

Brief Summary of Hegel's Philosophy of History*

Basic Question: How can we provide an adequate account of human experience which includes **both** our radical and rational **autonomy**, as well as our **expressive unity** with nature?

General Scheme

All existence is the actualization of **Idea**. It is **dynamic** and gives rise to all that exists. Only in actualization does it achieve its full reality.

Idea develops in both space and time. [75]

1. Idea developing in space is **Nature** (physical space/time).
2. Idea developing in time is **Spirit** (time of consciousness, not physical time).

This development is, in one sense, a **logical** process; in another sense it is **temporal**. In the latter it is conceived as **History**. Thus, History is the movement or development of Idea.

Hegelian Dialectic and the Role of Idea in History

Hegel's system is based on the triad **Idea-Nature-Spirit**.

1. **Idea-in-itself** is that which develops logically and underlies dynamic change.
2. Its antithesis is **Idea-outside-itself**, or in space, i.e. **Nature**.
3. Nature develops out of the mineral and vegetable kingdoms a **human reality** which is characterized by **consciousness**. In this consciousness, Idea becomes conscious of itself (achieves self-consciousness).
4. This self-consciousness of the Idea is **Spirit**; it is the synthesis of Idea and Nature (Idea-in-and-for-itself).
5. The development of this consciousness is **History**.
6. Thus, history and idea are interrelated. [23]
 - a. Idea can also be thought of as the nature of God's **will**, and
 - b. History as the **reality** of God.
7. Idea-in-itself is only the starting point of God. Creation itself completes God.
8. Thus, to understand world history is to understand God. This is the task of Philosophy of History.
9. Thus, Philosophy is the divine Idea, or **Reason**, in the process of knowing itself.

The Teleology of History

The goal towards which everything moves is the self-awareness of Spirit. The human being is the vehicle of this realization.

But the realization requires a certain development of the human being in history, from a being determined by immediate needs and desires to one which is a proper vehicle for Spirit.

Thus, Spirit is initially separated from itself and has the task of "returning to itself".

This can only happen (given the principle of the necessity of embodiment) if the form of human life is transformed in history.

This means that the human being must come to see human life as part of a larger life.

Thus, the life of the individual must be understood as and integrated into the larger, more universal life. Participation in the life of "the State" is a concrete realization of this need. (This gives the State a special, "divine" status for Hegel.) [Cf. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 42: "The State is the divine Idea, as it exists on earth."]

This State must be a fully rational one to be adequate to the "return" of Spirit.

The Connection Between Spirit and Freedom

A world history is the progress of Freedom.

1. A human being is part Nature and part Spirit, but one's **essence** is Spirit.
2. The more humanity develops, the more individuals become conscious of the nature of their own existence.
3. Consciousness is linked to freedom. The more you become conscious of yourself, the more you **become** yourself, i.e. free, independent, and autonomous. [Cf. 20. Analogy: clarification of a vague feeling or idea.]
4. Thus, the development of Spirit toward consciousness of itself in world history is the development of freedom.

Spirit is Freedom -- This can be seen by considering Spirit in relation to its opposite, viz. **Matter**. [20]

1. Matter is subject to the force of gravitation, i.e. it moves toward something outside of itself.
2. Spirit, by contrast, is self-contained. It has its being within itself.
3. Thus, Spirit is **essentially** free, i.e. autonomous.

Spirit must continually increase its freedom -- any reduction in this trend is a falling back into the inertia of Matter, i.e. a loss of freedom.

This loss of freedom can arise, for example, when human beings are subject to Matter (poverty, sickness, famine) or when they are subject to others and are used as things (slavery).

Conceptually, the universe strives toward the particular and the particular strives toward the universal. Spirit appears as both universal and particular.

Hegel's Concept of Reason, Freedom, and the State

Freedom is following one's essence. For a human being, that essence is reason.

To follow reason is to participate in the larger life of the State.

History is a succession of increasingly developed communities, each of which better realizes the conditions for the self-realization of Spirit.

Thus, Spirit is realized through stages. The stages are historical civilizations, *Volksgeister*, or embodiments of Spirit.

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*Unless otherwise noted, page numbers in square brackets are references to G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, Robert Hartman, trans., New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1953.