

Philosophy of History as theodicy

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Abstract

Taking Adorno's critique of Hegel's Philosophy of History as point of departure, this paper: (1) sketches the general outlines of the modern Philosophy of History in order to (2) spotlight their commonalities and differences. Hegel's Philosophy of History (3) can be described by considering pain and the negative. It highlights these topics in a way that had never been done before, so it became a turning point, as revealed by the fact that he treated the Philosophy of History as theodicy. Despite his initial intention of carrying out theodicy, which Leibniz depicted in a metaphysical and abstract way, in the specific field of history, this intention was realised not in the Philosophy of History (it only conceptualises theodicy as viewed as a framework of meaning for action) but instead in the absolute spirit, in his reference to Christianity and specifically to incarnation and Christ's death.

Key words: Hegel, Philosophy of History, theodicy

It is common knowledge that with his Philosophy of Universal History, Hegel explicitly set out to carry out Leibniz's programme of developing a theodicy freed from his metaphysical, abstract or indeterminate approach in the specific sphere of history. After outlining the general principle under which history must be considered, namely that it is governed by reason, *nous* or divine providence, he concludes that "our mode of treating the subject is, in this aspect, a theodicy – a justification of the ways of God – which Leibnitz attempted metaphysically in his method, i.e., in indefinite abstract categories, – so that the ill that is found in the World may be comprehended, and the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil. Indeed, nowhere is such a harmonising view more pressingly demanded than in Universal History." (Hegel, 1970: 48).

In this text, we shall examine the expression of Hegel's position with all its nuances, such that according to his assessment: 1) we shall begin by recalling the general outlines of the critique levelled by Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) against Hegel's Philosophy of History; 2) we shall recall the main lines of this

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philosophy in the modern age in order to situate Hegel's attempt to build his Philosophy of History as a theodicy within the tradition of the Philosophy of History; and finally 3) in conclusion we shall outline the features that distinguish Hegel's position and to what extent it is a theodicy.

1. Adorno's critique

Adorno's criticism of Hegel is far-reaching; it can be regarded as a correction of the entirety, albeit not without having combed through the philosophy he criticised and learned a lot from it, thus making his criticism even more piercing. Here, therefore, we cannot enter into this criticism in its entire breadth and depth; instead we shall limit ourselves to his criticism of the Philosophy of History meant as theodicy. Another exception is that here we take Adorno's position as typical of many others which are usually not as understanding of Hegel's philosophy which perhaps without even entering the letter and spirit of Hegel's Philosophy of History simply discredit it with the cliché that reduces it to exposing the triumphal march of reason and spirit in the world.

Adorno views Hegel's *Philosophy of Universal History* as an expression of the domain of the universal¹ (Adorno, 1970: 319, 304, 305) and of the thought of identity (308, 318). For this reason, he considers the *Philosophy of Law* and the *Philosophy of Universal History* as intertwined. With this union, he does justice to Hegel's approach, which indeed does make the *Philosophy of Universal History* the last chapter in his *Philosophy of Law*. His main thesis can be summarised by saying that "the cult of the world's course" (301), which the *Philosophy of Universal History* discusses, is nothing other than the reflection of the "violence of the universal" (304), of the "predominance of unity" (308) over individuals. In this sense, the meaning of the *Philosophy of Universal History* which comes to the fore is that history forms a continuous, unitary process aimed at a purpose, which is what unifies it and endows it with meaning. This purpose is freedom. History appears to us as progress: the process of the spirit "is essentially progress" (Hegel, 1970: 70).

This unitary and teleological process subsumes and absorbs individuals as the means to achieve the end sought. Not doing justice to the individual, to the private person, betrays the subject of the process (reason or the spirit) as a private individual: "What tolerates nothing particular is thus revealing itself as particularly dominant. The general reason that comes to prevail is already a restricted reason... [because]... it is imposed" (309). With this contrast, the presumed unity is revealed to be a split and reason is shown to be irrationalism (ibid).

This marginalisation of individuals is associated with the marginalisation of suffering, since it also becomes a mere instrument or necessary step to achieve the end; it becomes the negativity that the spirit must accept, but that in the process does not become something accidental: "the negativity of the world spirit becomes an accidental trifle" (298).

¹ Curiously, this is the oft-repeated and not always well-grounded cliché from different perspectives, since such a varied range authors as K. R. Popper and K. Löwith concur on it (Bouton, 2004: 111 s.).

In any event, Adorno is aware that Hegel does not ignore suffering and negativity: “Hegel himself had conceived universal history as unified merely on account of its contradictions” (311). It is the same contradiction that lies within the conception of society, which “stays alive not despite its antagonism but by means of it” (312). What he criticises is that despite this, Hegel clings to the idea of continuity and unity. To Adorno, this continuity does not exist except on the technical plane, but not on the human plane: “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (312). What is more, postulating this continuity and with it progress is “cynical”, since it means “say[ing] that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it” (312). This assumption that all suffering is for a higher good is tantamount to reducing it to mere appearance, to a *quantité négligeable*, since by doing so he transfigured “the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute”, through which this suffering is approved and justified, such that the totality “would teleologically be the absolute of suffering” (312). “The world spirit ... would have to be defined as permanent catastrophe” (312). With this, he is not rejecting the *Philosophy of Universal History* but more regarding it as a reflection that is not only possible but also necessary, but now on the conditions under which history, originally a process of progress, has inverted to become the opposite: regressive (Geyer, 1980). And thus concludes Adorno’s devastating critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Universal History*.²

2. The modern Philosophy of History

To calibrate the characteristics of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Universal History*, we should recall the general features of the Philosophy of History in modern times so it will be easier to see both the commonalities and differences.

