

THE DEATH OF GOD AND HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT: The primary aim of this paper is to provide an interpretation of what Hegel means when he claims that history is “teleologically” structured. Contrary to the common interpretation, I argue that Hegel’s attribution of teleology to history is not rooted in the Eurocentric claim that history’s purpose is, and always has been, to pave the way for the social, cultural, and philosophical accomplishments of modern Europe. On the contrary, through an exploration of the way in which Hegel’s understanding of history is rooted in the concept of “the death of God,” I argue that Hegel sees historical explanation itself as well as the teleological aim which underpins the structure of any historical explanation, as gaining their significance within a particular cultural, social, and normative context. In this sense, I hope that Hegel’s conception of historical explanation can provide us with a theoretical structure that encourages us to be open to alternative historical narratives and reflective of the cultural and normative interests inherent in our own dominant narratives.

KEYWORDS: Hegel; Continental Philosophy; Philosophy of History; Death of God; Alternative History

INTRODUCTION

One of Hegel’s most well-known and infamous claims is that history has a “teleological” structure. More specifically, It often seems as if Hegel understands later cultures’ understanding of the structure and purpose of the human agent, the community, and the cosmos to represent improvements over the understandings of past cultures. These “inferior” past cultural points of view are understood to have the function of mere stepping stones on a path towards the

modern European conception of the world, history, and the human agent. Of course, such a picture of history has strong Eurocentric overtones, and Hegel has often been criticized on these very grounds. Although it is obvious that Hegel sees history as “teleological” in some sense, I will argue that if we look carefully at the way such a teleological picture of history arises within Hegel’s texts, we will see that the strong Eurocentric implications are actually not a necessity. In fact I hope to show that his philosophical framework for understanding history keeps open a space for the *necessity* of taking alternative cultural points of view seriously as well as continually reconstructing our narrative of history in a way that takes seriously all historical and cultural information a given community has access to at their point in history.

A central aspect of my reading of Hegel’s teleological history is that such an understanding of history only becomes possible after a specific cultural and historical development; namely, the arising of Christianity. In his book *Does History Make Sense?*, Terry Pinkard outlines some of the reasons why Hegel thinks this is the case.

Christianity also brought the principle that “all are free” to the forefront. In the idea that God does not play favorites but loves each equally, Christianity began to supply the content for such inwardness—that is, it provided an account that specified the goods by which an individual could comprehend his or her own life as itself being of worth in more than just the terms of whatever “office” they were recognized as holding.¹

Pinkard points to this notion that “all are free” as the “end goal” of the teleological trajectory of history for Hegel, that which history is moving towards. Pinkard also points out what features of past culture’s social structures disallowed them from reaching this end goal. Pinkard notes that in many past cultures individuals were valued only by virtue of their “office,” by which Pinkard means their role in the community. Although Pippin is referring specifically to Roman culture when he focuses on the human agent’s social role in particular, there is a similar theme in Hegel’s analysis of all past cultures. The commonality that Hegel attributes to all cultures that come before the “end goal” of history is that the human agent’s goals, aims, and cares in life were more centered around their role

¹ Pinkard, Terry, *Does History Make Sense?*, Harvard University Press, 2017. (91-92)

within a larger social, religious, or cosmological order than around the emotional life or creative and rational capacities of the individual themselves. The historical progression towards the realization that “all are free” gradually shifts the locus of value from this religious, social, or political good to the human individual themselves. This does not mean that Hegel believes that individuals are not oriented towards a higher social or religious good in his own time or that there was no sense of individuality in the past. However, Hegel argues that modern social institutions, such as the free market, provide a space in which the individual human being has more of an ability to contribute to and remold the significance and of the social or political with other members of their community. Since the flourishing of individuality which this teleological history is centered around is exemplified in the Christian religion and the historical and cultural developments surrounding it, this means such an understanding of history could not possibly be constructed or cognized before Christianity. In this way, Pinkard shows us that the Christian idea that God “loves each equally” sets the stage for the possibility of a teleological understanding of history by positing the orientation towards freedom of the individual as the fundamental aim which gives direction and structure to that teleological understanding.

Pinkard, and his fellow scholar Robert Pippin, who articulates similar views, do a great service to Hegel scholarship by illuminating that this teleological structure of history is rooted in a development towards a social organization that makes possible a certain notion of human agency, and that such a notion of human agency originates in Christianity. However, along with this insight both Pinkard and Pippin attribute what I will call a “realism” to Hegel’s teleological narrative of history that they do not find agreeable. From Pippin and Pinkard’s point of view, attributing this “realism” to Hegel’s teleological history is the only way to make sense of how Hegel could see history as having an inherent “aim” of leading towards this Christian inspired conception of agency of Hegel’s own time. Pinkard explains what he takes to be Hegel’s justification of this claim writing,

There is an unchanging principled core to subjectivity that underlies the way history developed so as to make it retrospectively true that each subject possesses an inherent standing... it functions a bit like a first principle, except that what follows it is what historically follows in the path dependent course of events that

make up human history.²

Pinkard explains why *this* particular form of agency is the one which history aims at by appealing to an “unchanging principled core to subjectivity” which “functions a bit like a first principle.” Pinkard reasons that if it is the case that humans were, in fact, always free individuals, attributing this teleological structure to history would make sense. The underlying, but often obscured, truth that human individuals are *in fact* free would be what drives cultures to progressively attribute more and more worth and freedom to the human individual. The “engine” driving this historical progression would be a progressive uncovering of the truth of what humans truly are.

