

Hegel and the Present¹

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Abstract: Hegel has assigned the task to philosophy of reconciling the logic (thought) and of history (time). In order to accomplish it, he conceived of a new concept of “present” (*Gegenwart*), distinct from that of a given actuality (*Jetzt*), namely the concept of “effectivity” (*Wirklichkeit*), which manifests the eternal activity of Spirit, its presence to itself that is impossible to be identified at any finite observable moment, here and now. This comprised that the concept of “the end of history” will guarantee a proper timeless significance: it coincides with a special event located somewhere in the course of time and as such likely to be announced or prophesized; but it represents the impulse that leads the entire cycle through which the Spirit becomes real; accordingly it finds itself constantly in this cycle, the eternal present of a history that, having always already begun, must never be completed.

Keywords: Present, Hegel, History, Logic, Lebrun

“One of the most difficult tasks of Hegelianism is to elaborate a concept of ‘presence’ which is free of any reference to a ‘presentation’.”²

Gérard Lebrun

Let us begin from a well known expression, which enigmatically summarizes - it is an introductory formula - the meaning and the issue of the Hegelian project: “to recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present” (*im Kreuze der Gegenwart*); the existence of a separation is posited in this way, as is the need to overcome it. The sentence which precedes it immediately explains its meaning: “What lies between reason as self-conscious spirit and reason as present actuality, what separates the former from the latter and prevents it from finding satisfaction in it, is the fetter of some abstraction or other which has not been liberated into [the form of] the concept.”³ The difference is between: on the one hand, the rose of reason, that is to say, the conscious mind of the self in the absolute and timeless perfection of

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¹ This paper was first published in Cahiers philosophiques n°13, décembre 1982, p. 7-19

² Lebrun 1972, p.50

³ Hegel 2003, p.72

its system (it is the sphere of the *Offenbarung*). On the other hand, the cross of the present, that is to say, the present reality through which the Spirit “appears”, through the tearing of finitude (this is the sphere of the *l'Erscheinung*). To philosophise is to reconcile these two terms, that is to say to pull them from their mutual isolation, from the abstraction in which they are initially locked, to concretely think their unity: therefore, it is to resolve the contradiction of the infinite and the finite, which is also that of thought and of time, or even that of logic and of history.

What does this mean: to think concretely the unity of logic and of history? This means to think this unity, not as a formal or given unity, but as the work of the Spirit who, at one and the same time, thinks and produces itself as *present*. In this sense, we can say that the notion of the present gives the key to the entire Hegelian project, in as much as it is the point where the contradiction of thought and time is resolved. Which means that the present, is another name for the effective: *wirklich*, that is to say of the real as it is for the Spirit which assimilates it, understands it, and produces it.

In what sense is the present, for Hegel, the other name, the proper name we might say, of the concept? What does this mean: thinking the present, thinking in the present?

This may initially be understood negatively, by elimination: philosophy thinks the present insofar as, according to Hegel, it deals neither with the past nor with the future. Firstly, philosophy does not deal with the past as such. Thus, when it considers universal history in order to express its rational meaning, it considers its sense as present, and not as past: “the point of view of philosophical history is not abstractly universal, but concretely and eminently present (*gegenwärtig*) because it is the Spirit which is eternally with itself and for whom there is no past.” Here, Hegel adopts an antiquated position which, on the contrary, seeks to retain and assimilate the past as it is: “When we go through the most remote past, we are always dealing with something present (*gegenwärtig*) because our object is the idea of the Spirit and we consider all history as its appearance (*Erscheinung*). Philosophy always has to do with the present, the real (*die Philosophie hat es mit dem Gegenwärtigen, Wirklichen zu tun*). The moments that the Spirit appears to have left behind, continue to be grasped by him in his actual depth. Just as he had passed through these moments in history, he must traverse them in the present (in der *Gegenwart*) - in its proper concept.”⁴ Rational thought, therefore, is only interested in the past to the extent where it can turn it into something present, i.e. integrating it to the life of the concept: from this

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4 Hegel 1963, p.30, 215

perspective, it maintains only a negative relation with the past as such.