The Philosophy of History is a typically modern and enlightened concept, created with the intention of affirming the domination of reason and man. It is a figure from modern thinking. The term was first used by Voltaire (1694-1778) in his work *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* (1756), and he devotes a work entitled *Philosophy of History* (1765) to this subject (Voltaire, 1990).³ He wrote against or in contrast to the theology of history (and with the view of replacing it), as Bossuet had outlined in his work *Discourse on Universal History* (1681), which presents an updated version of the consideration of history as the history of salvation according to the Augustinian model.⁴ Thus, the Philosophy of History was founded as a secular and secularising response to the theology of history, which claims that the principle that governs history is not God’s will or Providence but man’s will, actions and plans, and this gives

² Regarding the criticism of the Frankfurt School in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Universal History*, albeit expressed more according to Horkheimer’s thinking, see Schmidt (1976), Geyer (1980), the extensive, well-documented study by Zamora (1995), Schäfer (1996). Estrada (1996) examines the issue from this perspective.

³ In any event, Voltaire cannot be regarded as a philosopher of history in its later sense; he offers instead a “philosophical history” (Dierese & Scholtz, 1974; Zamora, 1995: 56). The collective singular term “history” was forged at this time, leading history to be conceived as a totality, as shown by Koselleck (1967 & 1975); Baumgartner (1987).

⁴ A brief survey of Bossuet’s theology of history can be found in Angehrn (1991).

expression to the enlightened faith in progress. With this, it became the adversary more than it sought to, since the progress of the human genus came to play the same role that Providence used to play, meaning that it would have to accept the weight of theodicy (Zamora, 1995).⁵

This connection in the birth of the Philosophy of History is not regarded as coincidental but is instead claimed by some to be the very fabric of the Philosophy of History, such that according to K. Löwith, for example, the “philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfilment and...ends with the secularisation of its eschatological pattern” (Löwith, 1967: 11); that is, it ended with what should have served as an example. What causes its birth also caused its death.⁶

What is the Philosophy of History about? “The interpretation of History [that is, the Philosophy of History] is primarily and ultimately an attempt to understand the meaning of historical action and suffering” (Löwith, 1967: 13). Its theme is therefore the meaning of history, of all individual and collective human action in this undefined stream that is history, which in turn acts as a determinant of acting and suffering. This question about meaning emerges in light of the experience of non-meaning, in general, and especially in view of pain, as pain seems to be non-meaning par excellence. To confer meaning on the entire heterogeneous body of human action and suffering, the Philosophy of History starts with a general principle and bears it in mind when reading and interpreting history, such that the Philosophy of History is nothing other than “a systematic interpretation of universal history following the thread of a principle through which historical events and consequences are unified and directed toward an ultimate meaning” (Löwith, 1967: 11).

Modern Philosophy of History provides an optimistic, enlightened answer to the question of the meaning of history: the very trust in reason – which is the framework within which this philosophy operates – is reflected in the course of history, since it entails a constant strengthening of reason. In short, the meaning of history is progress, the progress of reason, of knowledge (versus obscurantism, ignorance and superstition) and of freedom (versus domination and slavery). By trusting in reason, triumph is assured. Reason is what detects the meaning of chance when the goal is to refute Providence, and it detects the meaning of regularity when the goal is to control the chaos in history. The concepts of labour and political economics play a crucial role in this effort. The idea of progress stems from the development of technology. Technology and its relationship with the principle of labour serve as mediators between nature and history which, in the realm of theory, would result in the

⁵ Regarding Voltaire’s philosophy of history, see Angehrn (1991: 69-71).

⁶ This view of the philosophy of history as the secularisation of Christian eschatological thinking has been the target of numerous critiques from different points of view, which we shall not explore in depth in this paper. Historical thinking was forged not exactly because of the secularisation of eschatological thinking but because of early Christianity’s experience of the tardiness in the fulfilment of parusia, which had been expected as imminent, and with which the mediation of the Church appeared to span the abyss between the expected parusia and its failure to arrive immediately, thus instating time in its unity as history, in tension between what has already happened and what has not yet fully come to pass. According to this critique, historical consciousness did not emerge from the secularisation of eschatology but from the mundanisation of the Church. This is explained by Baumgartner (1987: 17).

establishment of a reciprocal relationship between the historicisation of nature and the naturalisation of history, and would thus contribute to making it plausible to think that real progress is necessary. Formulas within this train of thought can be found in the metaphors of the “fable of the bees” by Bernard de Mandeville (1670-1733) and in the “invisible hand” coined by Adam Smith (1723-1790), which become the guiding ideas in the understanding of history (Zamora, 1995: 57).

In the *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit* (1794) by the Marquis of Condorcet (1743-1794), we can see a paradigmatic outline of the Philosophy of History from the modern age. It includes the ideas of Voltaire and Turgot (1727-1781) (Turgot, 1991)⁷ and is characterised by positing the indefinite growth in the sciences as a model of historical progress. After the explanation of a philosophical history, whose organising principle is progress in knowledge, the last chapter, entitled “The future progress of mankind”, outlines the concept of progress. This vision of the future is grounded upon the considerations of the past, and experience is used to predict the course of the future. The past has revealed the essence of history, just as by observing the facts of nature the physicist manages to learn about it. “The only basis for belief in the natural sciences is the idea that, whether we know them or not, the general laws governing the phenomena of the universe are necessary and constant. Why should this same principle be less true for the development of the intellectual and moral capacities of humankind than for other natural processes?” (Condorcet, 1980: 225) Because of his application of physics to history, called him the “Newton of history” (Löwith, 1973).

“Our hopes for the future condition of the human species can be reduced to three important points: the destruction of inequality among nations; the progress of equality within each people; and the real betterment of humankind” (Condorcet, 1980: 225). With this he lists the pathways along which progress shall unfold. At any rate, he soon makes the effort to nuance it: “It will therefore be necessary to show that these three kinds of real inequality must diminish continuously - without, however, being completely eliminated. For they have natural and necessary causes” (Condorcet, 1980: 230). What he stresses the most is “instruction”, because “well-organized instruction corrects the natural inequality in human capacities” (Condorcet, 1980: 234), and reveals it to be the engine that fuels progress, since through it mankind is perfected, and progress lies in the perfection of mankind.

