
REASON AND HISTORY: KANT VERSUS HEGEL

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Today I am going to challenge a certain understanding of Kant and his relation to Hegel. Since the view I will challenge is especially evident in recent work on Kant's practical philosophy, I will confine most of my remarks to that domain. At stake is the status of Kant's formalism and its relation to empirical content.

If we survey discussions of Kant's practical philosophy, we discover that there is much interest, of late, in the *non*-formal or empirical features of his theory.¹ Friends of Kant remind us that his practical philosophy is not just a formalism. They emphasize the various ways in which empirical facts not only do, but must play a role in his practical philosophy. They urge us to acknowledge his sensitivity to the variability of human nature and to the ways in which our faculty of reason is shaped by nature and by historical contingency. They insist that if we ignore the empirical elements of Kant's project, we get a significantly distorted and impoverished picture of the whole. We deprive ourselves of the chance to appreciate what is living in what sometimes seems to be a cold and barren theory; we lose a sense of its relevance for us *now*.

It is certainly true that Kant's practical philosophy is not a mere formalism in that it relies on empirical content in an essential way. It is also true that his works on practical anthropology and the philosophy of history have generally received far less attention than his writings on the metaphysical foundations of ethics. So, much of this recent emphasis on Kant's discussions of history and of the empirical features of human nature is a welcome development.

But I worry that this effort to correct the excessively formalist interpretation of Kant has had the following effect: the pendulum has now swung too far in the other direction. After all, too narrow a focus on the non-formal elements of Kant's practical philosophy can generate distortions of its own. If we concentrate our attention on the empirical bits of his theory, we risk forgetting his reasons for including the formal bits. We can convince ourselves that worries about his formalism, voiced by

Hegel among others, miss the mark or are over-blown. We can perhaps even persuade ourselves that if Hegel has anything of interest to tell us about the history of reason and the dependence of reason on nature and social institutions, Kant said it first.²

My reasons for worrying about this trend in recent Kant interpretation are in part crudely self-interested: I don't want to see myself and fellow fans of Hegel put out of work. But I have philosophical axes to grind as well. First, I think it is clear that the distinguishing marks of Kant's practical philosophy are its formal rather than its empirical features. Second, I believe that the concerns Hegel raises regarding Kant's claim to base practical philosophy on a formal foundation are deep and compelling. Finally, I think Hegel's own account of practical reason and of its relation to history is more than a mere continuation or elaboration of the Kantian program. In the transition from Kant to Hegel there is a genuine break, a break that results in a significantly different conception of human reason. This is what I will try to persuade you of today.

I begin my discussion with a brief review of the respective roles played by the empirical and formal features of Kant's practical philosophy. I then move on to make the case that the relation between the empirical and the formal is very different in Hegel. Again, my principal aim is to convince you that in the transition from Kant to Hegel we get a fundamentally new account of human reason.

I

In his Preface to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant assigns two principal roles to empirical content. We need to rely on what he calls "moral anthropology" to assist us both in determining the concrete *application* of the supreme practical law, and in ensuring that the law actually *motivates* us.³

Taking the application point first: Although Kant claims that the validity of the supreme law or categorical imperative extends to all rational natures, he is of course most interested to draw out its implications for human nature. His specific applications of the law rely on assumptions about our empirical natures, assumptions about who we are as creatures belonging to the realm of nature. One duty that derives from the categorical imperative in its application to human nature, for example, is the duty to refrain from arbitrary acts of self-destruction. This prohibition relies on the assumption that we are capable of self-destruction, that we are not just rational but also mortal natures. The duties that command us to attend to our own welfare and the welfare of others likewise depend on assumptions about our fragility and vulnerability, as well as our desire for happiness. Even the fact that we have to be commanded in morality reflects a feature of who we are as empirical natures. We have to be commanded, Kant tells us, because our wills are not "perfect" or "holy." Unlike perfect or holy wills, it is not our nature to always act in conformity with morality. Unlike perfect or holy wills, we have natural drives and inclinations, and these compete for our attention with the demands of duty.

Empirical facts figure in the application of the categorical imperative in a further way as well. Kant claims that the categorical imperative is our standard for assessing both the morality of our maxims and the rightfulness of our actions. The adequate assessment of maxims and actions, however, depends on their accurate description. We can only properly apply the categorical imperative, on his account, if we have singled out the morally relevant features of a given case. In this way, proper application of the law requires attention to empirical particulars.

As for the role of moral anthropology in *motivating* us to care about morality, Kant repeatedly insists that an interest in morality cannot be externally coerced. Although a state can coerce me to bring my actions into conformity with right, it cannot force me to adopt a particular maxim or value a certain norm. How, then, do I come to acquire that internal incentive Kant describes as “respect” for the moral law?