I call this a “realist” reading of history because the interpretation understands this teleological structure of history leading towards individual freedom to be true *independently* of the particular historical point of view, namely Hegel’s own, from which such a perception of history was constructed.³ Such a realist picture would take a historical point of view such as Hegel’s and reify it as a true statement about the nature of history independently of the particular conditions which made such a cognition of history possible and desirable. Or to put it more simply, a “realist” reading would propose that Hegel takes his view of history to be appropriate not only for his own culture and historical time period but also for all future historical time periods; to be the “final” truth of the purpose of human history. If we look at a quote from Pippin’s book *After the Beautiful* we see him interpret Hegel as committed to this “realism” (later in the paper we will see Pinkard suggest this reification explicitly as well). Pippin writes, “After all, Hegel also did not believe that there was any world-historical work for philosophy to

² Pinkard, Terry, *Does History Make Sense?*, Harvard University Press, 2017. (150-151)

³ To be fair to Pinkard, and Pippin at times, do seem to oscillate between a “realist” understanding and a non “realist” understanding of Hegel’s teleological history. Although the earlier quote mentions an “unchanging core” to human subjectivity that implies a “realist” understanding of history it also mentions that we only can understand this “unchanging core” when we look back at history “retrospectively” from Hegel’s point of view. In quotes such as these, which are frequent in Pinkard’s book and also present in Pippin’s work, it is ambiguous as to whether they think that the cognition of this unchanging core of subjectivity is contingent on Hegel’s own perspective or if it can be reified as true independently of the historical resources Hegel uses to understand and articulate it. However, as we will see shortly from Pippin and later in the paper from Pinkard, they both have passages that imply a very straightforward realist understanding as well; in which an “absolute” understanding of history or agency is starkly contrasted with an understanding that is linked to one’s historical point of view.

do; its content was also its past, now understood in the right way within a comprehensive philosophical system.”⁴ Here Pippin explicitly claims that after Hegel’s own philosophical articulation of the nature of history that there is no longer any “world-historical work” for philosophy to do. By this he means that humanity will never again need to generate a fundamentally different understanding of the nature and purpose of world history; we have finally understood that history’s true purpose is this fostering and realization of this “unchanging core” of human agency which has the nature of freedom. Such a statement implies that the truth and adequacy of Hegel’s own understanding is not rooted in its appropriateness for his particular historical perspective; as it claims that Hegel’s own articulation has put an end to the need for any further refinement of historical understanding in the future. Of course, Pippin and Pinkard are not exactly thrilled about Hegel’s alleged claim that the accomplishments of his own time period reveal the ultimate purpose of history. Pinkard criticizes Hegel for condemning all cultures he discusses other than European cultures to be “failed Europeans;” in the sense that they failed to understand the true “timeless core” of subjectivity that Europeans were finally able to grasp due to their superior culture.^{5 6}

I do not mean to suggest that Hegel does not, in one sense, commit himself to the claim that this teleological picture of history gradually leading towards the sovereignty of the individual is the true structure of history. Hegel’s aim is nothing less than to give an exhaustive picture of the trajectory of history that is able to weave together empirical information concerning past cultures with the social, political, and cultural realities of his own point in history. The result is a systematic narrative of history that simultaneously clarifies and reinterprets the nature of the highest normative and social practices of Hegel’s present age by

⁴ Pippin, Robert, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 2015. (36)

⁵ Pinkard, Terry, *Does History Make Sense?*, Harvard University Press, 2017. (64)

⁶ Pippin also dismisses the thesis claims for different reasons. Pippin writes, “What could be more obvious than that history is not teleologically progressive and that the modern world cannot be considered, even incipiently and incompletely, the “realization of freedom” (*Beautiful* 136). Pippin’s worry is a bit different than Pinkard’s. Instead of focusing on Hegel’s dismissal of past cultures, Pippin worries that Hegel’s praise of his own time period is misplaced. Namely, that it is not the case that the social and political institutions of modern times provide a context in which free and autonomous individuals can flourish.

tracing their historical origins, and reinterprets the significance of those historical origins by understanding the way they have gradually led to the present. In other words, Hegel gleans a novel significance to both history and the present through the act of connecting them together within a systematic narrative of human purpose. As we have seen, the primary normative principle which this act of historical explanation gives rise to and which grounds the entire narrative is that of human freedom. In this sense, from Hegel's point of view, this teleological trajectory of history is the *one truth* of the nature of history; as it accounts for the significance of the past, the present, and suggests a new future directed orientation through the centrality of this particular normative principle to the entire human enterprise. This being said, I will argue that Pinkard and Pippin do miss out on some of the nuance of Hegel's commitment to the eternal or "real" nature of his understanding of history. Namely, for Hegel, although every culture, including his own, is and must be committed to a singular historical truth or narrative that provides them with a unified understanding of their highest goals, values, and aspirations; the cognizing and articulation of any truth is only appropriate and possible within a particular set of cultural, historical, natural, and social conditions. Thus, although Hegel takes this truth to be the only possible and appropriate synthesis of all historical information for his own time period, he does not mean to suggest anything about what will be an appropriate understanding for future cultures and communities who will have a different point of view from which to undertake the analysis.

My primary aim in this paper is to illustrate this dual nature of Hegel's teleological understanding of history, as both eternally true *and* contingent on his point of view in history and culture, and point to some implications of such an understanding; namely what it implies about Hegel's alleged "Eurocentrism." I do not intend to completely deny Hegel's Eurocentrism. Hegel does often provide uncharitable readings of cultures outside of Europe and it is fair to say this is rooted in a Eurocentric bias. However, I do want to argue that Hegel's Eurocentric commitments do not run as deep as Pinkard and Pippin's "realist" interpretation of Hegel's conception of history suggest. Even if Hegel does have a triumphalist attitude concerning his own culture's accomplishments, an understanding of this dual nature of Hegel's teleological history will show us that this does not imply that Hegel thinks modern Europe will, or even should, always

be understood as the epitome of human achievement. Once we have a more nuanced understanding of the way in which Hegel can both be committed to his own teleological history as the one truth and to that truth being rooted in a particular historical perspective we will see that Hegel's understanding of philosophy actually encourages and even necessitates taking other worldviews and cultures seriously. In order to grasp this dual aspect of Hegel's notion of teleological history we will focus on two aspects of Hegel's thought. First, we will explore his notion of "absolute spirit" or the various mediums human cultures, as well as Hegel himself, use to articulate this one truth throughout history. Second, we will look at the peculiarities of Hegel's own form of absolute spirit he uses to articulate this vision of teleological history. In this process we will find that this history, contrary to Pinkard and Pippin's suggestions, is in fact rooted in medium of explanation which has a form that disallows any "realist" understanding of the human, the world, or history; thus making it impossible to "reify" European culture as the ultimate accomplishment of human history for all future points of view.