Progress is based on a specific trait of mankind: human perfectibility, which means that man is constantly perfecting himself and he thus has been harnessing his possibilities and capacities throughout the course of history. The first explicit formulation of this principle comes from Condorcet: “The aim of the work that I have undertaken and its results will be to show by appealing to reason and fact that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now on words independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limits than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us” (Condorcet, 1980: 82).

⁷ Turgot’s decisive contribution could be considered the extension of the idea of progress to all fields: to the experimental and applied sciences, to language, to the mechanical and fine arts, to politics and to society; see Angehrn (1991).

As can be seen, history is linear progress based on nature which also unfolds naturally, even though it requires man's action, which helps in the unfolding of the natural process. Here we are quite far from glimpsing any even vague consideration of pain, and even less of theodicy.

Herder (1744-1803), too, offers a view of history with a somewhat ingenuous and objective feel, à la Condorcet. In *Another Philosophy of History* (1774) he describes the development of history following the phases of human biography: childhood, youth and adulthood, but as a process aimed at the goal of the realisation of human perfection, of full humanity. Only once, in order to expose the inexorable and necessary nature of the process, does he mention pain, by stating that "the course of Providence goes to its goal even over millions of corpses," (Herder, 1983: 147). This unitary, teleological view of history would later be fleshed out in his work *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (1784-91), in which he prioritises the diversity of nations and cultures to spotlight simultaneity above the idea of progress (Herder, 1959).

Similarly, Kant (1724-1804) establishes the first principle of the philosophy of history as a general principle, namely that: "All natural capacities of a creature are destined to evolve completely to their natural end" (Kant, 1975: 35). This principle allows us to glimpse how nature does not frustrate us or let us down; what is sown germinates, grows and ripens. Therefore, this is also the statement of a teleological meaning of nature, which is extended to the teleology of history and confirms optimism in the course of history.

However, the question soon arises: in whom and when does this "complete and adequate" development of "all natural capacities" happen? The second principle answers it: "In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are to be fully developed only in the race, not in the individual" (Kant, 1975: 35); that is, the capacities of man, which point to the use of reason, achieve the full development not of the individual but of the race, throughout history. In the explanation of this development of mankind's capacities throughout history, a factor that includes negativity or pain enters the equation. Indeed, according to the fourth principle, "The means employed by Nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society, so far as this is, in the end, the cause of a lawful order among men", which is nothing other than "the unsocial sociability of men, i.e., their propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society" (Kant, 1975: 37). Therefore, Kant begins by considering evil, but without it in any way darkening his enlightened, optimistic vision, and he only considers it "the means" through which positive effects are yielded for historical development as a whole.

With this we have formulated the *underpinning*, the reason why there is history, why man develops in history: man is essentially a perfectible being; he is equipped with capacities that can and should be used. Secondly, we have formulated the *goal* of history: perfection and the realisation of mankind's essence and potentialities, especially reason and freedom, which are the human traits, the achievement of full humanity as a quality of man, reason and freedom. And thirdly, we have identified the *subject* of history: the human race or humanity, not individuals. Therefore, the *meaning* of history consists of

progress towards the goal of the full realisation of humanity, the development of reason and the realisation of freedom.⁸

This progressive, optimistic vision of history can be regarded as culminating in the vision offered by Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). In his text "What Is, and to What End Do We Study, Universal History?" (1789), he claims: "History, like the Homeric Zeus, looks down with the same cheerful countenance upon the bloody works of war and upon peaceful peoples that innocently nourish themselves upon the milk of their herds. However lawlessly the freedom of man may seem to operate upon the course of the world, she gazes calmly at the confused spectacle; for her far-reaching eye discovers even from a distance where this seemingly lawless freedom is led by the cord of necessity" (Schiller, 1969: 159). Schiller begins by mentioning "the bloody works of war", but he suggests an Olympic view of it, like that of "Homeric Zeus", because from a distance he sees the goal towards which everything is headed "by the cord of necessity", and this sparks in her a "cheerful countenance". We would be unable to find a greater contrast with the view of history proposed by Adorno and by Walter Benjamin before him.

3. Hegel's philosophy of universal history

With these schematic lines from the modern Philosophy of History as the background, we can now try to sketch Hegel's vision of it and compare and contrast them, outlining some continuities and divergences.

3.1. *"The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom"*

Hegel, too, views history as progress.⁹ This is perhaps the most important shared feature with the typically modern view which sometimes leads them to be equated with each other. Hegel views progress as the difference between the changes that happen in the natural order and the spiritual order. "The changes that take place in Nature ... exhibit only a perpetually self-repeating cycle; in Nature there happens 'nothing new under the sun'" (Hegel, 1970: 149). In contrast, "only in those changes which take place in the region of Spirit does anything new arise" (Hegel, 1970: 149). The possibility that something new might arise is due to the fact that there is another determination in mankind unlike natural things, and it is none other than "an impulse of perfectibility" (Hegel, 1970: 149). Therefore, at first it may seem as though Hegel shares the modern, enlightened view by adopting its concepts to explain that the spirit

⁸ These elements can also be found in Hegel's Philosophy of University History, albeit transformed because of his receptiveness to and transformation of Kantian philosophy. Horstmann (1982) studies the evolution of the conception of history in Hegel and summarises it by three milestones. This evolution can be explained by Hegel's clash with Kant; the Kantian conception of history is characterised by: 1) getting to know the subject of history, namely nature; 2) assuming that we cannot know this subject agent; 3) the purpose that nature pursues in history is the perfect political constitution. Hegel accepts 1 and 3 but is opposed to 2 with the transformation of nature into spirit.

