegel's view, this is a difference in fundamental outlook, and it determines the whole structure of the respective civilizations. Thus, from a Hegelian perspective, because no clear consciousness of individual freedom was alive in ancient China or ancient India, those civilizations did not provide for the freedom of political representation which was claimed in the Greek city-states or in the Roman republic. A civilization in which people are not *conscious* of themselves as free, therefore – that is, a civilization in which the claim to freedom is not made – *is* not free, in Hegel's view, and will not develop the institutions which human freedom requires. 'The Orientals do not yet know that the spirit or man as such is free in himself', Hegel tells us. And 'because they do not know this, they are not themselves free'.[16]

The China of the first Emperor, Qin Shihuang, was a highly bureaucratized, hierarchical society which allowed no room for the freedom of self-determination which Western European civilizations have claimed, except, perhaps, in the case of the Emperor himself. Moreover, whatever changes have since occurred in China – and Hegel does not deny that changes have occurred – they do not constitute any evidence that the spirit of individual self-determination which we prize so highly has played any significant role in Chinese history. Even in ancient Greece, where individual freedom was claimed and given expression in art, religion and political life, the conception of freedom with which the Greeks operated was, Hegel thinks, a limited one. It was a freedom to be enjoyed by the few, not by all. Greek art thus celebrated the noble heroes who stood out above all others, and Greek democracy, even at its height, only gave representation to some and was able to coexist with slavery. The Greeks and the Romans valued human freedom – albeit in subtly different ways – but they both confined that freedom to certain privileged groups. Only with the coming of Christianity, Hegel maintains, did people come to recognize that all human beings are in principle free because all are equal in the eyes of God. Of course, the acceptance of the Christian religion in Europe did not bring about the abolition of slavery and the realization of political freedom overnight. Nevertheless, the history of Western civilization is understood by Hegel to be the gradual process of developing the Christian recognition of the universal freedom and dignity of humanity before God into the social, political and ethical reality of the modern rational, constitutional state. European history is thus the process of matching the Christian demand for universal human freedom with the secular claim to universal human rights – a claim which grew out of the religious demand for freedom and which is characteristic of the modern period.

In Hegel's view, therefore, certain shifts in cultural perspective have resulted not merely from a *change* in human self-understanding, but rather from a *deepening* of human self-understanding. Such shifts constitute, for him, a progressive development towards the truth. They represent humanity's increasing awareness of the essential nature of our own character, activity and thought – a growing self-awareness that brings with it a more adequate understanding of the world around us.

Once again, we should be careful not to misunderstand Hegel. He does not presuppose that there is a given, fixed human nature or immutable human 'soul' – analogous to external, physical nature – which we gradually represent more and more accurately in our theories. For Hegel, there is no given, immutable human self, no 'entity' called the self which would be available for scientific scrutiny. There is only the human *activity* of producing our world, of producing or determining different forms of social life from different forms of philosophical, religious, aesthetic or ethical self-understanding. But, for Hegel, that activity of historical self-production, self-construction and self-determination *is* thus what we

are. It is the universal form of all human activity, of all human life. Different cultures differ only in the degree to which they are conscious of themselves as self-productive and self-determining; that is, only in the degree to which they are explicitly, self-consciously and thus *freely* self-determining.

This does not mean that there is after all an agreed and acknowledged standard by which civilizations can be compared. Not all civilizations understand themselves in the same way and not all recognize or accept that human beings create their own identity and world. Some civilizations understand themselves as caught up in a fixed natural order (Hegel often cites the Indian caste system as an example), whereas other civilizations are much more confident of their ability and power to create their own world (Hegel sees this confidence as a characteristic of modern civil society in particular). Nevertheless, all civilizations, in Hegel's understanding, do in fact produce their own world, whether they do so consciously or not, because in all civilizations the way in which people see themselves fundamentally determines the social practices which they develop.

Essentially, human beings are nothing but the activity of producing and determining themselves and their identity; they are self-producing, self-determining beings. Human beings are born into a particular geographical and historical environment with certain natural characteristics, so they do not create themselves, as it were, out of nothing. However, mankind's natural constitution and specific historical and geographical context, while providing the conditions from which we must start, do not fix for all time what human beings can become. Rather, mankind's character changes as its self-understanding changes. When human beings become more conscious of themselves as self-determining beings, or, indeed, when a once sophisticated level of human self-understanding is submerged by that of a more primitive people and forgotten – as happened, at least in part, to classical learning during the Dark Ages – then the nature of the social, political and cultural world which human beings create and inhabit is transformed. The fundamental advances in history – the emergence of the classical world and the dawn of Christianity, for example – are thus the result, for Hegel, of mankind's becoming more aware of itself as freely self-determining and thereby actually coming to be more freely self-determining in history.