ABSOLUTE TELEOLOGY AND TELEOLOGICAL HISTORY

For Hegel we can understand much of any given human's immediate emotional and motivational landscape by understanding the way that particular agent relates to other agents, the community, and the world within the context of that culture's political and social institutions and religious and cosmological understandings. This is not to say that a human is exhaustively defined by the norms and relationships made possible by such institutions and conceptual spaces but rather that these spaces provide the concrete context in which the human agent can actualize their choices and their will and thus do largely define the scope of those choices. Pippin explains this in his book *After the Beautiful* writing,

Any such individually self-constituting identity is not possible except within a continuing effort at a commonly achieved self-knowledge and so self-realization. It is the very broadest of such projects aimed at commonly realized self-knowledge.⁷

What Pippin points out here is that when an individual or a community

⁷ Pippin, Robert, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 2015. (42)

attempts to articulate, or constitute, a conception of their own identity as human agents, they do that within the context of “efforts at a commonly achieved self knowledge.” In other words, we can only truly understand the human agent by understanding the more communal and comprehensive contexts in which that agent moves, relates to others, and acts out its aims, goals, and desires. For example, a human agent in a feudal society would act within a social space that places great emphasis on the upkeep of a communal structure that is rooted in relatively strict social roles. Thus, the possibilities and choices available to the individual would be largely defined by whether they are a serf or a noble, for example. On the contrary, a modern social space contains institutions that explicitly allow for social mobility, and thus give the individual more flexibility in acting on their own projects or desires that may or may not be in line with their particular social role. In this second case, the agent’s personal cares and desires are still defined by their relationships to others within the context of social institutions and shared understandings of the world. However, unlike the feudal society, the individual has more flexibility in the constitution of their own agency. This is just one example of the way the nature of the human agent must be understood through its relationship with others within the context of the more comprehensive religious, ethical, or social commitments of the community; as these provide the conceptual and practical spaces in which the agent moves and lives their life.

In the same discussion Pippin also points to another commitment of Hegel’s concerning human agency. He writes, “We don’t know, in any determinate or “living” detail, who we actually take ourselves to be except *in* such externalization.”⁸ For Hegel, we cannot understand our own agency or the structures in which that agency gains its determinacy simply by reflection or introspection. Instead, we must “externalize” our understanding. We must make use of a particular medium in order to articulate the principles and norms upon which our social institutions, moral values, or religious understandings are based, and in doing so articulate the principles which underpin the structure of our own agency. The word Hegel uses for an artifact that undertakes this task is “absolute

⁸ Pippin, Robert, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press 2015. (41)

spirit.” Hegel explains the function of absolute spirit as aspiring to illustrate “the divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of spirit;” to articulate those most fundamental principles by which we orient our lives (*Aesthetics* 6). Hegel claims that the mediums that have been used throughout history to undertake such a task are art, religion, and philosophy.

From this perspective, our agency and the context in which that agency gains its structure is not only something that we uncover, it is also, to use Pippin’s word, something we *constitute*. When an artist, philosopher, or religious contemplative attempts to articulate the ultimate principles of morality and the universe, and the possibility of the human agent and community acting in line with those principles, they never simply imitate past articulations. For example, when Jesus gave sermons on the nature of God and the way human beings can act in line with God’s will, he drew on aspects of the God of the old testament but also included new developments that reimagined the nature of God and his relationship to human beings. One major reinterpretation of the nature of God was Jesus’ message that God loves all humans equally. Thus, because absolute spirit functions not only to “reveal” the nature of the universe and the human agent but also to reconstitute the nature of the human agent in a way more suited to the current historical, cultural, and social realities; it becomes possible to understand each new form of absolute spirit as responding to and in a sense, “building” on the previous. Pinkard explains the implications of this understanding of absolute spirit as not only uncovering human agency but also reconstituting and renewing human agency continually, writing, “Most crucially for Hegel, the philosophical comprehension of history is a comprehension of how historically the metaphysics of subjectivity itself and not merely our conception of the metaphysics of subjectivity—has changed.”⁹ ¹⁰ In this quote Pinkard helps us see the way in which this understanding of absolute spirit as not only uncovering but also restructuring and constituting human agency lays the ground

⁹ Pinkard, Terry, *Does History Make Sense?*, Harvard University Press, 2017. (3-4)

¹⁰ I would argue that referring to these various structures of agency as different “metaphysics of subjectivity” is misleading, for as we have seen any agent only gains its significance within the context of what was taken to be *objective* for that culture; their social and political institutions and most comprehensive religious and cosmological model. However, if we keep this in mind, this quote of Pinkard’s can be helpful for understanding the relationship between such an understanding of absolute spirit and Hegel’s teleological history.

for Hegel's understanding of history as teleological. History can only be understood as progressive or teleological if we are able to understand each new work of absolute spirit, each new vision of the truth of the human, history, and the cosmos, as not only drawing but also reformulating the principles of the past expressions upon which our agency is rooted.

