

# Hegel on Helvétius

Brad Thomson

## I

Hegel may be defined as an Absolute Idealist. And he may also be defined as a monist. One substance exists, and this one substance is the Absolute Idea. It is one changing and evolving idea. In the opinion of Hegel, *History* is not simply a random sequence of events that takes place more or less by chance. History is the process of the self-realization of the Absolute Idea. This Idea may also be defined as God. Thus the self-realization Absolute Idea is also the self-realization, or the coming to self-awareness, of God. It is the *becoming* of God. How does this process take place? In and through the historical activity of humans.

God, or the Absolute Idea, for Hegel, may also be defined as *Reason*. And Reason evolves over time. Hegel writes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that, “Reason is the conscious certainty of being all reality.”<sup>1</sup> Reason strives throughout human history to exist both in- and for-itself. In other words, Reason seeks to become *one* with its own substance. When this takes place the Absolute Idea is realized, it is actualized, it is *thought*. And when we say that the Absolute Idea is *thought* in this context, we use the word *thought* both as a noun and as a verb at the same time. In other words, humans *think* the *thought* that is the Absolute Idea. And Reason advances and is *thought* through the *dialectical* process that is known as human *history*. As historical events unfold or take place, or as the dialectical process moves forward, so too does the advancement of Reason, so too does the self-knowledge of God, and the self-awareness or actualization of the Absolute Idea.

The goal of history, the goal of the unfolding dialectical process, is the awareness and realization of *Freedom*. The goal of human action throughout history is the personal realization of individual freedom, and the collective

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<sup>1</sup> *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, paragraph 233.

realization of political freedom. But the road is a long and difficult one to be sure. We shall not have an easy time of it. And no final Eden or Nirvana is forthcoming. The actualization of the Absolute Idea takes place fleetingly, through brief glimpses, or through passing revelations, in the minds of philosophers. But otherwise the Idea is eternally hidden and unnoticed. Hegel suggests that *History* moves or is forced along by continuous conflicts between personal, social and political oppositions, or forces. And Hegel speaks of the *moving power of the negative* to affect change. Each social or political conflict is resolved into a new, distinct and often more advanced state of affairs which in its own turn will break up into another conflict of competing forces that will eventually be resolved, and so forth. And this for Hegel is the mechanism of historical change. Thus the history of mankind is very much the history of war, the history of turmoil and the history of dissension. The final goal of the dialectic is to be desired and sought, but the means of its attainment must necessarily at times be horrendous. *Freedom* is a struggle for its own survival.

For Hegel, there is a universal *Logic* that must play out historically, a sort of evolutionary pattern that must take place in *Time*. Humans are pawns in this process. Only through this process does *Reason* become actualized, or self-aware. Only through this process is *Freedom* realized. Mankind is in a sense condemned to live out his necessary historical fight for freedom. History knows no other way. For God must achieve self-awareness. This is the purpose of existence. The universe must move forward, for the Absolute Idea must be *thought*. And as we have suggested, the *thinking-of-this-thought* takes place in the mind of the philosopher. It is in the mind of the philosopher that the *Truth* appears and is self-realized. And this is *Substance*.

Hegel also speaks of *world-historical individuals*. These are the persons that strongly effect the course of history at crucial points where the interplay of opposing forces is very acute. World-historical individuals are essential to the

process of historical change, they are the primary movers of history itself. But as a result, these persons are very often villains. For example, the most influential person of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and therefore the most important world-historical individual during that time period, was Adolph Hitler. Hitler found himself placed both geographically and ideologically between the conflicting forces of Western capitalism and Eastern communism. His goal was to resolve the debate once and for all. A war leading to seventy-five million deaths was the result. And yet the conflict between the forces of capitalism and communism persists, it remains to this day. All was for naught, for nothing. And the realization of freedom remains as elusive as ever. Such is the power, and it might also be said, the impotence, of the world-historical individual.