Hegel extends this remark in relation to all the other forms of life of the Spirit. For example, in the lessons on aesthetics, at the end of the first part which is dedicated to “the Idea of beauty,” concerning whether the artist can borrow from the past the contents of its representation Hegel writes: “no matter how well and how precisely we know it; but our interest in what is over and done with does not arise from the pure and simple reason that it did once exist as present. History is only ours when it belongs to the nation to which we belong, or when we can look on the present in general as a consequence of a chain of events in which the characters or deeds represented form an essential link.”⁵ Thus, here we find that the same idea exists, strictly speaking, has value only to that which is present, and it is the present which determines the point of view from which all that is historic can be recuperated.

It's also the same argument that applies to the history of philosophy: “We are not dealing with the past, but with thinking, with our own proper spirit. Thus, it is not in reality a history, or better, it is a history which at the same time is not a history. For the thoughts, the principles, the ideas which are offered to us are of the present. They are determinations of our own proper spirit. What is historical, that is, of the past, is no longer, is dead. The abstract historical tendency that deals with inanimate objects spread heavily in recent times. It is a defunct heart which finds its satisfaction in occupying itself with what is dead, with corpses. The living spirit says: “let the dead bury the dead.”⁶ The past only makes sense insofar as it leads to the present. The privilege of the present - according to the famous formula: “*die Gegenwart ist das Höchste*” (the present is the highest)⁷ – is the consequence of the evolutionary perspective, and so recurrent, adopted by Hegel on everything that is historic: it is one of the expressions of rational teleology.

Moreover, philosophy does not concern itself with the future either, insofar as it forbids itself from prophesying over what “ought to be”. Thus Hegel remarks about the “New World”: “As a Land of the Future, it has no interest for us here, for, as regards History, our concern must be with that which has been and that which is. In regard to Philosophy, on the other hand, we have to do with that which (strictly speaking) is neither past nor future, but with that which is, which has an eternal

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5 Hegel 1988, p.272

6 Hegel 1979a, p.156

7 Ibid. p.686

existence — with Reason; and this is quite sufficient to occupy us.”⁸ Through philosophy, we have a relation “with that which has been and that which is”: that is, to what has been in so far as it is, as we have already shown. This remark, which concerns America, “land of the future”, applies also to the Slavic peoples, of whom Hegel says, at the end of the *Lessons on the Philosophy of History*, that they have not yet exhausted all the potential that they carry in them: “These people did, indeed, found kingdoms and sustain spirited conflicts with the various nations that came across their path. Sometimes, as an advanced guard — an intermediate nationality — they took part in the struggle between Christian Europe and unchristian Asia. The Poles even liberated beleaguered Vienna from the Turks; and the Slaves have to some extent been drawn within the sphere of Occidental Reason. Yet this entire body of peoples remains excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason has assumed in the World. Whether it will do so hereafter, is a question that does not concern us here; for in History we have to do with the Past.”⁹ We are dealing with “the past”, in so far as it can be thought of an “appearance” of the Spirit, therefore in the present.

This exclusion of the future from the field of philosophical reflection must be replaced in the context of the condemnation of the ideal, abstractly opposed to the reality of what is: this theme is fully developed in the preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights*. From this point of view, if philosophy always comes “after”, as the well-known metaphor of the owl of Minerva shows, it is because it cannot come “before”: because it refuses any anticipation, any speculation on what has not yet happened: this position is, moreover, the correlate of the recurrent approach which envisages all reality from the point of view of a teleology.

This philosophical reflection, not taking into consideration what belongs to the past and to the future envisaged as such, seems to explain the exclusive privilege that it grants to the present by elimination: the present is what remains when we have done away with the past and the future, what comes before or after. But is this negative consideration of the present, obtained by subtraction, is it authentically rational? Is it adequate to the contents of what the present is, in the sense of a positive affirmation, according to which is present to that which is presented? And what exactly is the nature of this content?