In his lectures on history, Kant offers conjectural reflections on how humanity as a whole has evolved to care about more than the satisfaction of its animal drives. An interest in morality, he claims, is possible only for beings possessing reason. Reason itself has a history, on his account. The emergence of reason in human history is very likely tied to the failure of instinct to meet the challenges of natural existence. Had nature been more generous in its endowment of our “animal gifts,” had it given us the “horns of the bull” or the “claws of the lion,” our faculty of reason would never have been awakened into action. We thus owe the emergence of reason to what Kant refers to as nature’s “parsimony.”⁴ Although reason is responsible for our advance from “barbarism to culture” and for the taming of our natural “unsocial sociability,” we have nature to thank for the fact that our capacity of reason has developed at all.⁵

Kant furthermore speculates that the emergence of reason has generated in us a host of complicated, artificial desires, such as the desires for esteem, power, and beauty. In addition, we have developed an appreciation for reason itself, for the special power it gives us to control our destiny and choose a way of life. Over time, then, we have come to value reason’s ability to give itself law. We have acquired an interest in freedom.⁶

Of course, our evolution into sophisticated rational natures has not transformed us into consistently moral natures. Kant is well aware of this; he recognizes that the motive for morality is “acquired” rather than “innate.”⁷ The motive for morality can be acquired, on his account, in that it is possible for us to at least on occasion be moved by more than the need to satisfy our passions and inclinations. If we are to acquire virtue, Kant argues, we need as a necessary condition a faculty of reason awakened into action. But further conditions must be in place as well. Moral education, for example, can perform the valuable service of teaching us to “feel our own worth.”⁸ Education in turn requires the support of a state that values enlightenment over blind obedience, and that is able and willing to back its values with resources.⁹

This completes my brief sketch of the role of empirical content in Kant's practical philosophy. I have provided a quick overview, and have passed over a great deal of rich detail. But even were we to add that detail in and offer a comprehensive account of the various ways in which empirical content figures in Kant's practical project, we would still be a long way from capturing what is distinctive about his approach. Kant did not earn his place among the giants of western philosophy because of his natural history of reason. His reputation in practical philosophy is not based on his account of the empirical conditions that aid the application of the moral law, and that awaken in us a moral incentive. Although he undeniably reserves a place for moral anthropology in his system, the task of providing a moral anthropology is not terribly high on his philosophical agenda. There is an obvious explanation for this. Kant was preoccupied with what he took to be the far more fundamental project of *grounding* practical philosophy. He saw himself as responding to an urgent need, namely, to save ethics and human freedom from the threat of skepticism.

There is, I think, nothing radical or novel about this representation of Kant's priorities. Indeed, some of you may find it odd that I take the trouble to emphasize them. But, as I noted in my introduction, there is a tendency in recent discussions to downplay Kant's preoccupation with the project of a grounding. Those eager to highlight the place of empirical content in his system tend to pass quickly over the fact that his profound contribution to practical philosophy is his unique response to the challenge of securing its basis. Kant's strategy for securing its basis depends in an essential way on his formalism, on his insistence that ethics must rest on a non-empirical or formal foundation. His insistence upon this condition, as well as his unique way of satisfying it, is precisely what distinguishes his approach not just from that of Aristotle, Hume, and Hutcheson, but also from that of Habermas and Rawls.

As for *why* Kant insists upon a formal grounding, he gives us essentially two arguments. The first reflects his commitment to a Newtonian view of nature. For Kant, as for Newton, nature is a system of deterministic mechanical laws. Within the realm of nature, nothing happens for which there is not a sufficient antecedent cause. Compatibilists who claim to discover freedom in nature—who define freedom, for example, as the absence of external constraint or as a form of internal or psychological causation—misunderstand the implications of this causal picture. For inside the realm of nature, according to Kant, internal causes are no less subject to deterministic natural laws than external causes. Kant thus dismisses the effort to discover freedom within the realm of nature as a “wretched subterfuge” [*elender Behelf*].¹⁰ Within the realm of nature properly understood, there is no freedom worthy of the name.

Kant goes on to argue that if there is to be any justification for the thesis of human freedom—a freedom robust enough to warrant imputations of moral responsibility—its ground must lie outside the realm of nature. He reasons that moral agency requires as a condition of its possibility the presupposition of a form of freedom that is not natural or empirical,

but “transcendental.” The free agent is self-caused. As transcendently free, the agent is capable of initiating a causal series, Kant claims, from a standpoint outside time.¹¹ In this respect, its freedom is wholly independent of the determinations of nature.