All peoples and civilizations are in fact self-productive and produce a different social order through the particular way in which they understand themselves and their world; but not all civilizations are fully conscious of the extent to which they are self-productive. Thus, there is a criterion for assessing the relative merits of different civilizations, namely the degree to which they are conscious of themselves as they are, as active and self-determining. But this criterion cannot be a generally acknowledged and accepted standard of evaluation, since only those civilizations which do evince a high degree of self-awareness will recognize that mankind is essentially self-productive. The criterion of evaluation that Hegel establishes is thus not a neutral standard available to all which would allow a neutral comparative evaluation of different civilizations. It is a standard that is only available to those civilizations that are in fact conscious of human self-determination.

Clearly, there is an asymmetry between civilizations, for Hegel, that makes his model of historical change different from that of Kuhn or Rorty. For Hegel, the fact that there may be no agreed standard of judgement in all cultures or forms of life does not mean that rival cultural (or religious or philosophical) viewpoints are incommensurable, or that they are equal partners in a conversation. In Hegel's eyes, there is an absolute standard of judgement which is laid down precisely by the fact that human beings are self-productive, historical beings with no agreed universal values or standards. But this absolute standard of

judgement can only be known to those civilizations which are *aware* that they are historically self-productive.

But how can this make sense? How can different civilizations have fundamentally different conceptions of themselves yet not be incommensurable? Hegel's answer to this question is that, despite the absence of common assumptions between civilizations, a more self-aware civilization can *prove* its greater understanding of human 'nature' and potential and its consequent greater strength. It does so by making space for degrees of self-consciousness and freedom that other civilizations cannot contain (at least not without huge and sometimes destructive upheaval). Hegel claims, for example, that democracy in ancient Greece was founded on a deep sense of the identity of the interests of the individual and the community. In democratic Greek city-states – Hegel has fifth-century Athens in mind – individuals took a free and active part in debating public affairs; but they did so largely in a common spirit of upholding the customs and practices of the community. What was right and proper was thus not determined by individual reflection or personal conscience, but was embodied in the living customs and practices of the community in which individuals participated. The strength of Greek democracy, for Hegel, lay in this shared sense of the value of common practices and institutions, which meant that individuals drew their moral ideas from their ethical customs rather than from autonomous, individual conscience. Once the principle of critical, individual reflection entered Greek life, however – Hegel points to the Sophists and Socrates as the major philosophical sources of this principle – the immediate bond between the individual and the community was weakened. People were encouraged to follow their own convictions, to seek guidance in their own critical reflection and ideas, rather than in established common practices. Hegel argues that this principle of subjective reflection undermined the trust that the Greeks had placed in their institutions and in leaders such as Themistocles and Pericles, and therefore ultimately undermined the ethical basis for their particular forms of democratic cooperation. Thucydides revealed his awareness of this development, Hegel tells us, in his complaint that citizens were coming to believe that things were going wrong if *they* were not personally involved in them in some way.[17] In Hegel's view, therefore, the principle of critical freedom, which reached its height in the great philosophers of the fourth century, such as Plato and Aristotle, posed a serious threat to Greek religion and Greek democracy because it no longer allowed belief and action to be guided by custom, but subjected everything to critical scrutiny. The reason why Socrates was put to death by the Athenians, according to Hegel, was thus that the principle of critical inquiry which he espoused proved to be revolutionary and subversive in the Athenian state.

The flourishing of free, rational thought in philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle was magnificent, Hegel says, but it was not compatible with the equal magnificence of Greek democracy. For all its grandeur, therefore, Greek culture was not able to accommodate this new sense of subjective human freedom – the dawn of reflective, critical thought – and remain the splendid political and aesthetic culture that it had been in the fifth century. Rome, however, and, to a much greater extent, Christian civilization have been able to incorporate and indeed build their strength upon this subjective, critical freedom. In fact Hegel believes that it is precisely this subjective freedom – which proved to be the ruin of ancient Greece – 'which constitutes the principle, and the peculiar form, of freedom in our world, [and] which forms the absolute foundation of our state and our religious life'.[18] He believes that the emergence of humanity's sense of its own freedom of critical reflection marks a real development or progress in human self-awareness, but that Greek culture as it was constituted in fifth-century Athens could not accommodate this progress and remain what it was. Modern Christian, constitutional states, on the other hand, can

accommodate that freedom – indeed they derive their strength from that freedom and from their ability to integrate it into the 'substantive unity' of the community and the state[19] – and thus in this respect at least have proved their historical superiority over ancient Greece.