⁹ Riedel (1982) views Hegel's Philosophy of History as a theory of progress; unlike his predecessors, he avoids antinomies precisely thanks to the concept of the spirit, which joins immanent need with exterior reference, with data.

becomes what it is or unfolds in history. However, he soon adds a significant nuance: “Perfectibility indeed is almost as indefinite a term as mutability in general; it is without scope or goal...: the improved, more perfect, state of things towards which it professedly tends is altogether undetermined” (Hegel, 1970: 149 and forward).¹⁰

And here we come upon a difference. Hegel may connect with the modern view, but he determines it and gives it a goal and a purpose that comes from the very concept of the spirit.¹¹ The spirit wishes to attain a “conception of itself” (Hegel, 1970: 152). With this, progress not only achieves a goal to which change is geared, but it also loses its indefinite nature in terms of both the goal and the content that should be developed in history. Progress ends when the concept is attained, when it is fulfilled (Amengual, 1998: 89). Thanks to this determination, progress also takes on a more specific content: “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom” (Hegel, 1970: 63). The goal of progress is not to reduce human capacities (skills) in general to perfection but specifically the capacity for reason; it refers to the realisation of the spirit. Thus, the criterion of progress takes on a much broader and more radical dimension, and, in the development of universal history, it takes on a clearly ethical and political dimension.¹² This ethical dimension is not isolated from the others; to the contrary, it assumes religious progress in the sense that this consciousness of freedom was born through Christianity (Hegel: 1970: 62 and forward) and in turn entails progress in other spheres,¹³ such as the sciences and arts, industry and commerce, social and political relations, etc.¹⁴

¹⁰ “The representation of the education of the human race (Lessing) is spiritual, but it only barely touches on the topic we are examining here. In these representations, progress generally has a quantitative form. Ever more knowledge, more refined culture: pure comparisons; we could speak at length about this without indicating any determination or expressing anything qualitative” (Hegel, 1970: 150).

¹¹ In fact, Hegel (1970: 504) expresses approval of both the idea of perfectibility and the education of the human race, since those who confirmed them “have sensed something of the nature of the spirit, of its nature”, and yet for those who reject it, the spirit is “an empty word” and history is “a superficial play of ambitions, of the so-called human passions”.

¹² In this, too, Hegel faithfully follows Kant, who considers “a society in which freedom under external laws is associated in the highest degree with irresistible power, i.e., a perfectly just civic constitution, is the highest problem Nature assigns to the human race; for Nature can achieve her other purposes for mankind only upon the solution and completion of this assignment” (Kant, 1975: 45). To Hegel, as well, the purpose of the universal history is to establish a post-revolutionary state (Siep, 1995).

¹³ According to Jaeschke (1996), there is incoherency between this vision of history, close to the spirit, which Hegel never manages to fully develop, and his *Philosophy of Universal History*, which is reduced to the history of states, so Hegel is simultaneously the one who discovers history, wraps it in his *Philosophy of Universal History*, and then forgets the concept of history that should be that should be exposed at the start of the philosophy of the spirit, since it is its proper sphere.

¹⁴ Hegel particularly outlines this congeniality of all the cultural forms of spheres from the same period as expressions of the same spirit (Hegel, 1970: 120-138) in *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, when he speaks about the historical nature of philosophy. His argumentation can be summarised precisely by the fact that since the spirit is the subject of history, this subject shall be presented differently depending on the philosophical view of history, such as if history is universal (political), or about art, religion or philosophy. But regardless, the spirit is what unfolds throughout history, and each period and each people is an expression of it. It is the same

Progress in freedom is necessary precisely because it is based not on nature but on the spirit, on its concept. “According to this abstract definition it may be said of Universal History, that it is the exhibition of Spirit in the process of working out the knowledge of that which it is potentially” (Hegel, 1970: 61 and forward). The acquisition of this knowledge is not theoretical; instead the spirit gradually acquires it as it objectivises its essence, freedom, such that it can then gain consciousness as a subject, as something external that is there. Progress in the consciousness of freedom assumes the realisation and objectivisation of freedom, such that the spirit can gain consciousness of itself by means of this objectivisation. It is natural for the spirit to unfold, to bring to reality and action the self-knowledge it made of while also gaining consciousness of itself in its objectivisable unfolding, in the objective realisation through which “the world of the spirit takes place in itself as second nature”. “The essential nature of freedom - which involves absolute necessity - is to be displayed as coming to a consciousness of itself (for it is in its very nature self-consciousness) and thereby realising its existence. Itself is its own object of attainment, and the sole aim of Spirit” (Hegel, 1970: 63 and forward). The statement that “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom”, continues by saying, “a progress whose development according to the necessity of its nature, it is our business to investigate” (Hegel, 1970: 63). The need for progress is nothing other than the fact that the spirit must realise itself, must be unfolded according to its concept of being-at-work (Hegel; 1970: 50 and forward).¹⁵

3.2. Turning point: View of affliction and indignation in history

After these observations on the approach that Hegel shares with modernity with certain nuances, namely the conception of history as the necessary progress towards the goal of freedom, when reading his lessons on the Philosophy of Universal History we can immediately notice certain traits that signal a turning point, such as his consideration of evil and pain.¹⁶ No matter how much everything is ultimately justified as a means to an end, we cannot ignore the setbacks or pain that permeate history. His perspective on history is not an Olympian view à la Schiller but an afflicted one because of the spectacle of pain it affords. Similar to Kant’s style, Hegel, too, points to something natural, namely desires and needs, as the engine of history. “The first glance at History convinces us that the actions of men proceed from their needs, their passions,

figure of the spirit that unfolds in the different spheres of human activity: constitutions and forms of government, ethics, social life, skills, mores and customs, art and science, religion, relations with other states, industry and commerce, etc. (Hegel, 1966: 38). For this reason, Jaeschke (1996), accurately observes that Hegel reveals historicity, history itself, the history of the spirit, in his methodological reflections on the history of philosophy.

¹⁵ Regarding history viewed from the concept of the spirit, see Hesse (1998). This equation between spirit and history had already been noted by Theunissen (1970).