So morality must rest on a non-empirical or formal foundation, in Kant’s view, because it requires the presupposition of transcendental freedom. It rests on the idea of a faculty he calls the “pure will.” But morality (or practical philosophy more generally) must rest on a formal foundation for a second reason as well. This has to do with the status of its laws. Kant claims that we all agree that the validity of moral laws extends not just to some, but to all rational natures. We in addition agree, he says, that moral laws command unconditionally or necessarily.¹² He then argues that laws enjoy the status of universal and necessary validity only if they are grounded in pure reason. As he puts the point in a typical passage in the *Groundwork*:

Empirical principles are not at all fit to ground moral laws. For the universality with which these are to hold for all rational beings without distinction—the unconditional practical necessity that is thereby imposed upon them—comes to nothing [*fällt weg*] if their ground is taken from the *special constitution of human nature* or the contingent circumstances in which it is placed.¹³

It is thus pure reason, not experience, that is the author of moral laws, including the supreme moral law or categorical imperative. We bring to experience, rather than abstract out of experience, what Kant sometimes refers to as our “moral compass.” As rational natures, each of us already knows the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil. We no more have to learn these distinctions, he writes in one passage, than we have to learn to distinguish our right hand from our left.¹⁴ Kant notes that it would be “easy to show” how “common human reason,” with its “compass” in hand, is able to distinguish good from evil. It would be easy to show this, he says, “as did Socrates.”¹⁵

So the moral compass is in us already, and the task of the philosopher is to awaken our awareness of it by emulating Socrates, by asking probing questions. The philosopher does not teach anything new, Kant tells us here; she merely asks the right kind of questions and thereby makes “common human reason” “attentive to its own principle.” Although she grants that experience can serve as a catalyst in activating our inner compass, she does not conclude from this that experience has a part to play in shaping the compass itself. When Kant compares himself to Socrates in this discussion, it is precisely in order to emphasize the already given nature of the moral law. His point, that is, is to *deny* that the moral law is or can be grounded in experience.

Perhaps we find Kant’s arguments for a formal grounding unpersuasive, and perhaps there are good reasons for finding them unpersuasive. On his account, however, neither the a priori status of the supreme practical law nor the purity or freedom of the will may be traded in for empirical counterparts. If we try to replace these formal features with empirical

alternatives—if we redefine Kant’s moral compass with the help of moral sense theory, for instance, or by appealing to the empirically determined consensus of members of a community of discourse—we in effect deliver victory into the hands of the enemy, in his view. For Kant, the formalism provides the cornerstone without which the entire system comes tumbling down.

II

I return, now, to my central claim in this paper, the claim that, as far as the relation of reason to history or to the realm of experience is concerned, there are real differences in the views of Kant and Hegel. Of greatest significance is the fact that Hegel rejects Kant’s formalism. He doubts that our practical laws are a priori in the Kantian sense. He also doubts that our freedom is transcendental and that our will is pure. With Hegel, we get a new account of the relation of reason to empirical content.

As my first bit of evidence in support of this thesis, I draw on a feature of Hegel’s works that we might suppose to be of merely rhetorical significance. The feature is this: each of Hegel’s principal philosophical works is itself a history. His *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a history of consciousness, a history of various ways in which human subjects have understood their experience and knowledge of objects. His *Philosophy of Right* is a history of modern conceptions of right, beginning with the social contract theories of Locke and Hobbes, and ending with the post-Kantian theory he refers to as “Ethical Life.” Even Hegel’s most abstract work, the *Science of Logic*, is a history. It tells the story of development in our interpretation of key categories or concepts, concepts such as “being,” “nothing,” “essence,” “appearance,” the “one,” and the “many.”

I hasten to add, however, that these works are not *just* histories, for Hegel. In each of them, he defends the thesis that there has been *progress* in the advance of history. In the *Phenomenology*, he argues that there has been progress in our understanding of the conditions of knowledge. In the *Science of Logic*, he defends the view that there has been progress in the meanings we have attributed to our concepts, even to those concepts that seem the most basic and fixed. In the *Philosophy of Right*, he claims that there have been advances in our conceptions of freedom and of right.

Hegel’s histories are neither fully separate from his philosophical works nor tacked on as mere appendices. The historical and the philosophical projects are instead intimately related. Indeed, Hegel’s understanding of how the philosophical and historical projects are related provides an important clue, I think, to his philosophical approach overall. It suggests how we should interpret the final chapters of his major works, the chapters in which he typically lays out his own philosophical position. Hegel’s account of the relation of reason to history is in other words key to grasping, in the *Philosophy of Right*, the conception of right he believes is also the most adequate conception so far, the conception he calls “Ethical Life.” His account of the relation between reason and history is key to understanding, in the *Science of Logic*, the concept he refers to as the “absolute Idea,” the

concept he takes to be the most complete and determinate, and the “only object and content of philosophy.”¹⁶ His understanding of the relation of reason to history is also essential for demystifying the final section of the *Phenomenology*, the section entitled “Absolute Knowledge.”

