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## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE AND THE FATE OF PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing on Hegel's claim that 'it belongs to the weakness of our time not to be able to bear the greatness, the immensity of the claims made by the human spirit, to feel crushed before them, and to flee from them faint-hearted', this essay explores the possibility of a renewed encounter with Hegel's thought. Arguing that it is not the acceptance or rejection of the lessons of Hegel's thought that is important, but rather that ever since Hegel, philosophers are challenged to experience philosophy as such as the happening of the spirit of the age. It further asks the question how is it that the spirit of the age might emerge in an otherwise spiritless age? From this perspective the question for us is whether philosophizing today has the power to generate a level of intensity, not so much for the spirit of our own age to emerge clearly and distinctively, but for the spirit of the age to emerge at all. Perhaps, instead, the real issue for those of us who come after Hegel is whether we are strong enough to intensify and withstand the intensity that Hegel's thinking has already released. From this perspective to encounter the spirit of the age can be neither to look for it in the developments of the twenty-first century world nor to produce a radically new philosophy. The essay suggests that the fate of those of us who follow the arriving of Hegel, the revolutionary thinker, is to face the challenge of dwelling in his arriving.

**KEYWORDS:** Hegel; Plato; Philosophical Thinking; The Spirit of the Time; Future

philosophy [...] is entirely identical with its time. (LHP I 54)

If philosophy is identical with its time, is there a sense in which revolutionary philosophers bear the spirit of their own age in so far as they arrive from the future? If so, would this explain why their ideas seem to us so strange and distant yet inexplicably familiar and attractive at the same time? But what is the future in this case? Might it be the *topos* of exile of what mostly belongs to us, to our time; the distant within and the within in the distant. If the revolutionary thinker does indeed come from afar his/her arriving must be the measure of our own distance from the future. Could it be that it is through this arriving that the world manifests itself, that the spirit of the age emerges in an otherwise spiritless age?

Plato is perhaps the paradigm case of the revolutionary philosopher in our sense of the philosopher arriving from the future. According to Hegel, the idea of the just polis

that Plato formulated in *The Republic* was the most philosophically thinkable in Plato's time. Even though Plato's ideal was so far from the then given state of affairs that it seemed hardly recognizable to his contemporaries, it was nevertheless out of its thinking that Plato was able to comprehend the rational moment embedded in the sophists' polis in which he lived. Having elaborated his ideal city, a city powerful enough to accommodate the philosopher, Plato was then in a position to cross the abyss between the ideal and the real in order to re-visit and once again embrace his own city as a whole. His thinking showed the city of Athens to be part of the world of the thinkable and in doing so it brought together the ever-changing finite body of the city with its eternal idea.

For this reason the city that condemned the philosopher to death could nonetheless be thought as part of an ongoing becoming that oriented it toward a future. For Plato this future was thought in terms of the polis of justice in which Plato the philosopher dwells conceptually and from which he arrives, albeit invisibly, to be welcomed by those who are prepared to think in the embrace of his thinking. Having arrived from afar in a way that also made it possible for him to dwell in the world in a radically immanent manner, Plato didn't lose himself, like a tourist, amongst the shiny trinkets and the trivialities of market life. Nor did he abandon himself to the shallow wisdom of the local. Rather, as the bearer of the ideal and in so far as he found the strength to withstand the infinite schism between the real and the ideal, his thinking entirely embraced the historical moment of his world and thus allowed the spirit of the age to manifest itself with his thought. Herein lies the determination of Plato's thought as revolutionary philosophy that arrives from the future in its own precise moment.

In this respect Plato the philosopher came to give effect to the conceptual transformative power of the revolutionary practice of his time in a way that Socrates before him was unable to conceive. Plato's thinking grew out of Socrates' failure to convince Athens to re-enact itself in accordance with the principle of radical self-knowing. Although we can say that in his capacity as a revolutionary Socrates also comes from the future, only the philosopher succeeds in thinking what the revolutionary practice announces but fails to achieve. So the thinking of the philosopher takes place in the retreat of the future that the failed revolutionary practice announces. This was the fate of philosophical thinking in Plato's time.