Even though all civilizations do not share the same world-view, therefore, they can be evaluated by comparing the extent to which they can incorporate new levels of human self-consciousness and freedom. The more self-conscious civilization, according to Hegel, can thus prove its greater self-awareness to another, less advanced civilization with which it coexists by showing that less advanced civilization aspects of human freedom and potential of which that civilization either is not conscious or has not taken full account. In the modern world, Hegel considered the English in particular to have taken on this educative role and to be the 'missionaries' of modern European civilization to the rest of the world – missionaries who are driven by interests of commerce and trade 'to form connections with barbarous peoples, to awaken needs within them and to stimulate their industry, and first and foremost to establish among them the conditions necessary for commerce, viz. the relinquishing of violence, a respect for property, and hospitality'.[20] Yet Hegel is well aware that the moment the more advanced civilization makes the less advanced civilization share in and adopt its higher or deeper level of human self-understanding, it transforms that civilization completely. The less advanced civilization can be shown what it had previously not recognized; to that extent a more advanced civilization can *prove* the advantage it has over its neighbours. But the less advanced civilization can only incorporate what it had previously not recognized by radically altering its way of life, as we ourselves see only too clearly today, as Third World countries often struggle painfully to adopt Western freedoms and at the same time seek to avoid the evident excesses of Western life and hold on to their own traditional values and beliefs. In Hegel's hard-headed, in some ways tragic but to my mind deeply realistic view, such Third World countries face an extremely difficult road ahead, because no civilization can become more self-aware and more free and also expect to retain all of its old values and practices. To that extent, for Hegel, civilizations are indeed incommensurable.

It should be evident from what has been said so far that Hegel's philosophy offers a solution to one of the most important questions occupying philosophers today: the question whether our modern consciousness of the changing historical character of human existence is reconcilable or compatible with the traditional philosophical belief in, and search for, the *true* nature of humanity. In the lectures on the history of philosophy Hegel poses the problem of the relation of history and truth in the following way:

> The first thought that may strike us in connection with the history of philosophy is that this subject itself involves at once an inner contradiction, because philosophy aims at knowing what is imperishable, eternal and absolute [*an und für sich*]. Its aim is *truth*. But history relates the sort of thing which has existed at one time but at another has perished, superseded by its successor. If we start from the fact that truth is eternal, then it cannot fall into the sphere of the transient and it has no history. But if it has a history, and history is only a display of a series of past forms of knowledge, then truth is not to be found in it, since truth is not something past.[21]

This at least is how ordinary reasoning conceives of the matter: if truth is to be absolute, it can't have a history, and if it is to have a history, it can't be absolute. Nietzsche, for example, insisted that what has a history cannot be defined,[22] and many writers, from pragmatists like John Dewey to neo-Marxists like Theodor Adorno to Aristotelian neo-Hegelians like Alasdair MacIntyre, have welcomed Hegel's sense of history while rejecting

his 'metaphysical' concern for absolute truth. It is invariably the case in fact that declared critics of metaphysical oppositions and dualities, like Nietzsche, find the opposition between history and absolute truth to be the main one they are unable to overcome or undermine. They are usually led to drop one side of the opposition – absolute truth – and to stick with history. But, from Hegel's perspective, the opposition between history and absolute truth is a false one, and the reasons for rejecting absolute truth (either in the guise of philosophy or religion) in the name of history are therefore spurious. For Hegel, the absolute truth of humanity is that human beings have no fixed, given identity, but rather determine and produce their identity and their world in history, and that they gradually come to the recognition of this fact in history. History is indeed essentially the process whereby mankind becomes aware of itself as free, self-determining and therefore historical. The absolute truth of humanity is that we are historical, and the history of humanity is the process of coming to recognize our absolute, historical character. History and truth are thus completely inseparable for Hegel, and it is not possible to drop or reject either term.

For Hegel, consciousness of human truth and consciousness of human historicity are not incompatible, because consciousness of human truth is essentially consciousness of human self-determination in history and of the historical process whereby humanity comes to recognize itself as essentially historical and self-determining. This connection between the truth of humanity and human historicity is not merely contingent. If human beings are indeed historically self-determining, they cannot simply *be* this, but must actively *determine* themselves in history to be self-determining. In other words, we must make ourselves into self-determining beings in history, because we are self-determining, self-*producing* beings. However, if we always already *are* self-determining beings, then the process of making ourselves into self-determining beings cannot simply bring into being something which is not already a reality. Rather, it must be the process of making us into what we already are. To put the point a little less paradoxically, this process involves humanity making itself *explicitly* what it already is *implicitly*. This means that we must come to be self-consciously what we already are 'unconsciously'. Hegel thinks that all the major developments in history as he understands it are to be explained in terms of this process.