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8 Hegel 2001, p.104

9 Ibid. p.367

To conceive of the present negatively is also to consider it as a moment of time, alongside those other elements that are the past and the future. But yet, time, in its unfolding, is precisely that negativity which makes it come after [*succéder*] distinct moments: “Time contains the determination of the negative. For us, this is something positive, a positive fact; but, it can also mean the opposite. This relationship with nothing is time and this relation is such that we cannot only think it, but we can also grasp it by sensible intuition.”¹⁰ The present is something negative insofar that it results from the passage of what was to come into something that is actual, which itself must be transformed into something past. In this sense, we can identify the abstract paradoxes of which time is the occasion, or rather the pretext: the past of a thing is to have been to come; and its future, is to become past. So, insofar as the present is of time, that is to say, is inscribed in its course, it seems that it cannot be conceived positively, that is to say concretely: what then justifies its rational privilege?

To try to answer this question, we can refer to a passage from the *Encyclopedia*: “The present, future, and past, the dimensions of time, constitute the becoming of externality as such, and its dissolution into the differences of being as passing over into nothing, and of nothing as passing over into being. The immediate disappearance of these differences into individuality is the present as now, which, as it excludes individuality and is at the same time simply continuous in the other moments, is itself merely this disappearance of its being into nothing, and of nothing into its being.”¹¹ The abstract present, which, as such, is reduced to an external form, is the present reduced to the limits of a finite actuality: it is the present considered as an exclusive present, this present, which as such is condemned to disappear and remains necessarily external, in the same way as the future from which it originates and the past in which it goes, to the eternity of the concept. The concept itself is timeless in the sense that it does not pass.

In so far as it is reduced to such a “now” (*Jetzt*), the present (*Gegenwart*) has no right to any rational privilege. As stated in the remark which follows paragraph 259 of the *Encyclopaedia*: “The finite present is the now fixed as being, and as the concrete unity, distinguished from the negative, the abstract moments of the past and the future, it is therefore the affirmative factor; yet in itself this being is merely abstract, and disappears into nothing”. The present, brought back to the finite existence of what actually exists, that is to say, returned to the objective

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10 Hegel 1993, p.181

11 Hegel 1970, p.233

representation of a given – or even: a *Gegenwart* returned to the objective “presence” of a *Gegenstand* - is precisely the present of the abstract representation which illusorily fixes one “moment” of time and tries to grasp it as positive by arbitrarily eliminating the negativity which haunts and decomposes it, annihilates it: finally, it is the temporal “presence” reduced to a spatial determination, it is the Spirit bogged down in the exteriority of what is purely natural. It is not, therefore, in this actual presence of what is simply present that we must seek a rational content: the latter is necessarily absent.

The difficulty that we encounter here is of the relation between thought and time. Thought seeks to grasp the Spirit, as such, in its eternal presence to itself (*Anwesenheit*): this is why it must, in a certain way, be freed from time, from finitude, which is the external form of its unfolding: what “appears” in time is exposed to the negativity of time, and is therefore condemned to disappear like all that is limited.

But for thought to be freed from time, it must resort to the intermediary of time itself, through which it is necessary for thought to “pass” in order to reach that spiritual world where it is at home, beside it (*bei sich*). It is not possible to, one might say, “jump over time”, because time is the form by which thought reaches eternity. In this sense, the activity of thought is necessarily temporal. It is at this level that the typically Hegelian problem arises: thought must reflect on time, or rather reflect time, not only as something external, but insofar as it is bound to it by a relation of belonging. Thought belongs to the order of time, thought is “time,” which means that every thought, that is, each of the realizations of the Spirit, comes “in its own time”: It corresponds to a moment of time which can be rationally determined, according to its own necessity.

