

Hegel and Progress

The (phenomenologically) primal question is: *what should I do now?* One is led to other questions only in their contributing to this question's lasting resolution: equivalently, insofar as the posing of them is one of the question's momentary resolutions. It is worth noting that the question must have a lasting resolution if it is even to be answerable, there otherwise being no finite mechanism of explanation (this mechanism constitutes the lasting resolution) to enable and mediate our contact with the momentary resolutions: that is, if each of the infinitely many moment-possibilities called for the application of its own logic in deriving out the proper action, I would need an infinitely large meta-logic to decide from the nature of the moment which action I would take, and such a meta-logic is not humanly navigable. The question not having a lasting resolution would then imply a theory of time quite far removed from time as we experience it: a discrete rather than continuous time, for one.

We may call the enacting of the question's momentary resolution *praxis*; what is contributed by praxis—by action of any sort, but clearly there is no action that is not somehow praxis—to the enacting of the question's lasting resolution is *progress*, in a very weak sense. The word *contributed* may be interpreted in two fundamentally unrelated ways: either by one's praxis one has solved part of the problem, or one has partially solved the problem. For example, an argument (not a proof) toward a certain lasting solution does not solve any part of the problem, since a solution must be a proof, but perhaps partially solves the problem in its being assumed to "look like" the actual solution. The solution of part of a problem gives progress in a mathematical sense; the partial solution of a problem gives progress in a statistical sense.

In his propounding of a theory of history, which insofar as it must provide a mechanism for motion within history invokes some notion of progress, Hegel relies upon "mathematical progress," while Habermas, Honneth, and indeed most twentieth and twenty-first century interpreters of Hegel instead make use of "statistical progress." Statistical progress is quantitative, or at least ordinal: one is given a metric like *welfare* or *justice*, and the expectation is that in each situation one take steps toward betterment with respect to this metric. Hegel does admittedly often express himself as if he meant

that history were engaging in such an incrementation with respect to freedom: but importantly, for Hegel, I cannot know what freedom is until I am myself free. This incrementation, that is, only presents itself as such in my looking backward from modernity: from a situation in which freedom is maximized or, rather, attained. Given that critical theorists do not tend to believe that we are in a situation in which their metric of choice is maximized—given that they do not tend to choose metrics which even have maxima—they must assert their metrics to be apparent, derivable in situations that are not at the end of history. That is, for a critical theorist, the "right" metric cannot simply be the metric that is not superseded because the situation out of which it is derived is not superseded; it must be a metric that is not superseded despite the situation out of which it is derived being superseded perhaps *ad infinitum*, a metric which can be relied upon to give accurate indications despite the insufficiency, immaturity of the situation out of which it is derived.

A concept of statistical progress is much more clearly unsupportable than one of mathematical progress, the former being that "progress" which the anti-Enlightenment tradition (Sorel, Heidegger, Koselleck, so forth) have made the target of their polemic.¹ It is not my intention to reiterate in detail those arguments here: I will only touch on the most compelling, the Heideggerian one that the dependence of any notion of statistical progress on an always-handy, always-reliable, largely unchanging metric is a mechanism of representation, and thus engages in the veiling of being as all representation does. It should be said, however, that the representational character of statistical progress, which is not shared by mathematical progress, constitutes the cleanest report that can be made of the unrelatedness of the two.

Mathematical progress presents itself as the overcoming of a sequence of distinct deficiencies. On the level of the individual, Hegel presents these deficiencies as entities in line with what will later be called neuroses: as splits, *Ich-Spaltungen*, between "an external and an internal world."² These splits are experienced as conflicts between that with which the situation constrains me (that is: my subordination to physics insofar as I am a body, my subordination to the science of elective affinities insofar as I am a

¹ It is also, obliquely, the target of some attack in Allen's *The End of Progress*: see especially p14 for a line of argument that can be read as broadly aligned with what I sketch below.

² Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 49.

social atom, and my subordination to discourse insofar as I am a subject) and my sense of, desire for agency—or, even more primordially, my not being merely a body or social atom or subject, there being something about me which the Law misses. Of course, from another angle I am not in any way split; I am (supposedly) always experiencing myself and participating in the world as a unity: in Hegel's language, "I nevertheless exist [ek-sist: poke out from the world]."³ Thus is presented an opposition which may then be dialectically resolved; and in this way, after some number of iterations through the process (each deficiency having its own character, of course), I come to a point at which there is no friction between what the world demands of me and what I am capable of, at which I am *part of the world*. The existence of this endpoint is always given by the nature of the dialectical process, but is not deducible at any stage of the dialectical process; and of course the dialectical process is not itself able to be characterized before the arrival at the endpoint.