¹⁶ When considering the common point of departure of the philosophies of history from German idealism, which is nothing other than the history of Kantian reason, Baumgartner (1987: 4) notes that compared to the others, Hegel shows a “greater proximity to historical reality” based on the fact “that Hegel articulates in an essentially more acute way the negative driving moment, or negativity, and in this way despite the general process of ascent and progress, at the same time he can diagnose moments of decline and make them understandable”.

their characters and talents; and impresses us with the belief that such needs, passions and interests are the sole springs of action — the efficient agents in this scene of activity” (Hegel: 1970: 79).

In this vision of history, all virtues are dispelled since “private aims, and the satisfaction of selfish desires, are on the other hand, most effective springs of action. Their power lies in the fact that they respect none of the limitations which justice and morality would impose on them; and that these natural impulses have a more direct influence over man than the artificial and tedious discipline that tends to order and self-restraint, law and morality” (Hegel: 1970: 79). This dimension of history is neither glorified nor justified, nor can it be. “When we look at this display of passions, and the consequences of their violence; the Unreason which is associated not only with them, but even with good designs and righteous aims; when we see the evil, the vice, the ruin that has befallen the most flourishing kingdoms which the mind of man ever created, ... a moral embitterment — a revolt of the Good Spirit (if it have a place within us) may well be the result of our reflections” (Hegel, 1970: 79 and forward). Regardless of the progress in the consciousness of freedom, history does not thus become progress in happiness; instead “the History of the World is not the theatre of happiness. Periods of happiness are blank pages in it” (Hegel, 1970: 92). There is certainly satisfaction in history, but it is not what is called happiness; instead it is the satisfaction of certain ends which are above individual ends.

Hegel does not eliminate the entire mass of pain in history by rationalising it; to the contrary, he takes it so seriously that he ineluctably poses the need for a reconciliation, and not just any reconciliation, but the kind effected by God, which is externalised and enters human history in order to overcome what is negative. This knowledge of reconciliation is theodicy, which takes place in the process of history. For this reason, if the process of history is universal judgement, it is not a vengeful judgement but a conciliatory one (Jüngel, 2001: 25).

With this we encounter the uniqueness in Hegel’s conception of history. First, Hegel claims that judgement does not take place at every moment and in every individual (as in Schiller’s poem *Resignation* [1983]), nor does it take place within consciousness (as in Kant) but instead in the course and progress of history, from one moment to the next, from the current era to the next one. In this way, it turns out first that the judgement judges, discerns and assesses what has a future, that is, freedom, that which serves freedom. And secondly, this conception of judgement is stripped of any moralising dimension (Jüngel, 2001: 27). Yet this equation of judgement with the process of history poses serious difficulties. Unlike the Christian conception of reconciliation, which in itself refers to eschatological fulfilment and is a reconciliation with God despite the negative aspects of the world, Hegel’s conception is characterised by these two particularities: it is a reconciliation in the present and with what is negative, not with God. To Hegel, therefore, neither God the judge nor personal responsibility before God has a place in history.

To calibrate even further what this justice consists of which discerns what serves freedom, especially in its political realisation, we should bear in mind that this judgement is the reason in history, but not the reason of history (Jaeschke, 1996: 370). That is, it does not mean that history (or the winners in

history) are always right, but that history is inhabited by reason, which exercises as such, that is, as a guide for human actions. This does justify not everything that helps a presumptive or perhaps planned end (even if it is a collectively planned end, or even politically planned by the state) but freedom, nor does it exclude actions that are contrary to the end, or backward movements. What is more, this presence of reason in history is the assumption upon which the Philosophy of History is based, the one on which it must be based, but its job consists of showing it within the specific course of history. The need for this principle as the point of departure is justified by comparing it with the way the natural sciences operate: “The investigator must be familiar *a priori* (if we like to call it so), with the whole circle of conceptions to which the principles in question belong — just as Kepler ... must have been familiar *a priori* with ellipses, with cubes and squares, and with ideas of their relations before he could discover, from the empirical data, those immortal ‘Laws’ of his, which are none other than forms of thought pertaining to those classes of conceptions” (Hegel, 1970: 168). “To him who looks upon the world rationally, the world in its turn, presents a rational aspect. The relation is mutual” (Hegel, 1970: 31)¹⁷.

3.3. Dialectical view: The astuteness of reason

These considerations which we have just made based on noting the vast amount of pain in history were based simply on the “first glance” (*nächste Ansicht*) (Hegel: 1970: 79). Certainly this first glance is not the last one, or the right one. Indeed, the right one knows how to look beyond those natural motives; it has an endless vision like that of the secret chamber (Hegel, 1952) with the contemplation of the passions and ambitions of the individual protagonists of history. Reason knows how to discover a meaning in this disastrous, pain-filled history. However, integrating evil, as Hegel does, does not consist of painting it as the shadows that contribute to enhancing the light of the whole, as the typically modern argumentation goes (Hügli, 1980),¹⁸ nor does it consist of integrating it as a means or necessary step for our good, according to the truism that all growth involves pain. Hegel precisely thinks that the means are so closely bound to the end that the end cannot be achieved with means that contradict it.¹⁹ The use of means is the fulfilment of the end. The dialectical vision of history that Hegel proposes consists more of the consideration that everything, both good and evil, passions and virtues, is the means, the fibres with which the spirit ultimately weaves the process of its realisation.²⁰

This vision of history as a process of the realisation of the spirit is radically asserted by unity and global nature, such that what it becomes is its action, the immanent action that includes all levels and spheres. The spirit is not

¹⁷ Regarding Hegel’s concept of history which joins empirical data and principles *a priori*, see Álvarez Gómez (1980).

¹⁸ René Descartes (1977: 51) claimed this clearly: “But I cannot therefore deny that there may in some way be more perfection in the universe as a whole because some of its parts are not immune from error, while others are immune, than there would be if all parts were exactly alike”. Spinoza (1632-1677) radicalised this principle by stating that we cannot even speak about errors (Spinoza, 2000: 185).

¹⁹ Regarding the relationship between the means and the end, see Hegel (1971).