If we look closer at this progressive and pluralistic picture of history we can also start to ascertain why it is *necessarily* grounded in the principle of human freedom. Pinkard explains further how such an understanding is arrived at writing,

Once that possibility of moral life became a real possibility, it was now also possible to project it retrospectively back across time and understand the earlier failures of shapes of life as having failed for not having made that possibility actual.¹¹

Here Pinkard is referring to the "moral life" that was preached by Jesus; in which all human beings are loved equally by God and all are free as individuals. Looking back on history from within this understanding of the nature of the human being we cannot help but see the way in which humans freely constituted and contributed to the wider social, political, and cosmological structures in which human agents gain their function and purpose in life. We cannot help but see and emphasize the hand of human freedom, creativity, and ingenuity in the various works of art, philosophy, and religion that attempt to lay claim to the fundamental nature of the world and humans' place in that world. It is Hegel's claim, at the time of their construction, such works or writing were taken to mirror moral ideals, cosmologies, or religious truths that had a sense of being or authority independent of the actions of humans. For example, the Egyptian pyramids and the sculptures and hieroglyphs they contained articulated a cosmology containing a realm of the living and a realm of the dead; a cosmology that was taken to have always existed in a "eternal" sense by the Egyptians.. Although a sense of eternal truth will never completely disappear from human cosmology, morality, or history, Hegel suggests that looking back from our point of view we cannot help but place a stronger emphasis on the hand human freedom played and still does play in *any* articulation of the nature of the human being, the world, or history; even if knowledge of this freedom has only been brought more and more explicitly into social consciousness gradually as history

¹¹ Pinkard, Terry, *Does History Make Sense?*, Harvard University Press, 2017. (93-94)

has progressed. From this point of view, we can see why Pinkard and Pippin arrive at the conclusion that Hegel's teleological picture of history is a "realist" understanding of history. Hegel's historical narrative points to the "truth" of the "timeless core" of human agency as freedom from every direction. In this understanding of history the significance of the past and present are simultaneously constituted through the way they are rooted in this fundamental freedom of the human agent; Hegel's empirical study of the practices and institutions of past cultures reveal a gradual fostering of the very freedom that he finds so prized in his social space. This mutual interdependence of past, present, and the normative ground of both, results in the impossibility of finding an "outside" to Hegel's systematic historical picture, as each aspect gains its significance solely from its connection to other aspects within the context of the whole teleological structure. Thus, we can understand why Pinkard and Pippin are right, in a certain sense, to point to this teleological narrative as final, exhaustive, and complete for Hegel.

That being said, this still does not imply that the "realist" reading of history mentioned earlier is true. It does not imply that Hegel's takes his commitment to the teleological nature of history oriented towards freedom as an understanding of history that will be appropriate for all future points of view and cultures. In the introduction we saw Pippin explicitly claim that Hegel's commitment to the truth of his historical narrative implies that there is no longer any "world historical" work for philosophy to do; that philosophy will never again need to construct a narrative of the nature and purpose of history again. In other words, Pippin sees a commitment to there being one truth of history and an understanding that that truth also acts as a conduit that synthesizes particular historical, cultural, and social forces into a new normative direction, leaving the future open for further philosophical and historical explanation, as mutually exclusive. Here we can see Pinkard interpret Hegel as committed to a similar mutual exclusivity when he writes of Hegel's teleological history,

It is more than simply an interpretative claim that from the standpoint we now occupy in the temporal river, we can make a plausible case that this is what it has all been about. It is the more audacious claim that a certain kind of "absolute" has come into view, and that is the view of the infinite end at work in all human life

and in history itself.¹²

As we have seen in the last few paragraphs, the second part of this quotation does describe an essential aspect of Hegel's project: to use all the empirical information and theoretical tools available to him to do his best to understand the "absolute" end or purpose that has been at work in all of human history. However, Pinkard's realism is betrayed when he contrasts this project of grasping the "absolute" with the project of trying to make sense of ourselves, history, and the world from "the standpoint we occupy in the temporal river;" implying that the two projects are necessarily in opposition.

My aim is to illustrate that, for Hegel, these two projects are, in fact, necessarily two different layers of *any* aspiration to grasp the "truth" of history, the human, or the cosmos through a work of absolute spirit. For Hegel, this layered analysis that is simultaneously committed to eternalism and historically conditioned is simply built into the nature of human explanation and articulation. For example, when Pinkard writes that earlier shapes of life are seen as "failures" to concretely manifest the truth of human freedom, there is, as we have explained already, a very real sense in which this is the truth from Hegel's own point of view. However, it is also the case that Hegel's very act of giving a historical interpretation does not only "reveal" these shapes as failures but also *originally constitutes* them as failures from within the perspective of the fundamental normative principles on which his teleological history is grounded. In this second sense, a work of absolute spirit in the very act of speaking of the one truth is also undertaking a normative intervention that grounds the significance of the past, the meaning of the present, and our orientation toward the future in a new understanding of human purpose. This principle of human purpose is ascertained from a philosophical scrutiny of the trajectory of the past and how it conditions and leads to our own cares in the present. To further substantiate this justification of the dual nature of Hegel's historical explanation we can look at some concrete examples of historical forms of absolute spirit for Hegel, with an eye to the way in which Hegel takes his own form of absolute spirit to bring an end to the remnants of realism that were still somewhat active in past forms.

¹² Pinkard, Terry, *Does History Make Sense?*, Harvard University Press, 2017. (163)

“FORM IS CONTENT”: THE CO-CONSTITUTION OF ABSOLUTE SPIRIT
AND HUMAN AGENCY

In the first part of his *Encyclopedia Logic*, and more extensively in his *Science of Logic*, Hegel articulates the basic conceptual structure in which he takes human experience to be rooted. One such conceptual relationship which he takes as inherent within any articulation of the nature of human experience is an identity relationship between what he calls “form” and “content.” Hegel writes,

The relation of the appearance to itself is thus completely determined, has the form in itself and because [it is] in this identity, has that form as its essential subsistence. Thus the form is content and, in keeping with its developed determinacy, it is the law of the appearance.¹³

In this paper I do not aspire to explain exhaustively the significance of these terms as they function in the context of his project in the *Encyclopedia Logic*. However, one context in which an identity between form and content shows up that is directly relevant to our purposes is in the relationship between a particular “form” of absolute spirit and the “content” it expresses. We can understand “form” in this case to be the structure of the medium of absolute in which a particular culture articulates the nature of the universe and the way human experience is situated within that wider universe. We can understand “content” to be the specific structure of the principles and laws upon which that universe is based and of the human agent and social institutions that inhabit that universe. It is this “content” that is an attempt to grasp the way human experience “appears” at this time in history; the human agent’s day to day experience of their relationship to themselves, their community, and their world. Given that absolute spirit can take the shape of a work of art, religion, or philosophy, its forms can be vastly different; a work of architecture is very different in form than a musical composition, not to speak of a religious or philosophical text. What Hegel points to here is that the “content” of this appearance cannot be separated from its “form,” as that form is its “essential subsistence” or the “law of the appearance.” This implies that one vital clue to understanding the worldview and way of life of a particular culture is to investigate the expressive possibilities of the medium they used to express their most fundamental understanding of the world and the human agent’s place in that world. In other words, the nature, structure and

