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Systematicity in Hegel's history of philosophy

In this paper I argue that Hegel thought that systematicity was both a necessary condition for a body of thought to be recognized as philosophy and a normative principle by which progress in the history of philosophy can be evaluated. I argue that Hegel's idiosyncrasies in the interpretation of thinkers who he considers to be philosophers can be explained by referring to the structure of his own philosophical system. I also argue that Hegel's conception of philosophy as being essentially systematic leads him to claim that traditions that do not have systematic philosophy do not have philosophy at all and this leads to their marginalization. *Finally, I identify the role of Hegel's assumptions in shaping the self-understanding of philosophers through the shaping of the philosophical canon.*



Hegel claims that someone like Confucius is not really a philosopher at all because he is “only a man who has a certain amount of practical and worldly wisdom, one with whom there is no speculative philosophy”.¹ Hegel is quite consistent in his application of systematicity as a principle (which, in his view, is both a necessary condition for a body of thought to be considered philosophy and a principle by which progress in philosophy can be evaluated). On his account, for instance, since Socrates lacked a system of philosophy he did not really possess any philosophical knowledge: “it may actually be said that Socrates knew nothing, for he did not reach the systematic construction of a philosophy” (GdP I, 458/LHP I, 399). So even though his application of this principle to figures in the history of Chinese philosophy is probably clouded to some extent by ethnocentricity or eurocentrism, he is at least willing to apply the same principle to both Eastern and Western philosophy. As an important aside, it should be noted that it would be a mistake to think that all of Hegel's immediate followers thought that he was right in denying that there existed philosophy in ancient China and India.

¹ G.F.W. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I, Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main 1971, Bd. 18, 142 (hereafter referred to as GdP I, the second volume of the lectures is referred to as GdP II, and so on). For the English translation, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy I: Greek Philosophy to Plato*, translated by E. S. Haldane, Lincoln/London 1995, 121 (hereafter referred to as LHP I, the second volume of the lectures is referred to as LHP II, and so on). I have modified some of Haldane's translations.

For example, Rosenkranz disagrees with Hegel on this point: "The Chinese and the Indians have not philosophized like the Greeks, but they have philosophized [...] it avails nothing, especially since the further investigations in this domain since Hegel's death, to seek either to ignore or to exclude the Orientals; for they have philosophized".²

Nonetheless, even if it is applied in a relatively equitable manner in relation to both Western and Chinese philosophy, Hegel's conception of philosophy as being necessarily systematic in character creates historiographic problems for him. For example, Gary K. Browning has criticized Hegel for attempting to portray Plato as a systematic philosopher, when in fact (according to Browning) Plato was not interested in presenting a systematic philosophy: "Hegel's characterisation of Plato as a systematic philosopher is an anachronistic importation of his own style of philosophising into a previous age".³ It must be said that Browning's criticism is not unfair given the fact that Hegel underemphasizes the Platonic dialogues which do not fit into his conception of philosophy as a systematic intellectual endeavour. It is certainly difficult to disagree with Browning that Hegel's emphasis on the *Parmenides*, the *Republic*, and the *Timaeus* and his exclusion of other dialogues is part of Hegel's attempt to recast Plato's philosophy so that it conforms to his own conception of philosophy (and this seems to violate Hegel's own methodological principles). I say that Hegel seems to be violating his own methodological principles when he does this because the commitment to internal critique applied to the historiography of philosophy implies that the evaluation of past philosophies should do not employ standards of evaluation that are different from the ones that were endorsed by the philosopher who is being criticized. For according to Hegel "refutation must not come from outside, that is, it must not proceed from assumptions lying outside the system in question and inconsistent with it".⁴ Hegel himself seems to admit that his focus on the aforementioned three dialogues is an attempt to view Plato as a systematic philosopher in Hegel's own sense: "if the *Parmenides* be taken together with the *Republic*, and the *Timaeus*, the three together constitute the whole Platonic system of philosophy divided into its three parts or sections" (GdP II, 60/LHP II, 49). Of course, the reference to the triadic division is a meant to evoke Hegel's own system with its logic, philosophy of Spirit (*Geist*), and philosophy of nature.