In the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel gives us clues to his own understanding of the relation of reason to history by singling out features of approaches he rejects.¹⁷ He tells us, first, that he rejects the naïve empiricism typical of the approach of the “original” historian. The original historian confines herself to describing the events of her day. She builds her foundation on a basis of observation, and sets out to accurately describe the facts at hand. This approach is naïve, on Hegel’s analysis, insofar as it assumes that we access the facts at hand simply by opening up our senses to the world, by relying on the resources of passive apprehension. In his critique of this form of empiricism, Hegel follows Kant in arguing that perception or experience, in contrast to mere apprehension, requires not just the passive input of sensation but also the synthesizing activity of the mind. Hegel’s rejection of naïve empiricism in the context of these lectures on history is consistent with a central thesis of all of his major works, namely, that there can be for us no perception without thinking, no awareness of objects without the organizing function of concepts.¹⁸

Hegel is equally impatient, however, with those who seek a remedy for naïve empiricism in an extreme form of rationalism. The “reflective” historian acknowledges that we bring to our experience of history a wealth of conceptual resources.¹⁹ She grants that we don’t just “see” or passively apprehend history, but judge or interpret it. But she makes the mistake of awarding human reason *too much* creative power. She does this when she claims that some of our concepts or ideas originate in pure reason. For the reflective historian, the ideas of progress and purpose in history, for example, are a priori.²⁰ She grants that these ideas cannot be grounded in history, but she nonetheless awards them practical necessity; she claims that the ideas of progress and purpose are indispensable in consoling us and giving us hope.²¹ The reflective historian secures the practical necessity of these ideas by tracing their origin to pure reason.

So while the approach of original history suffers from naïve empiricism in that it insufficiently appreciates the role of concepts and judgment in shaping perception, the reflective historian on Hegel’s account awards human thinking too much creative power. The reflective historian overlooks the role history plays in the origin even of those ideas that seem to us the most formal or abstract. Hegel seeks to convince us that his own approach to history suffers from neither of these defects. His own approach is neither naively empiricist nor excessively rationalist, but somehow combines insights of each of these extremes.

III

I move on, now, to fill in more details of Hegel’s positive account of the relation of reason to history. To make my task easier, I am going to focus

in on a single text, namely, his *Philosophy of Right*. The *Philosophy of Right* is on the one hand a *history* of approaches to right. On the other hand, it is not *just* a history; as Hegel says, it is a “science” of right.²² One of its principal aims is to defend the thesis that there has been progress in the development of theories of right. The *Philosophy of Right* in other words aims to convince us that the history of right has been rational.²³

How does Hegel justify this thesis? When he argues that the account of right he presents in the final chapter of the book, Ethical Life, is the most adequate conception of right, his reasoning is surely *not* that Ethical Life is the most adequate because it best captures what, in his time, is in fact taken to be right. Whatever else Hegel may intend by his slogan, the “rational is the actual,” he does not mean to endorse the view that the way to determine right is simply to consult the actual preferences of a people. Hegel repeatedly reminds us that the *Philosophy of Right* is *not* an exercise in positive right. He insists that the work establishes the superiority of the standpoint of Ethical Life over other accounts of right by means of rational demonstration.²⁴

But if the rationality of right is not for Hegel determined by consulting actual preferences, how does he think he is able to justify his claim that there has been progress in our conceptions of right? What kind of rational standard does he appeal to? How does he account for the source of reason’s norms?

A moment ago, I drew on Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* to make the case that he rejects a certain kind of appeal to reason, an appeal that awards reason extraordinary creative powers. I suggested that he was skeptical of the “reflective” approach which holds that human reason is capable of bringing to its consideration of history norms that are a priori, norms that in no way depend for their origin on the realm of the actual. If this interpretation is on track, it implies that, for Hegel, reason not only is not a mere reflection of what is actual, it is incapable of wholly transcending the realm of the actual as well.

What we need, then, is an account of Hegelian reason that explains how it avoids both naïve empiricism and excessive rationalism. We can get help, I think, if we bear in mind the feature of his texts I emphasized earlier: the fact that they are histories. I suggested that this fact is philosophically significant in that it contains clues to his unique conception of reason. This is the suggestion I want to explore.