¹³ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1, Science of Logic*, trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstron, Cambridge University Press, 2015. (33)

content of the principles and laws upon which a culture's understanding of the world, morality, and the human agent were based, are constrained and conditioned by a particular medium of expression.¹⁴ As a concrete example of this relationship between form and content in the content of absolute spirit we can look briefly at Hegel's discussion of architecture in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Hegel speaks of architecture as one of the first mediums of absolute spirit used by ancient cultures such as Egypt, India, and Babolyn to exhaustively express their conception of the cosmos and the place of the agent within it.

Hegel's discussion of architecture in the *Aesthetics* is vast and nuanced. Hegel analyzes the contributions to conceptions of human agency of many specific architectural structures throughout history; explaining the small steps they each took in moving the locus of value away from an indifferent entity or cosmic law and into the human individual and community. However, since our purpose is only to show the way in which a particular form of absolute spirit conditions the possibilities of understanding the content or "appearance" of agency, community, and cosmos, we will only discuss the material structure of architecture as a medium more generally. We can begin by looking at the way Hegel describes architecture. He writes of the task of architecture,

We can see that the first task of art consists in giving shape to what is objective in itself, i.e. the physical world of nature, the external environment of the spirit, and so to build into what has no inner life of its own a meaning and form which remain external to it because this meaning and form are not immanent in the objective world itself.¹⁵

Here, Hegel explains that this material used to construct architecture is

¹⁴ This does not necessarily mean that everyone in a particular culture explicitly understands their worldview to be mediated through a medium of absolute spirit. For example, it would be absurd to claim that all those in ancient Greece understood the way in which the physical medium of sculpture, the medium of absolute spirit used in ancient Greece, constrained and conditioned their understandings of agency, morality, and the cosmos. Rather we would say that the medium of sculpture was most suited to harness and make explicit the fundamental forces and principles that were implicitly at play in Greeks' life. If we reflect on how our own culture relates to what Hegel claims is our form of absolute spirit, reason or thought, we can see this is the case in our own society as well. Members of our culture, even if they have never studied any intellectual disciplines, will generally assume that scientific or intellectual reasoning grasps the nature of reality, not the arts. Even those who are religious usually have to make the caveat that they believe due to "faith," implicitly appealing to the unspoken authority of reason. Thus, even in our culture there is a particular form of "absolute spirit" to which we implicitly appeal when speaking of truth whether we are explicitly aware of it or not.

¹⁵ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Terry, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (631)

“shapable only according to the laws of gravity ...bound together regularly and symmetrically to be a purely external reflection of spirit.”¹⁶ What Hegel is referring to here is that the material pieces which constitute the work itself must be placed together in relationships that respect these laws of gravity and weight rather than being fully determined by the cosmological meaning which the work is intended to express. The consequence is that the physical shape of the work does not only serve the purpose of expressing the meaning but also of respecting these laws of gravity, resulting in a lack of harmony between what Hegel calls work’s “shape,” the physical work itself, and the work’s “meaning,” what it is meant to express in its cultural context. Of course it is true that there are material aspects of the physical shape of the architectural structure that do correspond to its meaning or purpose. However, due to the reasons expressed above, the medium of architecture is materially limited to expressing a meaning that is at least partially external to or in excess of the physical and sensuous reality of the work; there will be aspects of the physical work that have a functional role not related to the meaning or purpose. In other words, a work of architecture cannot fully express and embody its meaning.

Hegel explains that any culture which makes use primarily of architecture as a form of absolute spirit resides in what he calls a “symbolic” worldview. In such a worldview, the structure of the cosmos and its constituents is understood as “measureless and not freely determined in itself, that is to be given shape, and therefore it cannot find in concrete appearance any specific form corresponding completely with this abstraction and universality” (*Aesthetics* 303). What is characteristic of any symbolic worldview is that the conception of the cosmological order which structures the universe and which underpins the way of life of that time period is of a nature such that it cannot be fully captured within a sensuous expression; the understanding of ultimate reality, of the source of the sensuous world, will always exceed full articulation. Thus, we can see why architecture is most suited to expressing such a worldview. A culture that expresses its worldview through architecture has expressed a worldview that cannot be captured fully in *any* human expression, as even its most fundamental architectural expression is not able to fully express its significance. According to

¹⁶ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Terry, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (701)

Hegel's analysis of the limitations of the medium of architecture, the meaning the work expresses will necessarily be understood to be beyond the complete grasp of human comprehension. As examples of this type of worldview we can think of cultures that take elemental forces of nature or deities that are beyond human comprehension to be the true nature of reality; forces that contain an element of ineffability or mystery and cannot be fully articulated through human means.

In a world where laws or forces which govern the cosmos are understood to be forever shrouded in mystery, not capable of complete expression in any human utterance, creation, or intuition, the human agent can have no role other than to be subservient to such a cosmic order because they cannot understand and therefore not alter that order. This is why Hegel claims that many of these "symbolic" cultures were involved in some form of nature worship. There is no understanding of the human agent as having the ability to understand, mold, and constitute the nature of the principles which govern the cosmos, morality, and social life; as these principles are understood to be written into the structure of the cosmos, unable to be touched, grasped, or changed by human beings. Here we see that the particular understanding of the human agent expressed through architecture is much different than our own notion of the human being as the master, or at least the knower, of herself, nature, and the cosmos. Of course, as Pinkard has previously mentioned, from the point of view of Hegel's teleological history, it does seem as if these cultures did, in fact, express and constitute their own understanding of the cosmos when they built architectural structures that at least approximated, if not fully embodied, a unique worldview. From this retrospective perspective it seems as if these past cultures did contain free humans who attempted to understand, contribute to, and even constitute their understanding of the cosmos through glorious works of art, but were not able to see their true nature; the "timeless" core of their agency. Although this claim of Pinkard's does have truth to it, for Hegel it illustrates the way in which these cultures appear from his own historical vantage point, not their own "timeless" truth.