²⁰ This dialectical conception of history has been outlined by Álvarez Gómez (2004).

a thing that emerges from a natural substance or not; rather it only reflects the rising ability of beings, who are always naturally situated but pursue a collective way of life that is regulated by rules, and that also recognises and fosters autonomy. In this way, all events, phases, nations and cultures, actions and suffering a part of the same process aimed at a single end.

This convergence of subjective, private ends with the universal end of the spirit is what Hegel called the “astuteness of reason”, which has sparked countless interpretations as well as many misunderstandings. Let us first recall the place and specific meaning of this expression and then examine its meaning within the Philosophy of History.

The place of the astuteness of reason is teleology within the logic of the concept. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel explains astuteness as the power or violence that man exerts over an object to turn it into a means; it consists of the fact that the end “throws itself in the first place immediately upon the object, which it appropriates to itself as a Means; just as it also determines another object through it, it can be considered *power (Gewalt)*, in that the end has a nature very different to that of the object [...]. Nonetheless, the fact that the end is in a *mediated* relationship with the object and *interferes between it* and another object can be regarded as the astuteness of reason.” (Hegel, 1969: 180). As can be seen, the *astuteness* consists of not directly instrumentalising the object but doing so through another object which acts as a means. Rationality lies in this mediation (Jaeschke, 1996). In any event, it is about finite purposes and ends. How can this model be transposed to history? Certainly only through a transformation (Jaeschke, 1996) precisely because history is not about finite ends, such as satisfying primary needs. Let us see, then, in what respects the model is transformed.

First, a disclaimer that affects Hegel’s vision of history and any other vision: History is never the result of the conscious action of individuals, not even if we believe that everything that happens is the outcome of human action. There are other crucial forces and powers in history, or the confluence of these forces and powers, which escape the action of individuals. And yet, the fact that history is the result of conscious action can only be formulated as a desire, exigency or postulate. Seeing the course of history as a whole, the view that some individuals have acted as a means for its specific development should come as no surprise, and therefore they are the means history has used to unfold itself (Jaeschke, 1996).

Secondly, precisely in the Philosophy of Universal History, if on the one hand we can find statements, following what we have said above, which claim that individuals are the means for the spirit’s realisation in history, in this same context Hegel makes his own considerations about individuals as ends in themselves (Jaeschke, 1996). He thus states about laws and principles: “Of themselves they are powerless. The motive power that puts them in operation, and gives them determinate existence, is the need, instinct, inclination, and passion of man. That some conception of mine should be developed into act and existence, is my earnest desire: I wish to assert my personality in connection with it: I wish to be satisfied by its execution. If I am to exert myself for any object, it must in some way or other be *my* object. In the accomplishment of such or such designs I must at the same time find *my* satisfaction; although the purpose for which I exert myself includes a complication of results, many of

which have no interest for me. This is the absolute right of personal existence — to find *itself* satisfied in its activity and labour.” (Hegel, 1970: 82)²¹ In this sense, it should be asserted that in both the *Philosophy of Law* and the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel maintains that the individual should never be used solely as a means as a categorical Kantian principle imperative.

Thirdly, the relationship between the means and the end, as we have seen, is internal, according to Hegel, never purely external, such that the end is carried out by use of the means. Therefore, when it is said that individuals serve the realisation of the universal end of reason, this is not an external end, but instead they realise their own ends by realising this universal end. And this is also asserted as their right. The universal end cannot be an end that does away with individuals in order to be realised; rather it must encompass them. This means that the universal also includes particular ends and this is how it becomes universal.

Fourthly, dealing now more directly with the meaning of the expression “astuteness of reason” (Jaeschke, 1996), it refers to the relationship between the object which has become a means and the end which it serves. Seen in this light, this expression cannot be used to explain history, since history has no object which could become a means for the end of history. In history it is a sort of mediation between the concept of history and the particular facts and events that the historian is viewing, or, more specifically, the relationship among different ends. Indeed, what the “astuteness of reason” aims to explain is the problem of the relationship between the end of the spirit of the world and the ends of individuals; between the universal, unconscious end and the particular, conscious ends of individuals. With this, it aims simply to explain and thus to show some connection between events in order to interpret the course of history as progress. The spirit of the world is not a yet another individual subject that enters into conflict or competition with individuals. The problem that Hegel tries to explain with this is the same one that Kant explained with his “intention of nature”. Ultimately, their aim is to explain why historical processes, unlike natural processes, irreversibly head towards an end, an orientation that can be explained not as the outcome of divergent individual ends but instead, from the outset, as the universal end or an internal logic. Hegel’s interpretation of history works with the distinction of two ends which are not mutually opposed to each other but instead operate at different levels. “The spirit of the world” is not an actor the way individuals are. The universal end of the spirit is not the same as the particular ends of individuals, which are formulated independently of those of the spirit of the world. Therefore, the “‘astuteness of reason’ consists precisely of the fact that the “spirit of the world” lets individuals pursue their own finite ends – unconcerned about their universal end, about which they are oblivious – and of the fact that despite everything [the spirit of the world] achieves its universal end through the mediation of individuals’ particular ends” (Jaeschke, 1996).

Fifthly, in this way Hegel can fully claim the individuality of individual agent subjects who are guided by their own interests, passions and needs, and thus contribute to the end of history (Jaeschke, 1996). In the course of history, not only is there “the infinite right of the subject [...] to find *itself* satisfied in its

²¹ This right was formulated by Hegel in FD §§ 123-124, pp. 230-236 (Amengual, 2001).