Focusing in on the *Philosophy of Right*, the question we need to ask is this: What is the lesson Hegel intends us to learn from the fact that his “science” of right appears in the form of a history of right? We can quickly disqualify a few possible answers to this question. The lesson of Hegel’s history of right cannot simply be that, over the ages, philosophers have defended a number of different theories of right and of human freedom. Hegel is eager to educate us about the history of right, but his aim is not just to teach us a history lesson. As I have suggested, his history lesson is supposed to inform us, somehow, about the nature of reason itself.

We can likewise disqualify the thesis that the aim of Hegel's history of right is merely to persuade us that there has been *progress* in our understanding of right. Hegel surely defends this thesis, but he is hardly alone in doing so. By itself, then, the thesis about progress does not distinguish his treatment of right from that of a great many other philosophers, including Kant. Hegel's commitment to the thesis that there has been progress in our understanding of right thus reveals very little about his unique conception of reason.

Perhaps the lesson Hegel intends us to learn from the history of right is that reason is dialectical. This suggestion seems more promising, if only because it has a more distinctively Hegelian ring to it. But others have advanced a thesis about the dialectical nature of reason as well. So we need to be certain we capture Hegel's particular version of it.

Here, a comparison between Kant and Hegel is instructive. For Kant, as for others, a mark of reason's dialectical nature is its insatiable curiosity, its persistent questioning. As he writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, human reason is "burdened with questions that it cannot dismiss," questions rooted in "the nature of reason itself."²⁵ But Kant also holds that reason's dialectic results from its propensity to fall prey to certain kinds of illusion. On his definition, it is the nature of human reason to extend beyond its proper limits. It does so when it misapplies its a priori concepts and laws, and expects them to yield knowledge of objects outside the realm of possible experience. This "natural dialectic" condemns reason to obscurity, he says; in some instances, it results in self-contradictions or antinomies reason can neither resolve nor put to rest.

For Hegel as well, reason's dialectical nature is exhibited in its persistent questioning. But for Hegel, reason's dialectic does not rest on a mistake or illusion. Dialectic instead reveals a positive feature of reason, a feature he believes Kant and others overlook. In particular, dialectic on Hegel's conception instructs us that reason's nature is not settled in advance. Dialectic exposes the error of assuming that reason can be the author of laws and concepts that are pre-given or a priori, laws and concepts that in no way reflect its engagement with experience. Dialectic reveals that the content of reason is picked up in the course of its history.

Now, we can surely find passages in Hegel's works that appear at odds with the interpretation I am proposing—passages that seem to suggest that, for Hegel, the content of reason is set from the start, and the role of history is merely to provide the temporal condition that allows for the unfolding of that pre-given content. One such passage occurs in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he writes this:

Just as the seed carries within itself the entire nature of the tree, even the taste and shape of its fruit, so the first traces of Spirit virtually contain all history.²⁶

It is tempting to interpret Hegel as committing himself here to a thesis of pre-determination. The germ of the plant, "carries within itself the entire nature of the tree," we might take him to imply, in that the germ wholly

fixes the tree's future properties. The problem with this reading, however, is that it conflicts with Hegel's elaboration of this point in other discussions. After reminding us later in this same text that the plant "begins with the seed," he goes on to urge us to think of the seed as "also the *result* of the plant's entire life." Just as the seed is the "result of the plant's entire life," he writes, so Spirit is "the result of its own activity."²⁷ Hegel makes a similar point in his *Encyclopaedia Logic*, § 124 A:

All things are initially "in themselves" [*an sich*], but this is not the end of the matter; and just as the germ, which is the plant-in-itself, is simply the activity of self-development, so the thing generally also progresses beyond its mere in-itself...to reveal itself to be also reflection-into-another, and *as a result it has properties*.²⁸

These passages do not by themselves settle the interpretative question, but they lend support to the following reading: they suggest that when Hegel writes that the seed of a plant is a "result," he means to *deny* that the plant's nature is settled in advance. He means to suggest, in other words, that the plant's nature comes to be in the course of its development, a course that depends necessarily on what he refers to as its "reflection-into-another," its relation to other things. As Hegel writes in the passage just quoted, what a thing is "initially 'in itself'," is "not the end of the matter."