As a result, the relation of thought to time is double, it is also, therefore contradictory. On the one hand thought, in so far as it is its own proper “act”, appears as the outcome of time: it gradually forms over the course of this temporal future, where the limited figures follow, that emerge one after another, in the context of an oriented development, the “becoming the self of truth” [*devenir soi du vrai*]. Furthermore, thought, throughout this progression, pursues a single goal which is to “get out of time”, and thus to detach itself. From the point of view of this end, the negativity of time appears as absolute negation, the negation of negation, which returns to itself to eradicate itself: if time has a speculative function – it is the place of the appearance of thought - it is precisely because of this power that it holds to eliminate itself in its own process. In this sense the end of time - in this very precise sense: the goal pursued by time in its unfolding - is

eternity, which is the specific element of the self-consciousness of the Spirit.

The difficulty, which has torn Hegel’s interpreters, is whether this end of time is the end [*fin*] also in the other direction of this term: a completion, a culmination, that is to say, a limit. Is the end of time a moment of time, the one through which time is done away with, which disappears to give way to the eternity of the Spirit which has been completely and definitively reconciled with itself? The end of time, is it to reach this eternal present that no longer passes, now (*Jetzt*) forever fixed in its unalterable actuality, in the positivity of that which is wholly and definitely fulfilled, of what can not be surpassed, surmounted, after which nothing more can be thought? The aporias that we encounter here are those which also cross, and tear, the traditional conception of the end of history.

To escape from these aporias, let us return to the question we asked earlier: in what way is the present specifically rational? To answer this question, let us start from the interpretation of Hegelianism proposed by R. Kroner¹² (R. Kroner – *Von Kant bis Hegel* (Tübingen 1924) t. II p. 505 – *System und Geschichte bei Hegel* (Logos t. XX 1981 p. 243)). The latter remarks first of all that Hegelian thought to all appearances re-emerges with the eschatological speculation, as it developed in the beginnings of Christianity: temporal existence has meaning only insofar as it is lived in expectation of a promised end, of the next and inevitable parousia. But this expectation, which is constantly delayed and disappointed, seems to be given an effective term by - in a Hegelian sense - the speculative system: in absolute knowledge, does not history fully accomplish its rational destination? Could we not also say, then, that it comes to an end? But what does this mean: to reflect on this end as present and effective? Does this mean that it is identified at a given moment, and therefore limited by time, to a singular historical and philosophical actuality, which could be the time of Hegel himself?

The absurdity of such a position has been repeatedly denounced. By Nietzsche, for example: “History understood in the Hegelian manner has been mockingly called the action of God on earth, God being himself only a creation of history. But this God, inside the skulls of Hegelians, has become transparent and intelligible to himself, and dialectically climbed all the degrees of its becoming until this revelation of itself so that for Hegel the summit and the terminus of the universal process (*der Höhepunkt und der Endpunkt des Weltprozesses*) eventually coincide with his own Berlinian existence. He would even have said that anything

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¹² Kroner 1931, p.505; Kroner 1981, p.243

that comes after him would have no more value than the coda of the universal rondo or, more precisely, would be superfluous. He did not say it; on the other hand, he implanted in the generation impregnated of his thought this admiration for the “dust of history” which is transformed at every moment into an admiration for success and leads to the idolatry of reality, this idolatry in which we have generally sought to repeat the mythological formula: “to do justice to the facts”. When one learns to bend the back and lower one’s head before the “power of history” one ends by appreciating with the head, like a Chinese figurine [*magot chinois*], no matter what power.”¹³This, Hegel himself “did not say,” Nietzsche rightly observes, who blames this illusion for the weakness of the “Hegelian skulls.”

