Hegel and the unfolding Idea of Freedom in the 21st century

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was a German philosopher and proponent of German idealism. Considered one of the most systematic as well as comprehensive thinkers of all time, Hegel influenced many other philosophers (Bertrand Russell said that “at the end of the 19th century, all leading academic philosophers were largely Hegelian”). Besides his importance to the history of philosophy, Hegel’s ideas on freedom, economics, government, religion, and so on, remain very valuable in understanding the changes of our times.

Our observations

- Last year, we wrote about the revival of Marxist economics, in the face of growing global inequality and unbounded capitalism. Marx was very much influenced by Hegel. In fact, Marx turned Hegel’s understanding of history on its head: instead of a spiritual foundation — such as religion, art, the Absolute — regulating the course of history, history is determined by material conditions (i.e. Marx’ historical materialism), concluding that instead of Hegel’s Geist, money has become our God and makes the world go round.

- Last week, we wrote on Francis Fukuyama’s End of History thesis, in which free-market capitalism combined with liberal democracy would be the ideological endpoint of human history. This work was hugely inspired by Hegel’s philosophy of history, in which he tries to demonstrate that the course of history should be understood as one of progressive realization of the idea of freedom and knowledge of what Hegel called Geist: the spirit within our thinking (subjective spirit), realized in the socio-political world (objective spirit), and in the wisdom of art, religion and philosophy (absolute spirit). Hegel tried to show that world history moves from East to West, in which freedom moves from freedom for only one (despotism in Asia), freedom for some (democracy and aristocracy in Greek and Roman society) to freedom for all (the monarchy in the modern, Prussian state).

- We have written before how deep learning will increasingly steer our behavior in the future, although we often have little understanding of how deep learning actually works. From a Hegelian perspective, this is problematic, as true freedom requires people to knowingly and willingly comply with the terms and rules that algorithmic systems prescribe us. When this is not the case, we increasingly become alienated from the rules and codes of conduct that govern our lives (i.e. there is no “recognition” of their objective validity and verity in the realm of politics and social life). These problems are becoming exacerbated as digital systems are increasingly imposing moral codes upon us and software is beginning to execute public policy. Furthermore, given the danger that algorithmic governance might reduce the complexity as well as dynamism and historicity of our living world to a single string of code, Hegel’s dialectic method — in which opposites are subjugated but never lost — focuses on the dynamic process of “becoming” instead of the static “result” and might actually fit this emerging algorithmic reality. Hence, Hegel can help to overcome a binary view on how to deal with technology (e.g. adapt or reject) and help us obtain a synthesis between technology and our biology as two opposite poles, laying the philosophical foundation for a new technological complex.

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Connecting the dots

Hegel’s grand project was to establish a “scientific philosophy”: a philosophical system in which all concepts and arguments were logically deduced from each other, justifying the introduction of new concepts in an “encyclopedic system”. Hegel’s system therefore consists of three main parts: logics, nature and spirit, of which the latter is subdivided into the human soul works (subjective spirit), the working of social and political reality (objectivist spirit) and the universal rationality and freedom (absolute spirit). The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), considered Hegel’s magnus opus, is the epistemological foundation that explains the way we could gain knowledge of this system. Central to this is Hegel’s dialectic method, in which seemingly opposing arguments (a thesis and anti-thesis) are merged into a new, higher position (synthesis) that contains the verity of both previously separate arguments. Using this “speculative reason” (i.e. a stage of knowing that goes beyond immediate, sensory perception and given ideas to metaphysical thinking that has resolved contradiction into a deeper understanding), Hegel tries to show that the same structures that are at work in our logical concepts have realized in nature, as well as in the realm of spirit, thus that the whole of reality should fit into his science of philosophy.