> What is implicit in man must become an object to him, come into his consciousness; then it becomes *for* him and he becomes aware of himself, explicit to himself. In this way he duplicates himself: first, he *is* reason and thinking, but only implicitly; then, secondly, he thinks, makes his implicit self into an object of his thought. . . . What was *potentia* comes into appearance *actu*. On further reflection we see that the man who was potentially rational and now makes this rationality the object of his thought has got no further than he was at the beginning. What a man brings before his mind he potentially *is*. His *potentia* is maintained and remains the same; the content [what he has become] is nothing new. This seems to be a useless duplication, yet the difference between *potentia* and *actus* is tremendous. All knowing, learning, insight, science, even all action has no other interest but to bring out, produce, make objective, what was potential and inner. . . . The whole difference in world-history arises from and depends on this difference. All men are rational, and the formal side of this rationality is that man is free; this is his nature, inherent in the essence of man. And yet there has been, and in some cases still is, slavery in many lands, and the population is content with this. Orientals, for example, are men and, as such, are implicitly free, and yet they are still not [explicitly free]; they have no consciousness of freedom because they have all submitted to a despotism, whether religious or political. The whole difference between Orientals and peoples amongst whom slavery does not prevail is that the latter know that they are free and are aware of it explicitly. The Orientals are free too – implicitly – but they are not free in fact. The tremendous difference in the world-historical situation is whether men are only implicitly free or whether they know that it is their fundamental truth, nature or vocation to live as free individuals.[23]

History is thus the process whereby human beings come to new levels of awareness of their freedom, of their productive, active nature, and thereby produce new forms of social and political life. The human activity of self-production is, therefore, at the same time the process of self-discovery and self-revelation – a fusion of making oneself and finding oneself, of acting and of coming to know, which is perhaps best expressed in English by the word 'self-realization'.

## Self-consciousness and Historical Progress

What I have said so far should have made it clear that Hegel's philosophy is a profound and challenging body of thought that has important ideas to contribute to current debates. However, I have given only the barest outline of Hegel's understanding of history and the historical nature of truth, and that outline needs to be fleshed out rather more if the new student of Hegel is to avoid certain popular misinterpretations of his thought.

First of all, it is important to point out that, although Hegel believes that history is the process whereby humanity gradually awakens to itself, he is not the naive Enlightenment optimist caricatured by Nietzsche or Schopenhauer. He does not regard the process of awakening as a smooth, continuous development in which new levels of human self-understanding just grow out of one another. The civilization of the Romans, in Hegel's view, was able to contain the principle of subjective particularity which precipitated the decline of Greece, but Roman civilization did not simply 'develop' out of Greek civilization. Rome owed much to the achievements of the Greeks and was influenced by them in many ways, but it had its own distinctive roots. The only area of history in which Hegel does see a continuous development is in the emergence and growth of modern European states within Western Christendom. Hegel's claim, then, is not that there is one simple, continuous tradition which constitutes 'history', but rather that within history we see a series of civilizations – the main ones being the Persian Empire, Greece, Rome and Western Christian civilization – each with its own distinctive roots, but each able to appropriate the achievements of its predecessor and accommodate a level of self-consciousness and freedom which its predecessor could not accommodate.

Nor, indeed, is this progress in human self-consciousness quite the steady, unproblematic development which some have understood Hegel to have in mind. Roman civilization, for Hegel, had a much more developed sense of the claims of the private individual than Greek civilization (at least, than fifth-century Athens), and this is made manifest in the institutions of Roman law. Rome thus developed a concept of the formal rights of private citizens which surpassed anything the Greeks had achieved. But this advance was purchased at a heavy cost. In Hegel's understanding, the Roman concern for the formal rights of the particular subject or citizen degenerated all too easily into a willingness to indulge private interest and self-will, and Rome was consequently not able to develop the sense of ethical community which was the glory of Greek democracy at its height. Rome in fact came to manifest the worst excesses of selfishness, force and even bestiality. Rome's artistic achievement is also much inferior to that of the Greeks in Hegel's view (as, of course, in the view of many others). In the transition from the cultural supremacy of the Greeks to that of the Romans, therefore, the world gained and lost something at the same time. The history of Christian civilization, in Hegel's understanding, shows a similar combination of progress and regression – the degeneration of the Catholic Church which followed upon the extension of Church power in the Middle Ages and which led to the Reformation, and the Terror which followed the French Revolution being perhaps his most

important examples. But Hegel never claimed that progress in human self-consciousness is a smooth or easy affair. After all, he called the history of the world 'the slaughter-bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed'.[24] The point, for him, is not to present a bland, idealized view of history, but to consider where in all this historical confusion and bloodshed progress does actually show itself, and to what extent massive historical upheavals – such as the Thirty Years War between Protestant and Catholic states in seventeenth-century Germany or the French Revolution – were the tragic results of *advances* in human religious or political self-understanding. And, rightly or wrongly, Hegel believes that he can see progress in these upheavals, despite the horrors which they brought in their wake, since the Thirty Years War led to the consolidation of Protestantism in Germany (and Protestantism, for Hegel, is a more profound and liberating form of Christianity than Catholicism), and since the French Revolution, whatever else it showed about our capacity for exercising terror in the name of freedom, demonstrated the powerful modern desire to remould our political world in accordance with the principles of free, rational self-determination.

