

Commentary on Hegel's Antimetabole* : "What is rational is real and what is real is rational."

Andy Blunden June 2019

One of Hegel's most famous passages is found in the Preface to *The Philosophy of Right*, and is repeated in the Introduction to the *Encyclopaedia*:

"What is rational is real;
And what is real is rational."

Hegel goes on to explain:

"... Against the doctrine that the Idea is a mere idea, figment or opinion, philosophy preserves the more profound view that nothing is real except the Idea. Hence arises the effort to recognise in the temporal and transient the substance, which is immanent, and the eternal, which is present. The rational is synonymous with the Idea, because in realising itself it passes into external existence. It thus appears in an endless wealth of forms, figures and phenomena. It wraps its kernel round with a robe of many colours, in which consciousness finds itself at home."

What does Hegel mean by "the Idea"?

The Idea is the intelligible narrative which lies within the "many coloured robe" of chance events and incidental characters and is manifested in it. It is by ferreting out this narrative that we make sense of historical events. The Idea is not some kind of pre-determined law covering the relevant events which could not have been otherwise, but unfolds in the course of history itself. Further, the Idea exists in the events themselves and not "in the eye of the beholder." It is *real*. It is the task of the philosopher to *discern* the Idea within the turbulence of immediate events, each of which, taken on its own, is contingent and inessential. The Idea is to be understood in terms of the working out (or resolution) of problems and contradictions within the existing social situations, so the first task is to discern these contradictions and interpret events in terms of the possible resolution or 'unfolding' of these contradictions. The 'Idea' here is the same as the concept as found in the Logic—the final grade of the Logic of the Concept, the unity of a concept with its reality.

What does Hegel mean by "real"?

Frederick Engels' explanation is worth recalling:

"But according to Hegel certainly not everything that exists is also real, without further qualification," [and citing Goethe] "In accordance with all the rules of the Hegelian method of thought, the proposition of the rationality of everything which is real resolves itself into the other proposition: All that exists deserves to perish." (*Ludwig Feuerbach*, 1886)

In terms of the categories of the Logic, one should expect to find a consensus of all sane, cooperative and honest people about "what exists," which more or less means the simple facts. 'Existence' appears very early in the phase of Reflection and lacks stability or 'meaning' – just the facts as they are at a moment. 'Actuality', on the other hand, is the highest grade of Reflection, immediately preceding the Concept. The German word being translated as "real" is *wirklich*, and *Wirklichkeit* is the German word for "Actuality." What is real (or actual, i.e., acting or having effect) is the whole range of

* Thanks to Emma Black for drawing attention to this concept from Rhetoric, and to the whole Sunday Hegel Reading Group for the fruitful discussions around this topic.

facts which are connected by definite lines of causality to ‘what is going on’, the essential *meaning* (or content) of the current conjuncture, the facts which will turn out to have significance and stability. The foremost indicators of actuality are the *effectiveness* of the given formation – its having real effects in the world, and the *stability* of the formation – its tendency to withstand changes in circumstances and other challenges to its existence. Eventually, when a circumstance loses its reality and perishes, its truth is manifest.

What does Hegel mean by “rational”? “Rational” is a translation of the German *vernünftig*, an adjective from the noun, *Vernunft*, meaning Reason. So *vernünftig* can also mean ‘reasonable’. For Hegel, what is necessary and intelligible in the unfolding of historical events is synonymous with ‘Reason’. Reason and Logic, for Hegel, are not something standing aside from or above history providing a standard or template against which historical events and social formations can be judged. On the contrary, the subject matter of the Logic is the norms which are produced by the historical development of human life and in turn regulate human life. The Logic, i.e. the rational, is *abstracted from* history and the development of human life. All systems of ethical life unfold according to their own logic, and invariably develop internal contradictions which are the motor of social change. What happens in history, then, *is* the logic of history, clothed in accidental and contingent events, the only way in which history can exist.

So the form of the maxim as an antimetabole is meaningful. When searching for what is rational in an historical juncture is not to bring an outside standard of rationality to bear on the events, to equate one thing with another, but on the contrary, to judge history by its own standards – not the standard of the immediately given social formation, but rather the ‘pure essentialities’ of human development, abstracted from analysis of the whole sweep of science, history and personal experience. The Logic, the standard of rationality, has to be drawn from the historical reality itself.

So what is rational in the existing fabric of events has to be discovered by analysis, since the rationality of events itself has to be extracted from the analysis of history. What is demanded of the philosopher is a kind of *hermeneutic circle* in which one must make a provisional analysis and try to discern the rationality within the events, but then the events have to be examined again in the light of a provisional analysis, and in the light of the unfolding of the events themselves, until analysis can identify the meaning contained in the events and the underlying contradictions.

Understanding the current social and political conjuncture is a matter of *judgment*, and requires discernment and an understanding of the essential problems and contradictions at work in the existing social situation. So far as possible the philosopher wants to understand *why* a given event occurred, to make it intelligible, and learn from events the new aspects of the dialectic brought to the surface by the latest events.