The interpretation I am proposing, then, is this: Not just "Spirit" or self-consciousness, but also reason, is a largely indeterminate potential, on Hegel's account—an "activity of self-development," as he says. Reason picks up its content, and thereby progresses from indeterminate and abstract to determinate and concrete, in the course of its dialectical journey. The role of history is thus not limited to that of supplying the temporal condition that allows reason to manifest its nature. It is *in* history that reason engages with "another," as it reflects on a wide array of objects: on nature, persons, institutions, and ideas. History thus furnishes the setting in which reason acquires a determinate content.²⁹

This reading of what Hegel has in mind when he characterizes reason as a "result" is supported by further textual evidence. Consider, for example, his frequently quoted comment in his Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* about the "owl of Minerva" beginning its flight "only with the onset of dusk." Philosophy, he writes in these paragraphs, always comes on the scene "too late" to perform the function of "*issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be."³⁰ Hegel's message here is not that philosophy has no business making normative claims. His point, rather, is that philosophy should not deceive itself about the *status* of those claims. As an example of the kind of view he is opposing, he reminds us of Plato's effort in the *Republic* to articulate a vision of the ideal state, of the state as it ought to be. Plato's ideal, Hegel asserts here, is "empty."³¹ It is empty not because it is vague or wrong-headed or of no practical value. Hegel ties the emptiness of the ideal to Plato's understanding of its origin. The ideal is empty, in Hegel's words, because it is "essentially the embodiment of nothing other than the nature of Greek ethics." What is empty, then, is the idea's status *as an idea or ideal*—as in no way indebted to the realm of the actual. Plato

assumes that his vision of the perfect state is the product of a special form of reflection, a form of reflection that allows him to transcend his time. As Hegel puts it here, Plato belongs among those who are convinced that we can attain superior knowledge by looking “beyond the present.”³² In effect, Plato over-estimates his powers of abstraction.

So when Hegel tells us that philosophy always comes on the scene “too late” to issue instructions on “how the world ought to be,” he means to caution us against following Plato’s lead. We are to resist the temptation of supposing that human reason can look beyond the present or overleap its age. Philosophers succumb to this temptation whenever they claim to discover eternal truths, whenever they assert that their laws or concepts are universally and necessarily valid. They presuppose that reason has a pre-given content, a fixed or eternal nature. They furthermore assume that they can access that eternal nature by means of a special form of insight or act of reflection, aided perhaps by the right kind of probing questions and the right kind of concrete conditions. Hegel repeatedly complains about the “vanity” that underlies the assumption that human reason can achieve this degree of critical distance. In our eagerness to pronounce on how the world ought to be, we ignore the fact that philosophy, as he says, is “*its own time comprehended in thoughts*.”³³

IV

I began by reviewing various ways in which Kant’s practical philosophy requires attention to empirical content. Empirical facts about our nature and about the particular situations in which we find ourselves need to be taken into account in any proper application of the supreme practical law. Empirical conditions in addition play a crucial role in securing our interest in the law, in motivating us to act from it. I also drew attention to Kant’s interest in history. He has a story to tell, for example, about the history of reason—about how reason owes its very awakening in human history to the limitations of instinct. As we saw, Kant also acknowledges the role contingent social institutions play in this developmental story. Human reason relies on institutions such as education to guide it to maturity. Kant’s recognition of the importance of history is furthermore evident in his appreciation for the history of philosophy. He is, of course, aware that his philosophical system is not the first, and he honors predecessors such as Newton and Hume for their impact on his own thinking.

But it would be a mistake to conclude from any of this that Kant grants the historical nature of reason in the Hegelian sense. It would be a mistake, in light of the way in which Kant sets out to *justify* his system. For reasons we considered, the justification of practical laws cannot on his account rest on anything empirical. Empirical generalizations—no matter how well confirmed—can never have the status of law; they are never universally and necessarily valid.³⁴ Nor can an appeal to a merely empirical form of freedom ever serve to ground genuine agency. In Kant’s view, justification both of the supreme practical law and of the idea of human freedom requires an appeal beyond the realm of experience; justification must in the end be provided by pure reason. Like Plato, Kant takes his grounding

of practical philosophy to rely on a form of knowledge that allows him to leave all that is empirical and contingent behind.

As I have tried to suggest here, Hegel's account of the relation of reason to history is significantly different from this. For Hegel, a careful study of the history of philosophy reveals that reason is historical in that it is a "result." Plato's idea of the just state is not a complete abstraction; it reflects, at least to some extent, the nature of Greek ethics. Likewise, Kant's ideas of the free will and its supreme law do not have their basis in a faculty of reason that is absolutely "pure"; they arise in response to, and are therefore conditioned by, his engagement with what he took to be the pressing philosophical challenges of his day. So Kant's idea of transcendental freedom is a "result" in that it owes its origin as well as its content or meaning to the particular set of problems he intended it to solve. The Hegelian point here, I take it, is that we would be foolish to expect to comprehend this idea of freedom, let alone reproduce Kant's argument for its validity, apart from a consideration of its relation to other ideas in this particular chapter of philosophical history. We would be foolish to try to grasp the unique form of causality Kant associates with transcendental freedom without first acquainting ourselves, minimally, with his dissatisfaction with Newton's determinism and with Hume's skepticism. Hegel wishes us to appreciate the way in which these alternatives shaped Kant's understanding of his philosophical options. They constrained his imagination; they supplied the material as well as the vocabulary for his philosophizing.