For Hegel, our grip on this past culture's truth and way of life do stem from their place in his teleological narrative concerning the development of human freedom. In other words, Hegel is not under any illusions that the past could ever be understood independent of its relationship to the vantage point from which

the study of that past is undertaken. However, for Hegel the only appropriate way to perform such an undertaking is to do our best to understand each past culture on its own terms given the information that is available concerning that culture, as this will provide for a more comprehensive, exhaustive, and rich historical narrative in the end. It is in this sense that Hegel attempts to glean the way of life of those who lived *within* this symbolic worldview, writing,

The peoples, poets, and priests did not in fact have before their minds in this form of universality the universal thoughts lying at the root of their mythological ideas; and only if they had had them in this way could they have then intentionally veiled them in a symbolic form...the peoples at the time when they composed their myths lived in purely poetical conditions and so brought their inmost and deepest convictions before their minds not in the form of thought but in shapes devised by imagination without separating the universal abstract ideas from the concrete picture.¹⁷

For Hegel, the builders and artists of these past cultures did not hold their most fundamental religious truths and “deepest needs” in their minds as “universal thoughts” (concepts) and then take the step of working these thoughts and concepts into “symbolic form” through their representation in an architectural structure or some other concrete artifact. Rather, Hegel explains that the people of these cultures “lived in purley poetical condition;” by which he means that their most fundamental notions of human agency and moral and cosmic law were understood exhaustively through artistic, or what he refers to here as mythological, expression. Although we may look back at these past cultures’ works of architecture and distill a conceptually expressed philosophical understanding or a moral lesson, according to Hegel this concept based interpretive step was not taken by these people. In such cultures, artistic expression was itself the most fundamental way of understanding these laws that govern the cosmos and the human being. In the case of architecture, the very act of building was these artists’ most fundamental way of expressing and grasping these truths. The “content” of these cultures’ form of agency and understanding of the cosmos cannot be separated from the “form” through which they are expressed. Hegel’s outline of the possibilities and limitations of the material medium and form of architecture itself is also the outline of the very horizons and

¹⁷ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (311)

limits of the possible ways in which they could perceive themselves, their community, the cosmos, and the relationship between the three.

In the context of Hegel's teleological view of history, what is essential to understand about this relationship between the form of absolute spirit and its content is that it applies just as much to Hegel's own philosophically articulated historical and agential conception as it does to these cultures who made use of architecture and other mediums. Just as the material form of architecture generates the very horizons of possibility for understanding agent, community, history, and cosmos in these past cultures; philosophy, and the Christian religious doctrine in which Hegel claims it is rooted, generates the very horizons of possibility for this teleological reading of history which sees human agents as coming to the realization that they have always been free. According to Hegel, the understanding of the human agent as a free individual is only possible when the structure of that agent is expressed within a philosophical form. Although this philosophical articulation generates the very horizons of historical cognition and understanding for Hegel's own time, to claim that such a historical narrative can be reified independently of that time period is not possible. As for Hegel the historical, social, and political forces at a play in different time periods require not only different unifying principles through which they can be synthesized and harnessed into a singular normative orientation but also fundamentally different mediums through which that synthesis can be expressed; and only one of these mediums according to Hegel can properly and fully articulate freedom as that orienting principle.

From this point of view, we see that it is not fruitful to inquire into whether or not Hegel's teleological narrative is the "correct" narrative of history in the realist sense that Pinkard and Pippin suggest; as it is meant to be an exhaustive comprehension of the truth *of his own time period*. As Hegel himself writes that philosophy is "its own time comprehended in thoughts."¹⁸ From our current point of view, it will be more fruitful to analyze the form of absolute spirit which Hegel himself uses to articulate his teleological history and the historical conditions which make the transition to that form possible. Such an analysis will not provide us with an understanding of whether Hegel's teleological narrative of history can

¹⁸ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press, 2012. (21)

be reified as “true” independently of his own point of view in history, even Hegel himself would think this impossible. However, it can provide us with a grip on some of the implications of Hegel’s normative intervention concerning the nature of history and agency; one of which is, contrary to Pinkard’s interpretation, actually a call to finally let go of *any* “realist” notion of history or the human agent.

THE DEATH OF GOD AS THE PRECONDITION FOR TELEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Hegel sees the beginnings of the seeds that will grow into a full consciousness and social encouragement of individual freedom in humanity’s very first attempts to articulate the nature of a world independent of their own desires and cares. However, Hegel claims such seeds begin to explicitly take root within the primary normative principles of a culture in ancient Greece. Hegel writes of Greek art, the cultural phase which he takes to direct precede in culminate in this modern emphasis on the individual,

At one end, the ideal inclines still to the loftiness and severity which does not begrudge the individual his living stir and movement but yet keeps him still firmly under the domination of the universal: while at the other end the universal is gradually more and more lost in the individual, with the result that it is deprived of its depth, and this loss can be repaired only by substituting the development of the individual and sensuous aspect of the object, so that the ideal passes over from loftiness to what is pleasing and delicate, to cheerfulness and a coaxing gracefulness.¹⁹

As this trajectory towards an emphasis on individuality continues this harmony between the “universal” and the “individual, as Hegel describes them in this quote, begins to tip towards the pole of the individual at the expense of the universal. This manifests as a de-emphasis on the good of the state as the ground of the individual’s motivations shifts to the growing salience of the inner cares and aims of the individual themselves, even if those cares are oppositional to the flourishing of the public good. As Hegel writes in the earlier quote this results in the principle that orient this individual being “deprived of its depth.” Hegel sees the political causes of this normative change in the corruption of the Greek state.