activity and labour” (Hegel, 1970: 82), but also, with that, it contributes to the universal end since “nothing great in the World has been accomplished without passion” (Hegel, 1970: 85).²² Hegel is aware of the gulf separating particular and universal ends, and he does not deal with this idealistically, assuming, for example, that history is moved by ideas or ideals, as if individuals were seeking to achieve the universal end of the spirit; rather he does so very realistically by stating that individuals seek their own particular interests and seek to satisfy their interests and needs. Hegel explains the course of history, which wends its way towards the realisation of the universal end of the spirit, by the concept of the spirit, which is an activity oriented at itself, and specifically at self-knowledge. This activity does not take place at a higher level, above or beyond finite individuals; rather it also entails their knowledge, their will and their action, even if it happens without the knowledge of the actors in history – at least at first. “The History of the World begins with its general aim – the realisation of the Idea of Spirit – only in an *implicit* form (*an sich*) that is, as Nature; a hidden, most profoundly hidden, unconscious instinct; and the whole process of History (as already observed), is directed to rendering this unconscious impulse a conscious one. Thus appearing in the form of merely natural existence, natural will – that which has been called the subjective side – physical craving, instinct, passion, private interest, as also opinion and subjective conception – spontaneously present themselves at the very commencement. This vast congeries of volitions, interests and activities, constitute the instruments and means of the World-Spirit for attaining its object; bringing it to consciousness, and realising it.” (Hegel, 1970: 86 and forward).

In short, reconciliation “can be attained only by recognising the positive existence, in which that negative element is a subordinate, and vanquished nullity” (Hegel, 1970: 48). Specifically, this knowledge consists of two sides: “the ultimate design of the World must be perceived; and, on the other hand, the fact that this design has been actually realised in it, and that evil has not been able permanently to assert a competing position” (Hegel, 1970: 48).²³ With this, Hegel not only proposes a reconciliation in knowledge but also suggests that it take place in history at the level of the objective spirit. In fact, this removes the theological dimension which the word and the project of theodicy embodied, such that the reconciliation with the divine is not with God personally but with the spirit, which happens in the sphere of actions, customs and institutions, whose action and knowledge are aimed at freedom (Jaeschke, 2003).

3.4. *The vision of history as a guide for action*

Because of its systematic place, at the end of the objective spirit or the philosophy of law, the Philosophy of Universal History takes on a peculiar meaning simply in that it is part of ethics in a broad sense, of the objective realisation of the spirit, which implies that it ultimately aims to say something

²² This claim can also be found in Hegel (1969: 383).

²³ Here we can find the only place where suffering, according to Adorno’s expression, can be viewed as “trifling” when stating: “This reconciliation can be achieved only through knowledge of the affirmative, in which the negative disappears as something subordinate and overcome”.

about human action, define its meaning and framework of expectations and, in short, the ends and motives for this action. This aspect has been highlighted by E. Angehrn, who stresses the role played by historical-universal individuals in the Philosophy of Universal History and shows how in them history becomes, even if unconsciously, the guide for action. And precisely because what is worthwhile is action in history and in its universal individuals, this action requires an orientation that history itself does not have, so he points to a higher level, that of the absolute spirit, which reveals what the concept of freedom means. For this reason, the Philosophy of Universal History is the conclusion of the objective spirit and the step towards the absolute spirit (Angehrn, 1981; Riedel, 1982).

However, if we take the concept of objective spirit in the sense of the human self-understanding that the human community tries to carry out in its relationships and institutions, then as it unfolds in history, the objective spirit serves the purpose of guiding the action and cooperation of individuals and communities. Seen from this perspective, “Hegel’s Philosophy of History is critical with all metaphysical eschatology, and also with any prognosis of progress which aims to be more than momentary guidance to guide action” (Stekeler-Weithofer, 2002: 141). In this sense, Hegel does not make a theodicy but instead makes theodicy a concept: his theodicy is not a question of belief or disbelief in God; the justification of God does not constitute the belief in God but “it has an explanatory meaning relative to practice. Whoever wonders about a ‘theodicy’ [...] is more seeking a specific horizon of expectations that opens up proper ways of life”.²⁴ This conception of theodicy very strongly accentuates Hegel’s idea that history is the process of self-realisation of the spirit, meant as freedom and, in response it frees this concept from all theological references.²⁵ Giving it freedom as the goal and its realisation in law, Hegel makes his thinking Kantian in that the “justification of Nature – or, better, of Providence – is no unimportant reason for choosing a standpoint toward world history. For what is the good of esteeming the majesty and wisdom of Creation in the realm of brute nature and of recommending that we contemplate it, if that part of the great stage of supreme wisdom which contains the purpose of all the others – the history of mankind – must remain an unceasing reproach to it? If we are forced to turn our eyes from it in disgust, doubting that we can ever find a perfectly rational purpose in it and hoping for that only in another world?” (Kant, 1975: 49). From this same perspective, Hegel transforms Leibniz’s theodicy, redirecting it at the course of history as a course aimed at freedom, and with it at the ethical realisation of the spirit, yet while trimming it back, at least usually or for the time being, to the theological dimension.

3.5. Contemplation of expiration

Another feature of Hegel’s vision of history, which also stems from its systematic place, shows that not only evil and pain contribute to the fact that it is an afflicted vision, but so does the expired nature of history. History appears

²⁴ He mentions Marquard (1990) in favour of the dissociation between the problem of suffering and the justification of God.

²⁵ Affirming the theological dimension inherent to history, as the realisation of the spirit, see Theunissen (1987, 1991, 2001).

not as the field of victory but as the field of fleeting, perishable things, as the succession of empires and cultures which, after they manage to blossom and take off completely, wilt and disappear. In fact, “the march of history” comes in stages,²⁶ each of which features a State, a culture which disappears once it has made its contribution to history (Hegel, 1970: 155 and forward). “When we contemplate the evil, the wickedness, the decline of the most flourishing nations mankind has produced, we can only be filled with grief for all that has come to nothing. Since this decline and fall is not the work of mere nature but of the human will, our reflection may well lead us to moral sadness, a revolt of our good spirit [...]” (Hegel, 1970: 79 and forward). We then feel the profoundest and most hopeless sadness, counter-balanced by no consoling outcome, against which we want to defend ourselves or from which we want to emerge, thinking that things are like that, fate, there is nothing to be done, we cannot change anything.