Put in another way, the Hegelian point is that human thinking cannot *but* draw on the resources of what is actual. This doesn't mean, for Hegel, that our ideas and beliefs are *simply* products of passive apprehension. He is not out to reduce reason to nature, or to deny the possibility of critical reflection altogether. Hegel's point is that our ideas and beliefs reflect our history; they are invariably constrained by the accepted norms and methods of our time. No matter how novel, our ideas are never products of unfettered acts of creativity or spontaneity; they derive *content* from the realm of the actual. Actual social institutions and actual systems of thought thus do more than supply the catalysts that encourage reason's development and aid it in displaying its inner light. They give that inner light content.

Perhaps we can now see why Hegel's own philosophical works are histories. As I have suggested, it is not that he is a positivist and seeks to convince us that the mere actuality of a given system guarantees its rationality. Indeed, it is Hegel's view that human reason in his time has grown impatient with positivism. Reason in his time demands that the adequacy of an idea be rationally demonstrated. Reason in addition places constraints on what an acceptable demonstration can be. Hegelian reason is suspicious of the suggestion that rational demonstration can be achieved by means of acts of insight or reflection that transport the thinker to a world beyond her actual world. Precisely because Hegelian reason doubts that such acts of transcendence are possible for us, it demands that our rational demonstrations be historical.

As I understand him, Hegel holds his own system to this standard of rational demonstration. It is no accident that he introduces us to his system of Ethical Life—the system of right he takes to be the most adequate—only in the final chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*. He prepares the way for his discussion of Ethical Life by first recounting in his earlier chapters the history of modern approaches to right. Hegel knows that unless he first familiarizes us with his interpretation of the history of right, he cannot expect us to comprehend the system of Ethical Life. He cannot expect us to grasp the particular kind of freedom that the subject experiences in ethical life, or to understand the way in which the ethical state makes possible the realization of that freedom. Hegel knows in addition that without first introducing us to his account of the history of right, he cannot hope to persuade us of the superiority of the system of Ethical Life. He knows that he can demonstrate its superiority—its rationality—only by first convincing us of the deficiencies, the inconsistencies and unsolved problems, of predecessor systems. Hegel defends the rationality of his system, then, not by appealing to insight or intuition or pure reason, but by showing us how the idea of ethical life appears on the scene as a compelling remedy for the failures of prior systems of right. He demonstrates the rationality of Ethical Life, that is, by persuading us of its success as a response or result.³⁵

So, in contrast to Kant, Hegel does not hold that we discover what is rational by accessing the already given nature of reason. On Hegel's account, a careful study of the history of philosophy reveals that there *is* no already given nature of reason, and no fixed and eternally valid moral compass. The history of philosophy instructs us that reason is a result, and that the “philosophy that is the latest in time is the result of all the previous philosophies.”³⁶ We make a mistake, then, if we suppose that by asking the right questions and providing the right conditions we can access reason's pre-given inner light. For Hegel, history teaches us that the questions we ask change over time—and that they don't just elicit, but also *shape*, the answers we get.

Endnotes

1. In the Preface to her collection *Moral Literacy*, for example, Barbara Herman announces her opposition to the tradition of criticism that either exaggerates or distorts Kant's formalism. She promises to offer an alternative to this interpretative tradition and show us the many ways in which Kantian theory “lets the phenomena in.” (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. xi, vii.). Others who have been recently emphasizing the empirical elements of Kant's practical philosophy include Paul Guyer, Robert B. Louden and Allen W. Wood.
2. Allen Wood sometimes seems to defend this view. In his paper, “Kant's Practical Philosophy,” he asserts, for example, that it is “fundamentally erroneous to represent Kant as having a ‘timeless’ or ‘ahistorical’ conception of reason, and Hegel...as correcting it by introducing a ‘historical’ conception.” In *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59.