Another misconception of Hegel's philosophy of history, fostered to a certain extent by Marx, is that he sees the development of human self-consciousness as a purely intellectual matter, as simply the development of human ideas. Hegel does indeed say that the thought of the early Greek philosopher Anaxagoras was 'epoch-making', because it introduced into human consciousness the idea that there is reason in nature,[25] and he clearly thinks that the philosophy of Descartes had enormous historical influence too. But, in his view, the changes in categories, and the consequent reformation of the human spirit, that underlie all revolutionary historical transformation involve changes in our material interests and practical, socio-economic activity (as well as in religious belief) as much as changes in intellectual or philosophical perspective. Having said that, history, for Hegel, is not primarily (as it is for Marx) the development of material productive power, but is 'the spirit's effort to attain *knowledge* [*Wissen*] of what it is in itself'.[26] In history, human beings gradually come to recognize and will the truth about themselves (and the world), and it is this that brings about changes in both our beliefs and our practices.

Note that this is not a claim about everything that has happened in the past, but a claim about what is to be understood by the word 'history'. What Hegel is arguing is that only those sequences of events which have been brought about by the development of human self-consciousness and by the pursuit of consciously articulated goals can really count as *historical*. But why should Hegel define history in this way? The answer lies in the distinction he draws between natural and historical change.

Natural change, for Hegel, is determined by unstated natural laws (and by certain contingencies). The laws of the movements of the planets are not written up on the heavens, and natural objects such as planets do not obey such laws consciously or purposefully. Indeed, whatever purposes may be fulfilled in nature, they are never pursued as self-conscious goals.

History, on the other hand, is different. The word 'history', Hegel points out, means both what happens and the narrative record of what happens, and, he adds, this coincidence of meanings is not arbitrary. 'We must . . . suppose', he says, 'that the writing of history and the actual deeds and events of history make their appearance simultaneously, and that they emerge together from a common source'.[27] Historical change or activity, therefore, is self-recording, self-narrating, self-interpreting activity; that is, *self-conscious* activity. Change is historical when those involved in it understand it as fitting into a narrative scheme of things, when they are conscious of its having historical significance.

Historical activity is self-conscious activity, for Hegel, not only because it is self-narrating, but also because it is directed at the achievement of deliberately pursued, self-conscious ends. And in Hegel's understanding, people come to pursue genuinely self-conscious, as opposed to merely natural, ends when they have formed themselves into communities which are held together not merely by the natural bonds of family affection, or by custom, but by self-consciously determined laws. Such is the case in states. A state, for Hegel, is a body of people held together by consciously willed general laws, rather than mere force or natural association. States may be created by the forceful unification of people, but they must be sustained by some commonly acknowledged conscious purpose or identity if they are to count as true states. Now, it is precisely because states are not based on the merely natural bonds of kinship, but are held together above all by a *consciousness* of a common social or political identity and purpose, that historical narrative is required to objectify and preserve the achievements of the state and thus consolidate its sense of identity.

> It is the state which first supplies a content which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps produce it. Instead of the merely subjective dictates of authority – which may suffice for the needs of the moment – a commonwealth in the process of coalescing and raising itself up to the position of a state requires formal commandments and laws, i.e. general and universally valid directives. It thereby creates a record of, and interest in, intelligible, determinate, and – in their results – enduring deeds and events, on which Mnemosyne, for the benefit of the perennial aim which underlies the present form and constitution of the state, is impelled to confer a lasting memory.[28]

The writing of history thus contributes to the preservation and consolidation of the self-conscious identity of the state by giving it a sense of where it has come from, what it is essentially concerned with and where it is going; that is, by enabling a state to develop a *historical* identity which nature alone does not provide.

Historical change is change that is produced by our self-conscious pursuit of the goals of the self-conscious communities – the states – in which we live. History, in other words, is the working out of the conflicts, clashes and interactions between and within different states. It is clear, therefore, that history, as Hegel conceives it – history as the progressive development of humanity towards greater self-understanding – is inseparable from the *political* history of human development towards greater self-consciousness and freedom in states. It is not the history of our intellectual – i.e. scientific, aesthetic or philosophical – achievements in abstraction from their social and political context. Shifts in human self-understanding, which entail shifts in our religious, aesthetic, philosophical and ethical viewpoints, thus also involve the transfer of political and historical power from one state – such as Greece – which reflects a particular level of human self-consciousness to another state – such as Rome – which reflects a more advanced level of self-consciousness. Or, alternatively, as happened in the development of modern Europe, shifts in human self-understanding, such as the transition from the Mediaeval world to the post-Renaissance and post-Reformation world, involve enormous social and political upheavals within one civilization and within individual states. Hegel's view of history is not therefore as 'idealistic' as it might first appear. Rather, it entails understanding major *political*, *social* and *economic* transformations in history in the light of major reformations or developments in human self-consciousness. Technological developments in history also play an important role for Hegel in the transformation of human life – witness the importance he sees in the invention of printing in Europe in the fifteenth century – but such technological innovations, in his view, themselves derive their power to change our lives from the social and political expectations of the people who are able to exploit them. The course of history is

thus determined not by technological advances alone, but by our growing consciousness of our power and freedom of self-determination.