## II

France in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was firmly under the control of the House of Bourbon, the *Ancien Régime* that had been in power for centuries. As the writings of Helvétius suggest, the structure of the government under King Louis XVI was completely and utterly corrupt. France was ruled by the arbitrary, temporal power of the monarchy, and also very much by sacerdotal power in the form of the Catholic church. And the two distinct powers, as Helvétius informs us, were often opposed in various ways to one another. In 1764, while Helvétius was still alive, the Jesuits, an Order of the Catholic Church that Helvétius attacks without mercy, was banned in France. At the time the vast majority of the wealth of the nation was concentrated in very few hands. Naturally, the common people of France were miserable as a result. But an *éclaircissement*, an *enlightenment* was taking place. An opposing force to the old and corrupt system was rising up, manifesting itself, and making itself known. As thinkers such as Helvétius, Rousseau, Voltaire and others published their works, society was gradually being awakened to its own plight. Society was learning that things did not have to be the way that they were. Change was

being recognized as being possible. In Hegelian terms, the rising force of the enlightenment, the power of the awakening of the people, was coming into conflict with both the traditional, arbitrary temporal powers and at the same time with the sacerdotal powers. And an explosive resolution to this historical conflict was becoming inevitable. In Hegelian terms, a thesis, in other words the old system in France, was opposed by an antithesis, in other words, the ideas put forth by the philosophers of the *éclaircissement*, and a synthesis, or a resolution to this conflict of forces therefore became the necessarily and inevitable result. The dialectic, the eternal fight for freedom, was nearing a breaking point. A vast explosion was about to take place historically. And a short eighteen years after Helvétius died, France witnessed the first indication of that coming explosion in The Storming of the Bastille, *la prise de la bastille*.

### III

In his biography of Hegel, Terry Pinkard writes, “Hegel... with raised voice declared, “This glass is for the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 1789 – to the storming of the Bastille.”<sup>2</sup> We learn also that Hegel later in life told his friend Varnhagen von Ense, “...that he in fact always drank a toast to the storming of the Bastille on July 14.”<sup>3</sup> At this time, having been born in 1770, Hegel was a young man attending the Protestant Seminary in Tübingen. He along with his classmates and friends Hölderlin and Schelling, were very enthusiastic about the French Revolution. They hoped that it would spread to Germany and replace the outdated and corrupt world in which they themselves lived. And a club was formed for discussing the Revolution and the literature associated with it as it was taking place.<sup>4</sup> Pinkard writes that, “Hegel, like many German intellectuals of the time, tended to see the emerging French Revolution as a newer version of the older Protestant Reformation, destined to lead society to a better ethical

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<sup>2</sup> *Hegel: A Biography*, Terry Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, 2000, page 451.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Page 24.

condition.”<sup>5</sup> We learn also that, “In Hegel's mind, the new revolutionary order would bring about a state of affairs in which men of learning, taste and cultivation would be running things instead of the undereducated, pompous, corrupt aristocracy...”<sup>6</sup> This sounds very much like some of the ideas presented by Helvétius. Pinkard suggests that, “The Revolution held out the possibility of moral and spiritual renewal of what he understood to be the corruption of German social and cultural life.”<sup>7</sup> And finally, “...Hegel had come to identify the French Revolution with moral and spiritual renewal and... to equate it with the coming reign of beauty and freedom.”<sup>8</sup> Hegel became less optimistic as he aged and as events unfolded.

Through a violent and bloody course of events, and through men such as Robespierre, the French Revolution lead eventually to an ambitious and talented Corsican of Italian descent taking full power in France. His name was Napoleon Bonaparte. On October 14, 1806, Napoleon lead the magnificent French army to victory by crushing the previously esteemed Prussian forces at the Battle of Jena. At the time, Hegel was living and teaching in Jena, and he was putting the final touches on his most famous (though in my opinion not his best) work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Then, as historical fate and circumstances would have it, almost as if by magical design, Hegel, while looking out his window witnessed the *world-historical individual* Napoleon Bonaparte with his own eyes. In a letter to his friend Friedrich Neithammer, Hegel writes, “I saw the Emperor – this world-soul – riding out of the city on reconnaissance. It is indeed a wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it... this extraordinary man, whom it is impossible not to

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5 *Ibid.* Page 26.

6 *Ibid.* Page 49.

7 *Ibid.* Page 54.

8 *Ibid.* Page 50.

admire.”<sup>9</sup>

#### IV

In his *Philosophy of History* Hegel offers his full theory of what *History* is. As we have observed, it is in and through *History* that the Absolute Idea, Reason, Freedom, or God, becomes actualized, or manifested as completely self-aware. The final result of the process of history is a purely *self-thinking thought*. This thought *is* the One Substance. We are able to *think* this *thought* only in fleeting glimpses, for as soon as the thought comes, it goes. This is similar to the way that we are able to think or grasp the Platonic forms of *beauty*, or *the good*. These thoughts, these revelations, these *sensations*, never stay with us for very long, they simply pass through us. We cannot hold on to them because change, or *Time*, is permanent. *Freedom* is never still, we are never at rest.