3. For Kant's remarks on the role of moral anthropology, see *Groundwork* (389, 412), and his Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals* (217). Except where otherwise indicated, I provide the Academy Edition page references to Kant's texts. I rely on (and occasionally alter) translations of these texts provided in the *Works of Immanuel Kant*, General editors, Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
4. From the 3rd Thesis of Kant's 1784 essay, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View."
5. See the 4th Thesis of Kant's "Idea for a Universal History."
6. See Kant's 1786 essay, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (110-115).
7. *Metaphysics of Morals*, Doctrine of Virtue, "Doctrine of the Methods of Ethics" § 49 (477).
8. *Critique of Practical Reason*, "Methodology of Pure Practical Reason" (152).
9. I rely for these remarks on Kant's 1784 essay, "What is Enlightenment?" and on the 8th Thesis of his "Idea for Universal History." For Kant's discussions of the importance of education, see *Critique of Practical Reason*, "Methodology of Pure Practical Reason," and *Metaphysics of Morals*, Doctrine of Virtue, "Doctrine of the Methods of Ethics," Section I.
10. *Critique of Practical Reason* (95f.).
11. As Kant writes in the first *Critique*, when reason acts freely, it acts "without being determined...by external or internal grounds temporally preceding it in the chain of natural causes" (A 553/B 581).
12. See, e.g., *Groundwork* (389).
13. *Groundwork* (442).
14. See the "Doctrine of Method" section of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Common human reason [*Gemeine Menschenvernunft*], Kant writes here, has long known the answer to the question, "What is *pure* morality?" It knows the answer to this question, just as it knows the difference between the right and left hand (155).
15. *Groundwork* (404).
16. *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1991), 824; *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, vol. 6 of *G.W.F. Hegel, Werke in zwanzig Bänden, Theorie Werkausgabe*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), 549.
17. I rely here on the opening discussion of Hegel's Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett Publication Company, Inc., 1988), chapter one. In the Suhrkamp edition, vol. 12, pp. 11-29. Hegel offered a lecture course on the philosophy of world history five times, beginning in 1822 and ending in 1831, the year of his death. His lectures were first published in 1840, and are based on the transcriptions of his students.
18. See, in Hegel's Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Hackett, p. 10; Suhrkamp, vol. 12, p. 20). See also his discussions of empiricism in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §§ 37-39. Hegel writes in that text that, "man is always thinking, even when he simply intuits [*anschaut*] (§ 24 A1)." (See G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A.

- Suchting, H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publication Company, Inc., 1991), 58; Suhrkamp, vol. 8, p. 83.) Perhaps Hegel's most well-known critique of naïve or uncritical empiricism is contained in the "Sense Certainty" section of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.
19. I ignore here Hegel's descriptions of the four kinds of "reflective" history, and focus on those features that most clearly distinguish "reflective" history in general from "original" history.
 20. The ideas of purpose and of progress are at the center of Kant's attention in his essay, "Idea for a Universal History." Hegel does not explicitly mention Kant in these pages, but Kant is very likely among those he has in mind when he complains about the "critical" version of reflection history which, he says, is popular among Germans in his time (Hackett, p. 9; Suhrkamp, vol. 12, p. 18). A few pages later, Hegel again writes dismissively of "Germans" who create "a priori fabrications [*apriorische Erdichtungen*] in history" (Hackett, p. 13; Suhrkamp, p. 22). In "Idea for a Universal History," Kant identifies the ideas of purpose and progress in history as ideas of the "philosopher" and not of the "empirical historian." His own idea of world history, he writes in the 9th Thesis, is "to some extent based on an *a priori* principle [*gewissermaßen einen Leitfaden a priori hat*]."
 21. See Kant's "Idea for a Universal History," 8th and 9th Theses.
 22. See Preface and Introduction (§§ 1 and 2) to the *Philosophy of Right*.
 23. Hegel writes that the "business" of his "science" of right, in contrast to that of "positive jurisprudence," is to "consider the rationality of right." Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (Addition from 1822/23). In *G.W.F. Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14; Suhrkamp, vol. 7, p. 17.
 24. *Philosophy of Right*, Preface and Introduction (§ 3).
 25. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A vii.
 26. Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Hackett, p. 21; Suhrkamp vol. 12, p. 31).
 27. *Ibid.* (Hackett, p. 82; Suhrkamp vol. 12, p. 104).
 28. Hackett, p. 194; Suhrkamp, vol. 8, p. 255.
 29. As Hegel expresses this point in § 187 of the *Philosophy of Right*, "particularity... gives universality the content that fills it and its infinite self-determination" (Cambridge, p. 225; Suhrkamp, vol. 7, p. 345).
 30. Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge, p. 23; Suhrkamp, vol. 7, p. 27f.).
 31. *Ibid.* (Cambridge p. 20; Suhrkamp vol. 7, p. 24).
 32. *Ibid.* (Cambridge p. 20; Suhrkamp vol. 7, p. 25).
 33. *Ibid.* (Cambridge, p. 21; Suhrkamp vol. 7, p. 26).
 34. See Kant's discussion of this point in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 3f.
 35. In describing his "philosophical" treatment of the "science of right," in § 2 of his Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel writes that "the chief concern is the *necessity* of a concept, and the route by which it has become a *result* [is] its proof and deduction."
 36. *Encyclopaedia Logic* § 13 (Hackett, p. 38; Suhrkamp vol. 8, p. 58).