² J. K. Rosenkranz, "Rosenkranz on Hegel's History of Philosophy", in: *The Journal for Speculative Philosophy* 8.1 (1874): 1–13.

³ Gary K. Browning, *Hegel and the History of Political Philosophy*, London 1999, 42.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II, Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main 1971, Bd. 6, 250. For the English translation, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, translated by A. V. Miller, Amherst 1999, 580.

The emphasis on systematicity and the problems that are associated with such emphasis allow us to draw connections between Hegel and subsequent philosophers who were also historians of philosophy, e. g., Ernst Cassirer. This will help us detect the influence of Hegelian assumptions on subsequent historiography of philosophy, and consequently the role of those assumptions in shaping the self-understanding of philosophers through the shaping of the philosophical canon.



As Donald Philip Verne notes, Hegel's emphasis on systematicity becomes especially problematic when it comes to treating philosophy in periods where philosophy was done in a consciously unsystematic fashion (Plato may not have been a systematic philosopher in Hegel's sense, but it is not clear that he was consciously and intentionally against the construction of systems).⁵ Hegel has trouble dealing with Renaissance philosophy and Enlightenment philosophy both of which were unsystematic in character (especially the latter, which had philosophers like Diderot and Condillac who consciously rejected and argued against the idea of philosophy as a system). Louis Dupré has raised the objection that someone who adopts a Hegelian approach to the history of philosophy will have difficulty in dealing with transition periods like the Renaissance because of the lack of systematic thinkers during such periods as well as the fact that the philosophical scene is chaotic in so far as it is not dominated by any one system, or even just a few competing systems.⁶ On the other hand, if we emphasize Hegel's claim that the philosophy of an age reflects the character of that age, i. e., its dominant cultural trends, we can say that the very lack of systematicity reflects the character of that age as a period of transition and exploration. In this sense, we can say that Hegel might have a response to Dupré's criticism.

Ernst Cassirer emphasizes that a Hegelian approach would face difficulties in treating Renaissance philosophy. In *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* he notes that Renaissance philosophy "does not seem to bear out Hegel's presupposition that the full consciousness and spiritual essence of an epoch is contained in its philosophy" primarily because it seems to lack a unified philosophical system.⁷ However, interestingly enough, Cassirer does not infer from this problem that Hegel's conception of philosophy as being essentially systematic is incorrect. Instead, as Verne points out, Cassirer attempts to solve this historiographic problem not by abandoning Hegel's principle but by suggesting that the entirety of Renais-

⁵ Donald P. Verne, "Vico's Road and Hegel's Owl as Historiographies of Renaissance Philosophy", in: *Clio* 21.4 (1992):329–343.

⁶ Louis Dupré, "Philosophy and its History", in: *At the Nexus of Philosophy and History*, edited by Bernard P. Dauenhauer, Athens/London 1987, 20–41.

⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, translated by Mario Domandi, New York 1963, 1.