What did Hegel say? “The finite present is distinguished from the eternal present, as it is the mode of the now and its abstract moments, as past and future, distinguish themselves from it as the concrete unity; but eternity, as it is a concept, contains its moments in itself, and its concrete unity is not that of the now/present, since it is the tranquil/quiet/silent identity, concrete as a universal being, and not what disappears into nothingness like/as becoming...”¹⁴. Eternity is this infinite present that cannot be confined within the limits of any finite actuality: one can say that it is essentially “in-actual”. On the contrary, the actuality of what exists now (*das jetzige*) is a particular determination, a moment of time. The present, in so far as it is the concept itself grasped in its effectiveness, possesses a rational dignity because it does not consist in such an abstract moment of time, which carries, within it the conditions of its annihilation. To what extent does this present still have a relation to time? Perhaps we must say that it is time itself, grasped in the totality of its unfolding, as a totality, apprehended in its concept, insofar as it is the concept itself in its concrete identity to itself.

This is why it is not possible to say that eternity is external to time: thus it does not succeed time, by the effect of a momentary interruption of its unfolding: “The Notion of eternity should not however be grasped negatively as the abstraction of time, and as if it existed outside time; nor should it be grasped in the sense of its coming after time, for by placing eternity in the future, one turns it into a moment of time.” (Encyclopedia, par 258, Remark). Eternity, the infinite present, is in time, not after it, insofar as it is time itself, and not one of its moments, time conceived in totality, such as it is from the point of view of speculative

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13 Quoted from Lefebvre 1970, pp.82-4

14 Hegel 1963, p.202

thought, which expresses its truth. The task of philosophy, in the Hegelian senses, is to grasp eternity as present, that is to say, as actually real, and not as past (a lost origin) or to come (a project, a hope not yet accomplished); it is also to grasp the present as eternal, from the point of view of its immanent reality: “to recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present”.

From a speculative point of view, we must therefore reverse the previous formula: if thought belongs to time, in the course of which it appears, it is insofar as time itself, taken in the totality of its concept, belongs to thought, that is, is in itself rational. The concept is therefore this knowledge of time which apprehends its intrinsically rational character, recognizes it as the self-presence of the Spirit and thus masters it, fulfils it. Now this knowledge of time is also a temporal knowledge: but, in so far as it becomes conscious of this determination, and recognizes its necessity, it dominates it, assimilates it, transfigures it; thus it accedes to its own eternity which is in time without being of time, that is to say without depending on that negativity which constitutes time as such.

So, the identity of the present and eternity does not depend on the particular conditions of a specific and limited historical moment: on the contrary, it is from the thought of this identity, which is the concept itself, that all moments of history can be understood in their intrinsic necessity. To reproach Hegel for having pretended to identify himself, insofar as he represents such a moment in history, with a total reason from which he himself would be the culmination, completion, is to reverse the terms in which Hegel himself reflected the relation between thought and time. A text by M. Guérout gives us an example of this misapprehension: “In admitting that Hegel, by his identification of logic and history, validly formulated the mode by which philosophies succeed each other and are linked together, he is right to say that his present is confounded with eternity, for the systems which succeed him could not bring other conceptions of the Spirit, opposed to this mode of its realization, would furnish, with respect to their contents in relation to it, no essential difference; The story would well be stopped... If, on the contrary, we wish to affirm that other presents will destroy the actual philosophical present and bring new contents, we must assume that any theory relating to the reason of these new presents must itself be destroyed by them. Thus the mere possibility of history abolished at once a possible system of history. “ (Philosophie de l’histoire de la philosophie (Aubier 1979) p. 265). But, yet, the speculative enterprise, in the perspective opened by Hegel, consists precisely in leaving the framework fixed by such a problematic, to overcome the limitations

posed by this alternative: from the infinite point of view of the concept, the eternity is not what is realized in this or that present, brought back to its exclusive peculiarity, but it is that which is effected in the present as such, that is to say, all the present and in all present: it is the infinite present as absolute power of affirmation that has mastered every kind of negativity.