## History, Truth and Relativism

Hegel is often referred to as the greatest philosopher of German Idealism, but it should be clear from what I have been saying that his view of history is not 'idealistic' if that term is meant to suggest either that he has a bland, optimistic theory of historical progress or that he reduces history to the history of ideas. Nor is Hegel an 'idealist' in the manner of Kant, since he clearly believes that human beings live in a world that is intrinsically spatio-temporal and that space and time are not mere forms of intuition that have no reality apart from human sensibility. Hegel is an 'idealist' (in his philosophy of history, at least) because he does not understand human character or identity to be some fixed, immutable 'reality', but rather conceives of human beings as actively producing their character and identity in history. Human beings have a true, essential nature according to him, but it is not 'an essence that is already finished and complete before its manifestation, keeping itself aloof behind its host of appearances, but an essence which is truly actual only through the specific forms of its necessary self-manifestation'.[29] As Hegel puts it in the lectures on the philosophy of history,

> the spirit is essentially active; it makes itself into that which it is in itself, into its own deed, its own creation [*Werk*]. In this way, it becomes its own object, and has its own existence before it. And it is the same with the spirit of a nation; it is a specific spirit which makes itself into an actual world which now exists objectively in its religion, its ritual, its customs, constitution and political laws, and in the whole range of its institutions, events and deeds. That is its creation – that *is* this people.[30]

The goal of historical activity, for Hegel, is thus for human beings to become conscious of themselves as freely and historically self-productive and self-determining – not something fixed by nature – and for them to build their world in accordance with that recognition. In other words, 'the entire development of the spirit is nothing else but the raising of itself to its truth'.[31]

Here we see the great subtlety of Hegel's historical conception of truth. Becoming aware of the true character of human existence does not mean for him simply becoming conscious of a given, fixed reality or gaining a more accurate picture of what we were like at the beginning of history. Rather, it means learning that what we are is the process of producing and determining ourselves. Furthermore, it means learning that this process of self-production is itself the process of coming to *understand* more clearly that we are self-producing beings. Indeed, we learn that it is above all through changes in our self-understanding that we actually make ourselves into and so *become* something new: we produce ourselves precisely through developing a fuller understanding that we do so. At the culmination of history, human beings recognize more explicitly than in earlier ages that they are and have always been free, self-productive beings; but they also realize that this more explicit recognition has itself made new beings of us and has produced a new world. What we achieve at the culmination of history is thus a full consciousness of what we *are* and a full consciousness of what we have *become* through understanding what we are.

History and truth necessarily belong together in Hegel's philosophy, (a) because our true nature is to come to understand ourselves through a process of historical development and to produce a new world in the process, and (b) because genuinely historical, as opposed to

natural, change is generated by our gradual awakening to our true nature. Consciousness of the truth is thus crucial to historical existence, for Hegel, since the deepening of such consciousness is what drives history forward. Equally, it is only when we have become fully aware of our true character that we are fully conscious of our historicity and of our real historical possibilities. This, of course, is where Hegel is out of line with a certain relativist trend in philosophy which has been fashionable at various times since his death. Nietzsche, for example, can only see the concept of absolute truth as restricting humanity within one limited perspective and so believes that doing away with the concept will liberate humanity to a more open future with new, infinitely varying possibilities. However, to Hegelian eyes, Nietzschean 'openness' seems dangerously vague and indeterminate. We are genuinely freed to our human possibilities, for Hegel, only when we know who or what we truly are, when we recognize that we are free, self-determining, historical beings and when we understand fully the form that our freedom must *necessarily* take if it is to be real freedom. A religious or philosophical consciousness of the truth that, for example, human beings must give up clinging to their narrow self-interest in order to find freedom with others does not confine us within one 'limited' human perspective or stand in the way of human self-realization, but rather makes real freedom possible by preventing us from destroying ourselves in the name of a false image of freedom.