sance philosophical thought can be understood as “a system in which all separate philosophical productions and viewpoints are parts of a total Spirit of the age”.⁸ From Cassirer's point of view, the lack of a systematic philosophy authored by a single individual is to be resolved by reconstructing a unified philosophical system, one which can be taken to represent the primary intellectual concerns of the age, from “the multiplicity of starting points and the divergence of solutions to the various problems posed”.⁹ Compare this to what Hegel says about what we are to do (methodologically) when several philosophies appear at the same time in the same cultural context: “where several philosophies appear at the same time, they are as different sides which make up one totality forming their basis” (GdP III, 457/LHP III, 548). In fact, further evidence in support of Verne's view that Cassirer essentially agrees with Hegel on this point is provided by Cassirer himself in the preface to his *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Here, Cassirer tells us that the philosophy of the Enlightenment is to be presented “in light of the unity of its conceptual origin and of its underlying principle rather than of the totality of its historical manifestations and results”.¹⁰ We can see that Cassirer's approach is to construct a unified system where he can find none. The invocation of an “underlying principle [*Prinzip*]” which can be used to identify (and in this case, construct) a system is clearly a Hegelian move. Cassirer also claims that he is interested in uncovering the “real systematic value of the philosophy of this age”.¹¹ The Hegelian emphasis on identifying a system which can then be taken to reflect the main intellectual concerns of the age is also apparent in the following passage: “the tensions and solutions, the doubts and decisions, the skepticism and unshakeable conviction of this philosophy *must be seen and interpreted from one central position if its real historical meaning is to be made clear*”.¹² The attempt to present the philosophy of a given period as being embodied in one system is motivated by the belief that there is a unity to the culture of a given period, we can recast this in Hegelian terms so as to speak of the Spirit (*Geist*) of an age, and that this unity is expressed in systematic philosophy. On this view, if the philosophy of a given age is not systematic or even explicitly hostile to systematicity, it must nonetheless be shown that it can be recast in systematic form. In fact, Cassirer's conception of the task of the historian is rather Hegelian. A. Juffras notes that Cassirer's view of the task of the historian is fundamentally characterized by an emphasis on re-

⁸ Verne, “Vico's Road and Hegel's Owl”, 335.

⁹ Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos*, 6.

¹⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, translated by Fritz Koelln and James Pettegrove, Princeton 1951, V.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.* My emphasis.

constructing the “spirit of the age” and that this expression (*Zeitgeist*) is an expression which recurs frequently in Cassirer’s work.¹³ It is also interesting to note that Cassirer’s histories of philosophy have been subjected to criticisms that are similar to the ones that are often directed at Hegel’s history of philosophy. For example, Quentin Skinner has quipped that “it sometimes seems in Cassirer’s analysis as though the whole Enlightenment was striving to make Kant possible”.¹⁴ Compare this to Beiser’s claim that Hegel distorted the history of German idealism by presenting his predecessors as “stepping stones on the triumphal path towards Hegel’s grand system”.¹⁵

The point is that there is a Hegelian strand in Cassirer’s historiography (and in some influential strands of twentieth century intellectual history). Questions about the strengths and weaknesses of Hegelian approaches to history and especially to the history of philosophy are not just of antiquarian interest; they directly pertain to contemporary issues in historiography, especially the historiography of philosophy in particular and the historiography of culture in general. As Wallace K. Ferguson has noted in his study of the historiography of the Renaissance, when one studies the history of European historiography one discovers that Hegelianism has exerted a tremendous influence on how intellectual history was and is approached, including of course the ways in which the history of philosophy has been approached.¹⁶ For a concrete example we can point to the work of Cassirer’s colleague at the Warburg Institute, the influential historian of art Erwin Panofsky. Specifically, his *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, which is clearly inspired by Hegel’s thesis that there is a unified outlook or perspective belonging to a given age which can be detected in all of the cultural productions of that age (in this case an outlook or perspective that is detectable in both Medieval architecture and Medieval philosophy). Panofsky even explicitly uses Hegelian language in his exposition.¹⁷

It must be said that the emphasis on systematicity as a necessary condition for serious philosophy comes at a significant cost. For if attempts at showing that there is systematicity in the philosophy of periods such as the Enlighten-

¹³ A. Juffras, “Cassirer’s Theory of History”, in: *History and Anti-History in Philosophy*, edited by T. Z. Lavine and V. Tejera, Dordrecht 1989, 188–214.

¹⁴ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, in: *History and Theory* 8.1 (1969): 3–53.

¹⁵ Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism*, Cambridge 2008, 10.

¹⁶ Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation*, Toronto/Buffalo 2003.