¹⁹ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Terry, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (787-788)

This corruption naturally leads to the fostering of a rich inner life of rational capacities and emotional textures in which the individual is able to take refuge from, as well as critique, the corruption of the state and public life.²⁰ As an empirical example of such a development we need look no further than Socrates; an individual who orients towards their own individual reasoning capacities, independent of the norms and values of the state and the shared religion. This arising of the independent individual however creates a new problem; the possibility of alienation and conflict both within the state and within the human individuals themselves. Due to the fact that the individual could withdraw from the community based, moral, social, and religious principles which constituted many of their own goals, desires, and aims, the human agent could now come into conflict both with that community and with certain values and aims within themselves.²¹

In the wake of this growing salience of the individual's inner life we are left with a troubled relationship between the individual's inner life and the more comprehensive values and community from which that inner life still largely stems. Hegel understands Christian theology and his own teleological understanding of history which is rooted in that theological understanding to represent both the next gradual step in this process of emphasizing the sovereignty of the inner life of the individual, and a major shift in how we understand this relationship between the individual and its wider world and community. In Christianity, God and Jesus are one. The Christian God is "wholly God and wholly an actual man."²² Jesus not only lived within a fragile human body but also experienced a wide range of human experiences and emotions,

²⁰ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Terry, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (510-511)

²¹ I do not want to be mistaken with the view that this alienation and conflict only arises in the post Kantian world that JM Bernstein, Terry Pinkard, and Robert Pippin have all expressed. (Pippin *Beautiful* 46) (Bernstein *Our Amphibian Problem* 201) (Pinkard *Art* 3). In the introduction to the *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel clearly states of these kinds of oppositions that "in numerous forms they have always preoccupied and troubled the human consciousness" (Hegel *Aesthetics* 54). For example, Greek tragedy illustrates the possibility of an opposition not rooted in the conflict between the individual and the public, moral, or religious good. In *Antigone*, Antigone, who is motivated by familial commitment, comes into conflict with Creon, who is motivated by his commitment to the laws of the state. That being said, Hegel does think that this alienation has become more pronounced due to the arising of this independent individual, writing, "it is modern culture that has first worked them out and driven them out most sharply and to the peak of their harshest contradiction" (Hegel *Aesthetics* 54).

²² Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Terry, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (435)

both noble and lofty but also personal and selfish. Jesus performed miracles and announced the good news but also was tempted, wept, and doubted. The fact that Jesus is not only God's son but is also *God himself*, shows that the Christian God is a God that "has become flesh, born, lived, suffered, and died."²³ In this way, the Christian God illustrates the possibility and the reality of a union and harmony between these comprehensive communal principles and a human being that has a rich inner emotional and intellectual life. Such a union, however, is only achieved when Jesus becomes truly united with his Father in heaven through the crucifixion.

Hegel writes of the crucifixion,

It must not then be represented merely as the death of this individual, the death of this empirically existing individual. Heretics have interpreted it like that, but what it means is rather that God has died, that God himself is dead. God has died: this is negation, which is accordingly a moment of the divine nature, of God himself. In this death, therefore, God is satisfied. God cannot be satisfied by something else, only by himself. The satisfaction consists in the fact that the first moment, that of immediacy, is negated; only then does God come to be at peace with himself, and only then is spirituality posited.²⁴

According to Hegel the crucifixion of Jesus, the death of the "human" element of God must also be the death of God himself. This is because the human agent always gains their determinacy, their very possibilities of acting, feeling, and intending, *within* a certain notion of "God;" within a set of social institutions and moral, religious, and cosmological semantic spaces that structure the physical and conceptual spaces in which that agent interacts with others and their environment. As soon as a particular set of actions and orientations becomes unsatisfactory for a particular community of agents, the wider civilization and worldview in which those agents once interacted begins to disintegrate and transform; as this wider order has lost its concrete grounding in the activity of actual human beings. In Greece this manifested as the gradual emphasis on the inner life of the individual as the locus of dignity and value as corruption entered into the public good to which the individual was previously oriented. In this way, God and his "son," or the concrete human agent that lives within such a wider

²³ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Terry, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2010. (505)

²⁴ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, J. M. Stewart and H. S. Harris, University of California Press, 1988. (219)

world structure, always die together. When this death of a whole way of life occurred in ancient Greece, it was seen as a tragedy; as it led to an apparent chasm between the individual's inner life and the social, religious, and cosmological worlds in which that individual resided and interacted. The crucifixion changes our perspective on this transformation or the transformation of any form of life by understanding the "negation" of the "immediacy" of God, or the immediacy of any particular form of life, to be a necessary step for God to "come to be at peace with himself." On Hegel's interpretation Jesus submits to torture and death on the cross in order to show humanity that it is only after we accept the death of the "immediate" God that we can finally heal the gap that has grown between the independent individual and God. We must allow the "immediacy" of the principles which ground both the human agent and the moral, social, and cosmological laws in which that agent's cares and values are rooted to die.

The negation of the "immediacy" of any particular way of life or configuration of God does not mean we throw out the hope of any particular community or culture having a singular normative orientation, cosmological understanding, or set of ethical principles. On the contrary, this negation of immediacy allows Hegel to understand that orientation in a way that neither suppresses the individual inner life nor generates a chasm between that inner life and the wider social good and cosmological understanding in which that individual resides. Hegel writes of this new form of unity between the two,