Hegel recognizes, however, that the rejection of truth and the privileging of individual, partial or local 'opinions' has become a 'great sign of the times'.[32] What he had in mind in his own day was what he took to be the championing of subjective piety and intuition at the expense of reason by writers such as Jacobi, theologians such as Schleiermacher and Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Hegel would have seen the danger coming from open subjectivism – above all in the arts – and from the historical relativism associated, for example, with certain forms of pragmatism. By stressing the conventional element in belief above all else, such writers as Richard Rorty argue that no absolute justification for our beliefs can be given or is even desirable. In Rorty's view, we should be less concerned with making grandiose claims to truth and more concerned with fostering 'conversation' between different perspectives. In Hegel's view, however, although many of the variations in human outlook and belief are the result of different geographical conditions and of different national or local conventions – factors that cannot be given any ultimate justification – the prime factor determining the outlook and character of a people is the level of its self-consciousness and self-understanding. From a Hegelian perspective, an unwillingness to make definitive judgements about human practices betrays a wilful refusal to recognize that there are *necessary* constraints imposed upon us by our essential nature as self-determining beings.

What many critics of Hegel fail to grasp is that he is not a historical thinker despite his retention of the idea of truth, but *because* of his retention of the idea of truth. Hegel understands human beings to be *essentially* self-determining and therefore historical beings. Like Herder, he is a deeply historical thinker who believes that we should seek to understand particular cultures and particular thinkers in their own terms, and not by reference to some abstract, neutral standard. Indeed, where possible, he believes that we should try to employ the 'actual words' of the people we are considering.[33] We should therefore always enter into the strength of our opponents' terms and try to grasp the point that they want to make, rather than simply interpret our opponents' interests in the light of our own. On the other hand, Hegel does not believe that we should give up looking for truth in what past ages or other civilizations have said. Where it is clear that one civilization's self-understanding is more advanced – more free – than that of another, then we should not be afraid to say so. This involves no doctrine of 'cultural imperialism' or 'racial superiority'. (Hegel does not

give particular priority to racial differences between people because, in his view, human self-consciousness is what determines a civilization's character, and this self-consciousness can be changed and developed through education.) Hegel's position does, however, commit him to the view that certain civilizations are more advanced than others and that the culture and civilization of the Western Christian tradition is the most profoundly self-aware and thus most advanced in history.

But is this not an intolerably smug, Eurocentric position? Is Hegel blind to the unmistakable deficiencies of the modern world? Not at all. Hegel was acutely concerned with the problem of modern subjectivism and, like the Scottish Enlightenment before him and Marx and Engels after him, he was acutely concerned with the problems of poverty and the division of labour which modern European industrial power has brought in its wake. However, he did not think that such problems expose fundamental deficiencies in modern society or in Western civilization, but rather that they result from our failure to grasp the true nature of the freedom to which we lay claim. For Hegel, post-Reformation Western civilization has recognized that the nature and purpose of humanity is to be fully free and self-determining. In the modern age, therefore, we lay claim to freedom of speech, freedom of representation, freedom of conscience, freedom of national self-determination and a host of other freedoms, in a way that no other civilization has ever done before. We also extend that claim to freedom over the whole globe and proclaim the right of all peoples to self-determination – sometimes with tremendous consequences. Out of this modern claim to freedom there have emerged in Western European civilization – and in this respect Hegel sees America as an extension of Europe – social, economic and political institutions such as open law-courts, relations of legally regulated economic exchange and representative assemblies which more or less successfully satisfy our demands. These institutions are not by any means perfect, in Hegel's view, but have grown up painfully and with many imperfections out of Europe's political, religious, economic and social struggles. Nevertheless, they are for him essentially the products of the emerging modern consciousness of freedom and of the corresponding demand for greater extension of human power and control over human affairs.

The basic character of the modern age is thus determined by the modern claim to freedom. However, Hegel also believes that the modern age has the tendency to seize on one aspect of human freedom at the expense of others. The evident deficiencies of modern Western society, of which Hegel was well aware, are thus not the result (as they are for Heidegger) of some fundamental blindness running throughout Western civilization, but rather of our understanding our freedom in a partial, one-sided way. The 'freedom' of opinion which rejects the constraints placed upon it by truth, the 'freedom' of economic competition which ignores its ethical responsibilities, the 'freedom' of aesthetic experimentation which undermines the wholeness and dignity of human beings and the 'freedom' of self-righteous political virtue which rides roughshod over the rights of others to make their views heard are all examples of modern freedom gone badly wrong. The modern evils of economic poverty (which Hegel discusses in the *Philosophy of Right*), of political tyranny in the name of political freedom (which he discusses in the context of the French Revolution in the *Phenomenology* and the philosophy of history) and of modern subjectivism (which he discusses throughout his philosophy) are all products of our understanding our freedom in a one-sided way and of our consequent neglect of the true nature of human fulfilment.