¹⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism: An Inquiry into the Analogy of the Arts, Philosophy, and Religion in the Middle Ages*, New York 1958, 64.

ment fail, then provided that one retains the idea that serious philosophy must be systematic, the history of modern European philosophy will be presented in a distorted form. It is important to recognize that the issue here has to do with whether a given thinker is considered a philosopher and not whether a given thinker is esteemed. In fact, Hegel found Diderot's work interesting (*Rameau's Nephew* is quoted three times in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*), but he does not seem to consider him a philosopher; he does not even mention him in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.¹⁸ The principle of systematicity, which took hold in the historiographic practices of the nineteenth century, leads to the following results: "the Renaissance is at best covered as a somewhat chaotic period of transition; seventeenth- and eighteenth-century eclecticism itself disappears completely from historical view; the messy French *philosophes* are taken less than seriously; the 'civic philosophers' in the Pufendorffian tradition are [...] dismissed".¹⁹ Haakonssen characterization applies to Hegel's treatment of Renaissance philosophy which is quite brief and dismissive. In Hegel's account, Ficino, Pico, and Bessarion get treated collectively in a single paragraph, and the same is the case for Gassendi, Lipsius, Reuchlin, and Helmont who also get lumped together in a single paragraph (GdP III,14-15/LHP III, 112–113). Hegel is more or less explicit on why he devotes little space to Renaissance philosophy. He claims that "it is in fact not a true philosophy at all, and I shall therefore not dwell any longer upon it" (GdP III,15/LHP III, 113). For Hegel, it is not true philosophy precisely because systematicity is a necessary condition for a body of thought to be considered philosophy. The exception to this characterization of Renaissance philosophy is Giordano Bruno, who Hegel finds very interesting and discusses at some length. Hegel reads Bruno as a precursor to Spinoza: "this system of Bruno's is thus objective Spinozism, nothing else; one can see how deeply he penetrated" (GdP III, 28/LHP III, 126). Hegel also emphasizes Bruno's proto-Leibnizian conception of matter: "matter is nothing without activity, form is therefore the power and inward life of matter" (GdP III, 29/LHP III, 127). Interestingly, this positive evaluation of Bruno is based on the characterization of Bruno as a philosopher who has a system.

What is especially interesting is that the result that Knud Haakonssen describes, a result which follows from knowingly or unknowingly adopting a Hegelian, or more generally, a German Idealist conception of what counts as philosophy, corresponds in many respects to the structure of the contempo-

¹⁸ James Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.4 (1996): 625–644.

¹⁹ Knud Haakonssen, "The History of Eighteenth – Century Philosophy: History or Philosophy?", in: *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, edited by Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge 2006, 3–25.

rary philosophical canon in the Anglophone world (especially in relation to its omissions). For instance, while it is more or less impossible to study for an undergraduate degree in philosophy without encountering systematic philosophers like Descartes and Kant, it is very much possible that one will not encounter the work of unsystematic philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Diderot. This is especially interesting once we realize that it is not at all clear that most contemporary philosophers would agree with Hegel (and the German Idealists in general) that systematicity is a necessary condition for a body of thought to be considered philosophy. Hence, it is important to analyze and evaluate the ideas which have historically dominated the historiography of philosophy in the nineteenth century (and many of these ideas can be found in Hegel) because these ideas have played an important role in structuring the philosophical canon which we now have. It may very well be the case that Descartes and Kant are just more interesting or more important philosophers than Ficino and Diderot and that the latter pair are really not deserving of a place in the philosophical canon (and there may be other factors as well) but at the very least we should be questioning whether it is wise to let the structure of our philosophical canon be dictated to us by the views of nineteenth century philosophers and historians of philosophy. Especially once we realize that it is not at all clear that we share with them their ideas about the necessary conditions that intellectual work needs to meet in order to be considered philosophy. Moreover, we should not think that abandoning the idea that systematicity is a necessary condition for a body of thought to be considered philosophy implies abandoning the idea that systematic philosophy is perhaps in some respects superior to philosophy that is not done systematically.

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