The death of God, then, is not the final privileging of the individual and their inner subjective life over any public or communal good; it does not mark the end of the authority of moral laws, social norms, or universal laws of nature over individual human beings. Rather, the death of God heralds a new understanding of the relationship between these "objective" principles and the inner or life of the individual. The death of the "immediate" God illustrates that humans simultaneously constitute themselves and the principles upon which their social and cosmological worlds are based through their attempts to understand themselves and their place in the universe. New cultures and new communities "resurrect" themselves and their world from the ashes of the death of the gods of cultures past; from the ashes of old ways of life that had proved to be inadequate to the needs of the community. This process is nothing less than Hegel's teleological history itself; the process of new cultures continually rearticulating,

through absolute spirit, a new vision of the world and the human agent. This is why Hegel writes in this quote that “through death God has reconciled the world and “himself” eternally with himself. The “reconciliation” Hegel points to is not something that occurs once and for all, it occurs each and every time self and world are constituted in a way that is in line with needs and demands of the present community of human beings and empirical information they have documenting the history that has led to that present community. Thus, even though God “dies” in a sense, this does not imply that this theological doctrine and the pluralistic view of history which stems from it annihilates the need for a commitment to an eternal truth, to a determination of the true purpose of life and human history. However, the death of the “immediate” God does imply that such a truth can no longer be reified in the “realist” sense Pinkard and Pippin imply it can. By joining God with humanity this theological and philosophical intervention illustrates the way in which the very standard of any “truth,” is the way in which it provides a singular normative orientation and comprehensive theoretical explanation that is appropriate for a *particular* historical and cultural community. In this way, it links the eternal truth to a particular time and a particular set of historical and social conditions. It allows us to see that, although it is the case that each culture and community must find its own singular normative orientation and exhaustive explanation of the human, history, and the cosmos; that singular orientation and explanatory feat is the truth precisely because it adequately incorporates the forces at play at a particular time and history and the needs of a particular historical community.

CONCLUSION

Although in one sense Hegel’s philosophical form of absolute spirit represents the next natural step in this movement towards the sovereignty of the individual that begins in Greece it also represents a fundamental shift in understanding the relationship between this individual and the social, cultural, and religious principles which underpin the communal contexts in which they live and interact. In the Greek social space there is room for the individual to make free decisions, and with these free decisions, determine and constitute the good of the state and public life. However such decisions must be understood as direct manifestations of this good of the state; one cannot think of themselves as having

an inner life *separate* from the public good and critique or affirm the value of public, social principles based on their inner rational or emotional capacities. Even once this inner life does begin to develop towards the end of antiquity, it is seen as in opposition to the public good. The death of God, on the other hand, sees *any* public, communal, religious, or cultural principle of action and orientation as constituted out of the activity of free individuals working together to understand their place in the world. In this way, the death of God simultaneously “completes” this gradual historical transition towards the sovereignty of individual freedom and produces a paradigm shift that allows us to understand *all* past stages of this development as, in fact, grounded in this principle of individual freedom. If we look back on history after the death of God we cannot help but see the human community freely constituting and reconstituting their understanding of themselves and the world in a way that is suited to their own cultural, historical, and ethical demands. Further, we cannot help but see this trajectory of continual reconstitution as gradually leading towards our own ability to finally understand this kernel of freedom out of which all cultures constituted their understanding of themselves and the world, even if they were not aware of it at the time.

From this point of view we can understand why Pinkard and Pippin give their “realist” interpretation of Hegel’s teleological history and why Hegel himself also suggests a “realness” to the truth of history which he professes when he writes that philosophy’s aim is nothing less than the comprehension of “what is;” the one eternal truth of the nature of human beings, history, and the cosmos.²⁵ However, we can also look to the process by which Hegel arrives at this one truth, the way he looks into empirical historical data, artifacts, and information, and systematically weaves them together into a narrative that makes sense of how that history has led to the present moment; and through drawing this new connection between the past and the present, reinterprets the fundamental normative principles in which both are rooted. Obviously, such a systematic story is conditioned by the information Hegel has access to and the normative lens through which he inevitably interprets the significance of that information. In this sense, Hegel’s story, although the highest and most comprehensive truth of history he can hope to grasp from his point of view, is clearly conditioned by

²⁵ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press, 2012. (21)

forces that will continue to shift and transform as human culture progresses into the future. In fact, the normative intervention of Hegel's historical story itself will be one such factor that transforms and redirects the direction of such forces. This is why, in the very same passage where he describes philosophy's aim as grasping "what is", he also writes that it would be "foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world."²⁶

Pinkard and Pippin are partially correct in interpreting Hegel as claiming to articulate the "truth" of history when he articulates its teleological nature. However, they miss the fact that the very Christian theology which they point to as making Hegel's realist narrative of history possible, in fact, illustrates an understanding of truth where that truth is "true" precisely because it accommodates and incorporates the present moral and cosmological commitments, and past historical information accessible from a *particular* time period into a systematically unified narrative of the history and purpose of the human enterprise. It is in this way that, contrary to Pinkard's claim that Hegel commits himself to a strong Eurocentrism when he reifies his historical narrative as true for all future human cultures, I would argue that a nuanced understanding of Hegel's philosophy actually encourages us to take alternative cultures and points of view as seriously as we possibly can on their own terms. According to Hegel the most responsible way we can construct a historical narrative and suggest a normative orientation for our time is by ascertaining the best possible understanding of not only our own culture but also alternative cultures in both the past and present; what political strategies, social organizations, and moral principles have worked for them, which have not, and why. Such an analysis not only gives a sense of what principles and understandings have remained consistent across cultures but also helps us to understand the pitfalls of principles and understandings that have proven to result in instability, violence, and unrest throughout history. Of course, Hegel's own analysis concludes that it is a lack of understanding of the way in which any moral, social, or cosmological enterprise must be rooted in the free actions of the human community that has led to instability in many cultures. We may very well charge Hegel with Eurocentrism

²⁶ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press, 2012. (22)

concerning this conclusion. We may want to argue that other cultures did emphasize human freedom and his analysis is uncharitable, or that their instability was actually due to other causes that may not have been internal to their own way of life and moral principles (a possible example for certain cultures Hegel discusses could be colonialism). Even so, Hegel's philosophical spirit encourages us not to accept or deny the narrative of history and human purpose which he took as "true" for his own time period but to come up with our own that incorporates changes in historical understanding and information since that time period. In order to follow in Hegel's legacy we must take other cultures, as well as our own, as seriously as possible if we are to construct a comprehensive narrative that is grounded upon a normative orientation that truly contributes to human flourishing. As Hegel himself writes in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,

This is the function of our own and of every age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and in so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In thus appropriating it to ourselves we make it into something different from what it was before.²⁷

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²⁷ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. Robert F Brown and J M Stewart, Oxford Press, 1994. (1)

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