Perhaps Hegel is the Plato of our own era for he too arrives from the future in the sense we have been outlining. He is the thinker of the great schism between the ideal and the real that marks and defines modernity. He is the 'owl of Minerva' that 'spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk' to cross the abyss of the great divide between notion and being in order to address us from the distant (PR 23). His thinking springs out of the future that was announced by the French revolutionaries and that retreated in the failure of this revolution. His thinking was destined to offer a place for the spirit of the age to emerge. His philosophy is the 'inward birth-place of the spirit which will later arrive at actual form' (HP I 55). This is the spirit of utopian violence that is also a violent utopia. Hegel's thought teaches that spirit is the infinitely violent act of separating the universal from the particular, communal love from self-interest. This was Plato's

lesson as well. According to Hegel's story, our world is the world of the 'empty self' that unfolds globally and perpetuates itself as an emptying out and hence as a triumphant and narcissistic sinking into the desert of this emptiness. It is out of such sinking that the spirit of communal being arises 'fragrantly' in the 'grey' of the speculative philosopher's utopian vision (LPR III 233 n. 191 & PR 23). It is 'the rose in the cross of the present' (PR 19). Through this vision the philosopher announces the healing power of history. History is the crossing of the abyss by the real that moves towards the ideal, a crossing first performed by the thinker albeit in the reverse direction.

So the philosopher's concern is the schism of the abyss at the heart of our collective being since this schism provides the inescapable context for the unfolding of particular events. Even so, the collapse of the schism is no less inescapable according to the lesson of Hegel's speculative thought. This is a lesson with which many may well disagree but such disagreement typically follows from thematic encounters with what is ultimately a non-thematic thinking. The noteworthy point for our purposes is not whether we should accept or reject the lessons of Hegel's thought, but that ever since Hegel, philosophers are challenged to experience philosophy as such as *the happening of the spirit of the age*.<sup>1</sup> Through its happening, the spirit of the age has explicitly become the age of key Hegelian concepts understood, not as themes, but as happenings of thinking itself, whether of history, the future, manifestation, alienation, recognition, otherness, reconciliation or philosophy. Viewed as this sort of happening we can conclude with H. S. Harris that, whilst it 'is not a very comfortable home that we have made for ourselves in this world', nevertheless Hegel's philosophy

is the one that shows us that it is our *home* and that we are the ones who have built it. The only comfort that philosophy can add to its amenities must come from our understanding why it is idle to look for comfort in it (H. S. Harris, this collection).

From this perspective the question for us is whether philosophizing today has the power to generate a level of intensity, not so much for the spirit of our own age to emerge clearly and distinctively, but for the spirit of the age to emerge at all. Perhaps, instead, the real issue for the thinkers who come after the revolutionary philosopher is whether we are strong enough to intensify and withstand the intensity that Hegel's thinking has already released. From this perspective to encounter the spirit of the age can be neither to look for it in the developments of the twenty-first century world nor to produce a radically new philosophy. To encounter the spirit of the age can only mean to enter the temple in which the spirit's flame is already alight.

But as we know all too well flames do not only permit us to see; they also pose the risk of going blind. Hegel himself was not very optimistic about the strength and resolve of those around:

it belongs to the weakness of our time not to be able to bear the greatness, the immensity of the claims made by the human spirit, to feel crushed before them,

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1. On the meaning of 'the spirit of the age' see Löwith, Karl, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David E. Green, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 201-231.

and to flee from them faint-hearted (LHP II 10).

We have suggested that the fate of those of us who follow the arriving of Hegel, the revolutionary thinker, is to face the challenge of dwelling in his arriving. The fate of philosophers after the arrival of revolutionary philosophy is to play a role much like that of John the Baptist, albeit in relation to what has *already* arrived. But if thinkers today seem destined perpetually to perform the role of announcing the previous arrival of revolutionary thinking, herein lies the danger for thought. Do we announce the thinker's arrival because she/he has arrived or do we consider her/him as having arrived thanks to our announcements? Do we admit to the status of our work as mere footnoting that of revolutionary thinkers? Does our thinking carry the wisdom of knowing that its place of dwelling is the thought of revolutionary philosophy or do we instead, remaining oblivious to the status of our work, aspire to re-position the work of revolutionary thinking within its confines and thereby imagine ourselves to be safely situated beyond the reach of such thinking? Are we thinkers of the post-Hegelian era more and more evidently not 'able to bear the greatness, the immensity of the claims made by the human spirit'? Is our era the era of a 'faint-hearted' philosophy? These are the questions that motivated us to celebrate 200 years since the publication of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* with the production of this volume. In different ways our contributors have responded to this call for a renewed encounter with Hegel's thought.

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We have chosen to begin this volume with an essay by H. S. Harris. This previously unpublished essay is a transcription of the 'Presidential Address' delivered to the Hegel Society of America on 2 October 1980, at Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. We have included the essay here because Harris in this posthumous publication manages to address in his own distinctive manner many of the central questions that were of concern to us when formulating this collection. The essay fittingly begins the collection as it not only sets an agenda for the volume, but also acknowledges Harris' immense contribution to Hegel Scholarship. Harris remains an inspiration to us as students of Hegel.

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