Given the discrediting of the concept of statistical progress, the concept of mathematical progress—a "return to Hegel"—seems to be the best concept of progress we can hope for. And this is true: insofar as there is to be any meaningful resistance against Hegel, one must carefully determine a way out of progress entirely. In fact, what separates schemata with mathematical progress and schemata without progress is the former's assigning of worth or meaning to at least some practical actions, and the latter's truculent refusal ever to do such a thing; the question, then, is not of proving Hegel *contradictory* or *wrong* or *absurd*. Pluralisms, like those of the critical theorists, can be revealed to be entirely unsupportable; but monisms—monarchies—can only be opposed, attacked, not invalidated: they demand the respect issued, say, foreign nobility, even when that nobility is of a nation at war against one's own. But it is necessary that such an attack be in this case launched; Hegel says: "The free man... is not envious, for he readily acknowledges and rejoices in the greatness of others."⁴ What this is is no less than an indictment of all who would dare to be envious in our current situation of maximal freedom: insofar as I persist in my envy, I reveal myself as primitive, immature, desperately in need of a continuation of my *Bildung*. The indictment

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 86.

is not moral, necessarily: a gender-minority envious of the station of men, or a person of color envious of the station of whites, is so not out of any "natural inferiority" or misdecision of theirs, but precisely because they have not been registered in those institutions which characterize masculinity or whiteness; the *Bildung* which would constitute registration as *white* or *man* is precisely the interval between them and whiteness or maleness, the interval which defines whiteness or maleness. Such a view must be held by any theorist of race or gender who acknowledges the fact of European or male cultural superiority; it is after all blatantly wrong and also quite anti-intellectual to assert there to have been a Walsler or Schoenberg of the Zulus, or to maintain that the Trinity is not the single most philosophically rich religious doctrine there is, but it is simultaneously blatantly wrong and rather offensive to attribute such advancements to some shared pseudobiological property of the group which is responsible for them, rather than to the group itself as institution (*institution* may mean *subjective spirit* as in Hegel or *material construct* as in Marx). This is all to say, Hegel's dictum is not an *insult* to the minority group, since the accusation it levels of improper envy precisely unrolls into a statement of what the minority group has always been attempting to establish: that it has had its development retarded, its potential limited—that it is oppressed.

But there is one envy that cannot be so explained away: the envy of the proletarian type toward his bourgeois masters, a particularly important case of which is the neurotic envy of the artist or thinker toward the common citizen. The proletarian or artist-thinker labors, suffers, and the bourgeois or common citizen does not labor nor suffer; yet per Hegel, if the artist-thinker is to envy the common citizen, the former must admit himself to be at a lower level of cultural development than the latter, despite the fact that what the latter knows as "his" culture is really entirely due to the former!

So the neurotic artist-thinker—of whom Heidegger might be taken as indicative—is driven by some sort of pride to assert the impossibility of progress. As was already pointed out, it is not for him to attack the idea of a lasting resolution to the question: what *should I do now*? What is to be attacked, then, is the idea that praxis contributes whatsoever—by any definition of the word—to the attaining of this lasting solution, to its being put into practice. Such an attack, such a presenting of a neglected alternative, might possibly turn out in the vein of the following (which is only to be taken

as a very brief sketch): while Hegelian praxis is φάρμακον, Heideggerian praxis is always pure symptom—a revelation *via* some deficiency of the fallenness of the world, and a simultaneous acknowledgment that this deficiency, fallenness will never be remedied through the work of those who are also fallen. Hegel the gnostic would himself be the god (or the fascist autocrat) which is requisite; Heidegger the Marcionite would only live out his life waiting for one.⁵

⁵ I have tried to stay clear of theological discourse for most of the paper, being no theologian and even more certainly no orthodox one—being no Christian, in fact—but I do think that a great many of Hegel's insights are perhaps ideally phrased as a radically new account of the Trinity and of the precise relation of God to man.