The idea that is realized within Hegel’s philosophy is the idea of freedom: consciousness that progressively gains more insight into reality and its working, thus increasingly experiencing the world as a place in which it recognizes itself. In fact, the concept of “recognition” is central to Hegel’s idea of freedom, as the moment at which a subject (thesis) no longer experiences outside reality (anti-thesis) as an alien world, but instead as one of his own projection and achievement (synthesis). That also means that there is an intimate tie between subjective consciousness (i.e. a free person) and the realm of absolute spirit (i.e. art, religion, and philosophy), and realizing this connection will finally release subjective consciousness from its restrictions and artificial determinations. In this way, Hegel still provides a radical critique of the liberal idea of freedom: the idea that one should be able to do what one likes, as long as one doesn’t violate the freedom of others. For Hegel, freedom is always realized within the synthesis of person and world, citizen and state, member and collective, as the latter only gives the determinations of the former, in which it can gain its concrete freedom. Freedom to do whatever one likes without restrictions is only “abstract freedom”, as there is no positive relation to the other and a connection to the world is lacking. Thus, Hegel wrote in his Philosophy of Right (i.e. objective spirit) “duty is not a restriction on freedom, but only on freedom in the abstract, i.e. on unfreedom. Duty is the attainment of our essence, the winning of positive freedom.” Besides the fact that abstract freedom can easily become destructive (e.g. by social isolation or by solipsism), there is no moment of recognition possible, thus leaving both subject and object, person and world, in an antagonistic relationship. On the other hand, the relation cannot be forced top-down, for example by a state imposing stringent laws on its citizens; the negative relation then still dominates a positive one. Only in the concrete recognition between free persons can real freedom be realized, requiring the existence of objective standards and a shared collective reality. And this can take many forms, such as habits, buildings with a shared message, work ethics, or ideas about the Good Life. Indeed, Hegel’s concept of freedom and his critique of the liberal concept of freedom remain relevant in our times of social fragmentation and mental health problems (anti-thesis) as they address the need to develop narratives that help to embed technology and modern life (thesis) into a meaningful narrative. Without this, we become increasingly alienated from the world (e.g. being directed by algorithms, the power of big companies or populist ideologies). Hegel’s critique of liberal economics follows the same line of argumentation (this is no coincidence, as Hegel’s system helps to deduce the Hegelian position in debates). Free-market capitalism, a kind of abstract freedom, easily runs the risk of overly focusing on private (thesis) gains and its own interests. As such, the social good is kept out of sight, meaning that economics is no longer in the service of the realization of freedom and the Good Life in society as such, but only occupied with its own interests (whether it concerns a company, person or party). As such, it requires regulation (anti-thesis) to function properly, a critique Marx voiced by “economizing” Hegel’s system of philosophy. However, too stringent regulation eradicates the freedom that is – again – an essential aspect of the economy, thus undermining the inner working of the market and economy. As such, markets need to be regulated and restricted with the aim to realize freedom in society for all. Of course, people can obtain profits and gains, but they shouldn’t be focused on pure self-interest. But how can Hegel make these claims, that the realization of freedom is the ultimate goal, that all of the domains of objective spirit (e.g. the state, economics, civil society) should have the aim of realizing the Good Life, which is in turn intimately related to the realization of freedom itself?

That is partly because Hegel shows how freedom is continuously realized at every moment of his philosophical system. But most importantly, Hegel shows that history should be understood as a continuous realization of freedom in societies, politics, religion, and philosophy, such that history itself provides the objective legitimation for his philosophy of freedom: how the idea of freedom unfolds spatially in reality and temporally in history. In this sense, Hegel also claimed the End of History, as the idea of freedom had finally realized itself in the modern Prussian state, after which Hegel’s own philosophy was the finalization of history, as he was the one who ultimately understood this process (thus synthesizing subjective and objective spirit into the absolute spirit). In this sense, Fukuyama merely reiterated Hegel’s arguments and provided additional empirical evidence from the 20th century to underpin his statement. However, we have written how new alternatives are emerging at the End of History, especially as contradictions remain in our current industrial modernity: persistent socio-economic inequality and environmental degradation. In a Hegelian sense, this forces us to continue Hegel’s dialectic method, and demonstrates how industrial modernity (anti-thesis) neglected the structures and ways of production and consumption in traditional societies (thesis) but eventually went too far in this process. The following synthesis will thus bring together the objectives of a Good Life (in terms of socio-economic equality and ecological flourishing) with the structure of industrial modernity, arguably the main issue in the coming century for philosophy in collaboration with other sciences.
Implications

- We are already seeing signs of a revival of Hegelian philosophy to cope with current problems. On the subjective side, consumers no longer define their lives in terms of “abstract” consumption: consumption for the sake of consumption regardless of how products were made, created, produced, distributed. They increasingly want to embed consumption into a moral narrative, such that the concrete act of consumption adds to one’s idea of the Good Life. The same happens with our relation to technology and modern life.

- On the objective level, people are seeking new rules and policies to deal with the “abstract forces” of modernity that point to a Hegelian solution, such as more government control for markets, finding local and federal middle ground between nationalism and globalism.

- The above examples are again part of a general trend of more holistic and optimistic perspectives on the future, just as Hegel’s philosophy of history shows that all problems and darker periods should be understood as moments of larger developments. Internally, they reveal a different conception of the Good Life, meaning that new external regulation on, for example, climate change, socio-economic inequality or international warfare, can become a “concrete reality”, as these are no longer considered top-down, “alienating” rules. As such, a new “universal spirit” might be emerging, with new religions, art and philosophies. History may take a different turn.