This vision of the expiration of history is reinforced if we bear in mind the parallelism which can be found between the Philosophy of History, which culminates the revelation of the objective spirit, and the concept of species, which culminates the philosophy of nature.²⁷ Hegel establishes this parallelism in his Heidelberg lessons on the *Enciclopedia* (1817); it thus appears in his explanatory notes in §448 of the first edition of the *Enciclopedia* (which corresponds to §548 of the third edition). The parallelism lies in the fact that just as animals disappear in their individuality and thus give life to species so that they themselves enter the universality of the species by extinguishing their individuality, so certain spirits of people also disappear and give life to universal history, such that they thus reveal their limitations and the fact that their self-sufficiency is subordinate and they enter the general history of the world, whose events reveal the dialectic of the particular spirits of the peoples. Hegel places the parallelism between the organic and the historic process of the species, in the sense that “just as in the organic process of the species with respect to individuals [they find in it] their loftiest universal essence – reconciliation – formally” (Hegel, 1973: 205). Just as the species shows the particularity and expiration of animals, universal history shows the particularity and expiration of peoples, nations, States, empires and cultures.

4. Conclusion

The idea of progress has been characterised as the last great myth of modernity: the myth of the progress of knowledge, of reason, of freedom or of emancipation. Of all the myths of modernity – which can still be said in the plural; they are all contained in each one, and in this sense the plurality does not break with monomythism – the most successful one, the primary, core and final one according to Marquard is “the myth of the unstoppable progress of universal history towards freedom under the banner of the philosophy of the history of revolutionary emancipation” (Marquard, 1981: 99).

²⁶ Hegel (1970: 155-157, 242-257) mentions four “realms” (the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman and the Germanic), while Hegel (1970: 61-64) only discusses three and omits the Roman realm; on this issue see Mayos Solsona (1990).

²⁷ Peperzak (1992) has drawn attention to and studied this parallelism.

This idea is the one that has become virtually wholly bankrupted in the 20th century; its failure and falseness have been revealed. Even though Hegel is unquestionably part of modernity, albeit with critics, he also draws from the belief in the myth of progress, also with critics. Specifically, the myth is broken by suffering, by physical and moral evil, by the expiration of what the spirit produces. In this sense, in Hegel we can witness a turning point, since in him the Philosophy of History is indeed posited as a theodicy, and this clearly means consciousness of the role played in it by evil and pain, that is, in the development of reason and in the realisation of the spirit. He begins to grapple with the problem, even though ultimately he still offers the theoretical, modern solution: a higher rational meaning justifies pain and negativity in general. The theodicy concludes and can be summarised in the “conciliatory consciousness”, for which “the thinking Spirit reconciled with the fact of the existence of evil” (Hegel, 1970: 48).

Hegel’s approach appears permeated by a twofold aporia, which becomes evident in his very interpretations of the Philosophy of History. The first aporia consists first in the fact that, as an outline of the process of the realisation of the spirit, universal history is progress in the consciousness of freedom, in which everything is integrated into and part of the same process that forms the spirit. In this respect, Hegel’s Philosophy of Universal History goes beyond the modern because it is more radical and far-reaching. In contrast, if it is only regarded as the political history of states, in that they are the political realisation of freedom, this excludes three spheres which are essential for the modern Philosophy of History, namely: 1) progress in man’s intellectual capacities and with it advances in the sciences and technology; 2) moral progress; and 3) the progress of happiness (Hegel, 1970: 92; Jaeschke, 1996: 369). This aporia can be expressed through the dilemma of whether the Philosophy of History is indeed the philosophy of history and, therefore, the history of the self-realisation of the spirit, or whether it is simply the Philosophy of Universal History meant as the history of the political realisation of freedom, of its recognition within the structures of the state.

The second aporia stems from the breadth with which the concept of spirit is understood. If we understand it in all its breadth (subjective, objective and absolute), then, at least as the point of transition from the objective to the absolute, it refers to the theological dimension, and thus the Philosophy of Universal History is indeed a theodicy, if not in itself at least for what it points to: the fullest realisation of the spirit as the absolute spirit. In contrast, if it is only viewed as the last chapter in the objective spirit, then it is not a theodicy but instead points to the concept of theodicy, in the sense of turning it into the instance of meaning for action. In this case, the Philosophy of Universal History simply offers clues to help us discover the meaning of human action and suffering (Stekeler-Weithofer, 2002).

This second aporia points to the clarification of the unknown. The requirement, which Hegel accepted, that his Philosophy of Universal History should be theodicy is not fulfilled in this philosophy but in the absolute spirit and specifically in the moment when “the *universal* substance effectively realised from its abstraction until *singular* self-awareness is exposed as an *assumption*, and self-consciousness, as *immediately identical* to the essence, exposes that *Son* of the eternal sphere transferred to temporality, and there it

exposes evil as overcome *in itself*; [...] dying in the pain of *negativity*”,²⁸ that is, at the time of the reconciliation realised by the Incarnation and the Cross of the Son of God, Christ. In this way, in the philosophy of the absolute spirit, and specifically in the philosophy of religion revealed and consummated, reconciliation takes place and with it the theodicy is fulfilled. Therefore, here is where we get a precise answer to the question about the meaning of history. Indeed, by presenting it as progress in the consciousness of freedom, progress in the ever more universal recognition of man, offering with this a framework of meaning for human action and suffering (the concept of theodicy), the question of whether there was room for recognition of the victims (if this concept of theodicy was fulfilled) remains unanswered. Here we can finally find this recognition. And Hegel thus concurs with Walter Benjamin’s vision that in order to do justice to victims, a theological vision of history is needed, or at least a metaphysical vision. Hegel has a metaphysics and theology of history in which the spirit, in its temporal realisation, loses nothing, nothing is left to oblivion or annihilation but instead everything contributes to the realisation of its essence, namely freedom in the sense of “the universal substance”. God has introduced human evil and pain into history and with it has taken on this entire mass of pain and has reconciled it with himself (Ottman, 1996).

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²⁸ See the commentary by Theunissen (1987: 274-290).

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