Why was Trump elected in the US (because he got more delegates to the Electoral College is not a valid answer)? Which aspects of the event are accidental? (the Russian meddling? his TV persona? his wealth? his abusive manners?) and what is the *reality* of the event? (The degeneration of the GOP? The class resentment of the ‘white working class’? The rejection of politics-as-usual?) But whatever you decide, you must see the essential features of events (the election of a man-child as US President) as manifesting real features of the conjuncture, real changes and historical tendencies.

However, there is no demand to make a judgment of the *totality* of a social formation or event. For example, it is possible to see that it would have to have been a conservative government to ban guns in the wake of the Port Arthur massacre. If a progressive

government had attempted it, the conservatives would have blocked it. This does not *justify* the conservative government! but it does tell us that reforms which offend conservative sensibilities can be achieved if conservative leaders can own the reform as their own.

More pertinently to reading *The Philosophy of Right*, currently the UK, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden are all constitutional monarchies and yet these seven countries are all exemplary modern liberal democracies, not mediaeval hang-overs. Crazy as it seems, this is a reality: constitutional monarchy has shown itself to be a consistent and stable aspect of modern Europe. We have to ask ourselves: what is rational in this reality? Conversely, sometimes there are ‘crazy’ features of the existing state of affairs which we can say are not *real*. I think it is possible to say that the existing level of inequality which now has six men holding as much wealth as the poorest half of the world is *not rational*, and consequently cannot be *real*. This is not to say that it is accidental; on the contrary, the ever-growing inequality in the distribution of wealth is a well-understood tendency embedded in the dominant, capitalist mode of production; but it is reasonable to conclude that such an extremity of maldistribution is in contradiction to widely recognized social mores. Such an extreme of inequality is something which has developed since about 1980, and expresses a contradiction in the existing world system which *cannot* last.

Is Hegel’s claim conservative? Does it demand that we accept that the existing state of affairs is rational and necessary and that arguments against it are vain? Not at all. In the *Philosophy of Right*, for example, Hegel claimed to demonstrate that the historical situation of his own country contained contradictions which could only be resolved by the replacement of the absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy along the lines set out in his book. The book was a critique of the existing regime, while at the same time, it demonstrated the rationality of numerous features of that social formation.

Is this a ‘linear’, inevitable and ‘progressive’ conception of history, in which a logical narrative unfolds itself according to a predetermined plan? No. The logic of events is not given in advance. Even though the structure of the *Encyclopaedia*, begins with the Logic, then Nature and then Spirit, as if everything had to follow the Logic, remember Hegel’s insistence that the *Encyclopaedia* is a circle, a *circle of circles*. The Logic is a product of human development as well as what drives its internal dynamics.

Hegel claims to show in the Subjective Spirit, how a living, thinking creature emerges out of inanimate Nature and how that creature, a human being, perceives in the world around them not only objects and other subjects, but *meaning*, signposts if you will. This, according to Hegel, means that the human being is essentially free – not born free, but in essence free. Through the construction of a ‘second nature’ in the form of artefacts, symbols and institutions they are able to regulate the activity of themselves and that of others, always seeking to realise their own freedom.

However, a close inspection of the *Philosophy of Right* shows that there are many independent conditions necessary for the realization of freedom, and beginning from conditions of primitive communities living close to Nature, it is not possible for universal freedom to be realized in a ‘linear’ way. The various constituents for a free society mature independently at different rates and interact with one another in complex ways. According to Hegel, the development of the ethical life depends on the independent development of the conditions for personal rights and on the development of moral subjects; the development of the State in turn depends on the development of the nuclear family and a mature civil society, not to mention all manner of ‘externalities,’ from invasion by rival states and natural disasters to the peculiarities of

cultural development and natural conditions. Nonetheless, there is a logic which can be discerned in historical developments.

Finally, there is a further nuance to the maxim of the rational and the real, in which *vernünftig* is perhaps better translated as 'reasonable'. In his chapter on Morality, Hegel shows that if, following Kant, an individual moral subject tries to determine 'for themselves' what is good and right, even with the best intentions, they are as likely to come to Evil as to Good. The good life for a moral subject requires the *critical assimilation of and obedience to* the existing, culturally determined customs and laws of their own community. There is nothing inevitable about these norms, which will be culturally variable, but they nonetheless embody the wisdom of an entire historical community. The moral subject must therefore determine their own pursuit of the Good within the constraints of the customs and laws of their community, in this or that role as determined by those same customs and laws.

There is no doubt that Hegel does here adopt a conservative position. Laws and customs are changed, of course, but according to Hegel only by the social and political mechanisms sanctioned by the community. His only exceptions are slavery, domination by a foreign power or a state which has become deformed and tyrannical, and in each of these cases Hegel sanctions unlimited struggle against the state. However, in our times, it seems to me that a concept of collective civil disobedience is consistent with what we can take from Hegel.