

When can we know our assumptions?

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Early on in his book *Philosophy of Right*, the daunting philosopher G.W.F. Hegel presents readers with mysterious images:

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk (1952: 13)

What is Hegel trying to convey by these images: that philosophy paints its grey in grey, and that the owl of Minerva begins its flight at dusk? In this paper, I will omit reference to the painting image. I will focus only on the owl of Minerva image. Furthermore, I will assess Hegel's thinking on a common interpretation of it, leaving aside how well this interpretation corresponds with his intentions.

Here is what Hegel is saying, according to this interpretation. "(a) Within a period of history certain assumptions are made, and making those assumptions is part of what distinguishes that period. (b) Philosophers who are part of that period only identify these assumptions when that period is coming to an end. (c) It is only then that they are able to identify these assumptions. (d) In the next period of history, different assumptions¹ will be made." The wisdom of knowing the assumptions of one's time comes at a point when those assumptions will soon cease to be made, and this is the earliest it can come. Wisdom, in Hegel's imagery, is the owl of Minerva and it flies only as night is beginning, as an era is coming to an end. For convenience, I shall sometimes refer to the combination of the four claims identified above as the owl of Minerva thesis.

R.G. Collingwood presents this interpretation of Hegel in his book *The Idea of Nature* (1945: 1-2). More recently, Simon Blackburn introduces roughly the same interpretation in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*. Blackburn writes:

¹ 'Different assumptions' is ambiguous between totally different assumptions and a non-identical set of assumptions. On the latter reading, the claim is that towards the end of a period, philosophers are able to identify the assumptions that are soon to be abandoned, but not other assumptions. My objection applies on either reading.

That is, at the end of an epoch it would be possible for successors to look back and to find that a particular metaphysics had structured its thought. But at the time the basic structures would themselves be invisible, because they were themselves involved in all seeing... Hegel himself may have thought something similar. (1996: 70-71)

Blackburn points to evidence from the history of philosophy which supports this thesis about what can only happen at the end of a historical period. He tells us about previous philosophers who made assumptions that later came to seem controversial (1996: 70-71).

The owl of Minerva thesis fits well with a certain account of what goes on in a historical period. On this account, towards the beginning of a historical period new projects are initiated, in art, in science, in politics and more. There is great enthusiasm for pursuing these projects. But as these projects proceed problems arise. The projects eventually fail and the period comes to an end. As these projects get closer to failure (or to being recognized as failures), those involved become conscious of certain assumptions, assumptions which are causing the problems.

We can illustrate the general idea of an assumption becoming apparent as a project gets closer to failure by considering a very small-scale project: some children who set out to collect data about rainfall in the city where they live. They make certain assumptions as they collect their data, but they do not think about these assumptions. They are interested in collecting data. But as they proceed, problems with their project arise and it becomes clear that they have been relying on a certain assumption, an assumption which is responsible for some or all of the problems: the assumption that they can adequately distinguish different quantities of rainfall just by sight, without a precise measuring system. Of course, the projects of a historical period are generally grander than this little project. They are projects such as making every state a liberal democracy, verifying a unified theory of the physical universe, and more. But the example illustrates how an assumption that was not apparent to people at the beginning of a project may become apparent later, as problems are encountered with that project.

However, it does not seem that the owl of Minerva has to begin its flight at dusk, even if it usually does begin at that time. There is an objection to thinking that it can only begin then. I have not seen the objection before although it seems almost inevitable that it will be made. I wonder whether there is some truth in Hegel's thesis, but at present I cannot see a way of defending it against the objection.

The assumptions of a given statement, or a view or a project, are background commitments that have not been argued for, and these background commitments are there in virtue of logical or pragmatic relationships. (The assumptions we are interested in here are presuppositions whose truth has not been argued for or suppressed premises.) For example, consider the statement “My cousin is writing a book on a philosophical question.” This statement assumes that there is a philosophical question. It would be a logical error to believe the statement, when taken literally, and yet deny that there are any philosophical questions, but the existence of a philosophical question has not been argued for. It is assumed.

Now given that assumptions are there in virtue of logical or pragmatic relationships, it seems that a person with a talent for detecting these relationships can simply apply this talent, at any point in a historical period, in order to detect assumptions. Maybe as a project encounters problems, it is easy to spot certain assumptions of that project. Most or all people involved do not need to try in order to spot these assumptions – awareness of the problems forces consciousness of these assumptions. But if a person with a talent for assumption-detecting tries, they may well be able to spot the same assumptions even before setting off on the project. They need only apply their talent. To put my point in the imagery of Hegel: given appropriate talent, it is possible for the owl of Minerva to fly in the morning, but it requires some effort first.

I have written above as if there are some people with a talent for detecting assumptions and others without this talent. But this is a simplification. Rather than thinking in terms of a simple division between those with and those without this talent, it is better to think in terms of a range: some people are extremely good at assumption-detecting; some people are not at all good at this (probably they have other talents instead); and many people are somewhere in-between. Furthermore, practice can improve how good one is at this. I began with a simplification, but once we introduce these complications it does not affect the basic idea that assumptions can be detected early on within a historical period.

Some readers might wonder whether, even if it is possible to identify assumptions early on in a historical period, the assumptions will seem uncontroversial at this point in time. I do not see why this would necessarily be the impression early on. Sometimes an assumption is made and one need only draw attention to it for it to seem questionable. While it is implicit, people are not thinking about it but as soon as it is a focus of thought, it is evident that it

needs further justification.² And sometimes an assumption seems self-evident to most people, but with determination and imagination someone can contest it.

Other readers might wonder whether, if assumptions are identified early on in a historical period, this will affect the projects that are pursued within that period. Some projects will simply not be pursued further, because assumptions of those projects have been revealed. Again I do not think this is necessarily the case. There are various reasons for not thinking this. I will present only one. Someone who points out an assumption may not be listened to. People may well be excited about pursuing a new project and may ignore concerns that are raised about the foundations of that project, even if they have no way of countering the concerns.

References

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Hegel, G.W.F. (translated by T.M. Knox). 1952. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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² Consider, for example, the argument from illusion. A straight stick partly submerged in the water looks bent. Since it is not bent, the argument concludes that we must be seeing a mental image of a bent stick rather than directly perceiving reality. This assumes that if we see something as having a certain property (e.g. being bent), there must be something that we see which has this property. Since the actual stick does not have the property of being bent, it must be a stick within a mental image.