Hegel's defence of the Christian and modern secular conception of self-determination is not therefore smug or complacent, for he is acutely aware that modern consciousness does not always fully understand what true self-determination means. Consequently, our

frequent failure to grasp the true nature of freedom or to make freedom a reality for many people today does not mean we are wrong to see the concern for freedom as the defining characteristic of the modern age. However, it does mean that we moderns have a duty to understand freedom properly, especially if we are going to export it to the rest of the globe. The task of Hegel's philosophy, as commentators such as Joachim Ritter have recognized,[34] will thus be to try to develop the true conception of the freedom and self-determination to which modern consciousness now lays claim, and so perhaps to enable modern consciousness to avoid its worst excesses.

## History and the Absolute

Two questions regarding Hegel's historical conception of truth now need to be briefly addressed. The first is this: Hegel has insisted that all civilizations understand the world from the perspective of their own self-understanding, but does this apply to the modern age as well, and, if so, does it limit the value of the modern conception of truth and freedom? The answer to the first part of this question, for Hegel, is yes. We moderns do bring our own categories to bear on our experience and view nature and history through these categories just as any civilization does. The categories we employ – or at least should employ – are, as we have seen, categories such as freedom, development and self-determination. But these categories are not just conventional categories; they are not just the product of technological changes or of 'paradigm shifts' which are ultimately a matter of chance. They are the categories which derive from our becoming conscious of the essentially historical character of human activity, and they are the only categories in which that character can be fully revealed. The categories of modern consciousness are *historical* products, but they are not therefore intrinsically *limited* categories because they are the categories through which we have become fully aware of our historicity and freedom.

As we have seen, however, the problem which Hegel recognizes with modern consciousness is that we do not always properly understand the character of historical activity and of free self-determination. We often prefer to understand ourselves in terms of the restricted categories of natural science, or in terms of abstract, one-sided conceptions of freedom. Or, like Nietzsche or Richard Rorty, we are often misled by our preconceptions into believing that our recognition of our historicity puts our claim to truth out of order. The task of Hegel's philosophy will thus be to provide a proper understanding of the categories appropriate to the modern age that will free us from such one-sided misconceptions of ourselves (and of the world around us).

The second key question is this: what has happened to Hegel's Absolute in this discussion? In one sense, I hope that my account will have shown that the infamous Hegelian Absolute which is supposed to be the all-powerful puppet-master governing history and using human beings as the vehicles for its schemes is in fact an absolute fiction. Such an Absolute does not exist in Hegel's philosophy, but only in the minds of his critics. Hegel is quite clear that history is the sphere of *human* activity. In all events and occurrences in history, he says, 'our first concern is with the deeds and sufferings of men; we see elements of ourselves in everything, so that our sympathies constantly oscillate from one side to the other'. Historical activity, therefore, has its source 'in the needs, impulses, inclinations and passions of man'.[35] However, like David Hume and Adam Smith before him and Karl Marx after him, Hegel believes that human beings are not in complete control of their historical activity. Human beings make history but not always as they intend to make it. Human interest, which for Hegel is always at least interest in satisfying individual human needs,

thus leads human beings, *despite* their initial intentions, to become interdependent, to form communities and to organize themselves into self-conscious groupings such as states. In this way they come to recognize that the satisfaction of their particular interests requires them to pursue common, social goals. Human beings' own needs, therefore, drive them to the recognition that they are essentially self-conscious, social animals who are able to find freedom only in self-conscious community with other human beings. This initially unintended course of action is, in Hegel's view, rational and necessary and is nothing other than the course of action to which human beings are driven by their own free activity. We are thus not at the mercy of some transcendent Absolute, but we are guided by the *logic* that is immanent in our own activity – a logic which we come more and more to understand as we progress in history, but which, tragically, we are also always able to *misunderstand* and, in so doing, turn into a force which threatens us rather than leads us to true freedom.

There is reason in being, nature and history for Hegel. Such reason, or, as Hegel calls it, the 'Idea', is a reality, not a fiction. It is not, however, a transcendent power that dominates from on high the world in which we live. In that sense, it is not the infamous 'Absolute' attacked so frequently by Hegel's critics. The Idea is, rather, the rationality that is *immanent* in the world itself: the world's own inherent logic. In nature the Idea is the logic that is immanent in and generated by space as such and that leads to the emergence of freely moving matter and eventually to life. In history the Idea is nothing other than the logic that is immanent within and generated by human action and that leads human beings to become more social and more self-conscious as they seek to satisfy their interests.

Reason, or the Idea, in history is thus not some abstract, domineering cosmic power. It is the dynamic, *immanent* logic through which human beings are led – despite themselves but by their own actions – to full self-understanding. This 'divine' logic of human development – which is also the logic of certain developments in nature – is understood by Hegel to be dialectical in character. In order to understand precisely what Hegel means by 'dialectical' reason, we must now turn our attention to Hegel's most difficult and unforgiving text: the *Science of Logic*.