It follows from this that Hegel in no way excluded the possibility of new speculative developments which would refute the system in the historical form which it had itself given to it. It is what illustrates, for example, the following remark reported in confidence by one of his disciples: "You, revered Master, told me one day that you were fully convinced of the necessity of new progress and new forms of the universal Spirit, even beyond the science completed by you, without being able to give me a more precise account of these new forms." (Letter from Weisse to Hegel 11 July 1829). And this inability to foresee the future must be understood not as the symptom of impotence, the negative limitation of reason, but as the refusal to prophesy, to anticipate a reality that has not yet occurred, and as such unpredictable.

Through the notion of the present, apprehended in its rational content, Hegel wanted to think concretely the unity of the finite and the infinite, which does not allow itself to be reduced to a formal coincidence: "In the finite, we can neither experiment, nor see that the aim is truly fulfilled. The accomplishing of the infinite purpose consists therefore only in sublating the illusion that it has not yet been accomplished. The Good, the absolute good, fulfils itself eternally in the world, and the result is that it is already fulfilled in and for itself, and does not need to wait upon us for this to happen. This is the illusion in which we live, and at the same time it is this illusion alone that is the activating element upon which our interest in the world rests. It is within its own process that the Idea produces that illusion for itself; it posits an Other confronting itself, and its action consists in sublating that illusion. Only from this error does the truth come forth, and herein lies our reconciliation with error and with finitude. Otherness or error, as sublated is itself a necessary moment of the truth, which can only be in that it makes itself into its own result." (Encyclopaedia, addition to par. 212). The illusion dissipated by the rational system consists in believing that the infinite can be realized totally, as it is in itself, in a finite form: whereas it is realized in the finite, or if one wants, in history, only on condition that it is grasped in totality, that is to say, from the point of view of the Infinite which acts in him.

However, this illusion is at the same time the bearer of a secret

truth: the expectation it inspires of an ultimate moment when the tendency which pushes us towards the totality would finally be satisfied, in a definitive form, if it is ineffective, since it cannot lead to any realization, and, yet is not without content: in the process through which the Spirit pursues its return to itself, it plays the role of a subjective motivation, a ruse of reason that is fulfilled even in its illusions. The idea of a completion of the process of thought and history, which is deprived of all rational content, has therefore only the value of a speculative passion, and as such it is irreplaceable: it is that which inspires a philosophical interest and confers on it its necessity.

To conclude, let us cite a final text which, in a very Hegelian way, will bring us back to our point of departure. In the lessons on the philosophy of religion, it concerns the discussion of the mythical conception which places the ideal in a lost origin or a desirable future, Paradise past or future, in any case absent: "This theory determines its ideal as past or future. It is necessary that it posits itself and thus expresses truth in and for itself, but the defect is precisely this determination of past or future. It makes it something which is not present and in this way immediately gives it a finite determination. What is in and for itself is the infinite: nevertheless, thus reflected, it is for us in a state of finitude. Reflection rightly separates these two things; it nevertheless has the fault of keeping them in abstraction and it demands, however, that what is in and for itself must also appear in the world of external contingency.

Reason assigns its sphere to chance, to free will, but in knowing that in this world that is extremely confused in appearance the truth is nonetheless found.

The ideal state is a sacred thing, but this state is not realized; if we imagine by its realization the complications of law and politics, the circumstances which present themselves as well as the multiplication of human needs must all be in conformity with the Ideal, there is here a terrain which cannot be adequate to the ideal, but which must however exist, and where the substantial Idea is yet real and present.

What existence has of absurdity and trouble does not alone constitute the present. This present existence is but one side, and does not entail the totality which belongs to the present. What determines the ideal may exist, but we have not yet recognized that the Idea is actually present because we observe it only with finite consciousness. It is difficult to recognize reality through the bark of the substantial, and because it is difficult to find the ideal in reality, it is placed in the past or in the future. It is a possible labor to recognize through this bark the nucleus of reality - to gather the rose in the cross of the present, one

must personally take charge of the cross.¹⁵

(*Glockner t. XV p. 293 trad. Gibelin (Vrin éd.) t. II p. 32*). That is to say, we must philosophize.

Translated by:
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¹⁵ Hegel 1979b, p.32