Hegel devotes the final chapter of the *Philosophy of History* to the relationship between the French *éclaircissement* and the German *Aufklärung*. The *Enlightenment*. Here Hegel discusses what is taking place during his own life and times. The effects and results of French Revolution upon France, upon Germany and upon *History* itself are considered in great detail. Hegel informs us that, “From France it [the *éclaircissement*] passed over into Germany, and created a new world of ideas.”<sup>10</sup>

Hegel states that, “...the French Revolution resulted from philosophy...”<sup>11</sup> He further suggests that, “...the Revolution received its first impulse from philosophy.”<sup>12</sup> We see that for Hegel there are times when philosophy moves history along, there are times when history is guided or directed by philosophy. Therefore there are moments in history when philosophers become very

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9 *Ibid.* Page 228.

10 *Philosophy of History*, Translated by J.Sibree, New York P.F.Collier and Son, 1900, page 551.

Future references will be to *History*.

11 *History*, page 556.

12 *History*, page 556.

powerful persons and exert very strong influences upon the times in which they live, or upon future times. In the opinion of Hegel, thinkers such as Rousseau, Helvétius and others very much *caused* the French Revolution to take place.

Hegel also expresses a very clear difference between the *éclaircissement* and the *Aufklärung*. The following long passage sounds at times very much as though it could just as easily have been written by Helvétius. Hegel writes, “In Germany the *éclaircissement* [*Aufklärung*] was conducted in the interest of theology: in France it immediately took up a position of hostility to the Church. In Germany the entire compass of secular [temporal] relations had already undergone a change for the better; [this is because] those pernicious ecclesiastical institutes of celibacy, voluntary pauperism, and laziness, had already been done away with; there was no deadweight [expense to society] of enormous wealth attached to the Church, and no constraint put upon morality- a constraint which is the source and occasion of vices; there was not that hurtful form of iniquity which arises from the interference of the spiritual [sacerdotal] power with secular [temporal] law, nor that other of the Divine Right of Kings, i.e. the doctrine that the arbitrary will of princes, in virtue of their being “the Lord's Anointed,” is divine and holy: on the contrary, their will is regarded as deserving of respect only so far as, in association with reason, it wisely contemplates Right, Justice, and the weal[th] of the community.”<sup>13</sup> Now, was that Hegel, or was that Helvétius?

Hegel also writes that, “The political condition of France at the time [of the Revolution] presents nothing but a confused mass of privileges altogether contravening Thought and Reason- an utterly irrational state of things, and one with which the greatest corruption of morals, of Spirit was associated...”<sup>14</sup> Helvétius would not have disagreed. Hegel also suggests that, “The change was necessarily violent, because the work of transformation was not undertaken by

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<sup>13</sup> *History*, page 555.

<sup>14</sup> *History*, page 556.

the government. And the reason why the government did not undertake it was that the Court, the Clergy, the Nobility, [and] the Parliaments themselves were unwilling to surrender the privileges they possessed...”<sup>15</sup> It is safe to assume that had he lived to see it Helvétius would have offered a similar explanation.

Hegel explains that, “One of the leading features in the political condition of Germany is that code of Rights which was certainly occasioned by French oppression, since this was the especial means of bringing to light the deficiencies of the old system.”<sup>16</sup> We see then the manner in which the French Revolution, Napoleon and the changes that he imposed upon the nations that he conquered, lead to a new and improved Germany. At least in the opinion of Hegel. The changes instigated by France brought about in Germany a *liberalism*, and with this liberalism a freedom for individuals that had previously been repressed by the older corrupt social institutions.

## V

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel writes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century French philosophers, “We must represent to ourselves the horrible state of society, the misery and the degradation in France, in order to appreciate the services that these writers rendered.”<sup>17</sup> Hegel describes the status of religion in France during the pre-Revolution time period, which is during the time period of Helvétius, as follows:

Not the religion that Luther purified, but the most wretched superstition, priestly domination, stupidity, degradation of mind, and more especially the squandering of riches and the revelling in temporal possessions in the midst of public misery.<sup>18</sup>

Once more Hegel writes in a manner that sounds very much like Helvétius. The sacerdotal powers are described as “wretched superstition”,

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<sup>15</sup> *History*, page 557.

<sup>16</sup> *History*, page 568.

<sup>17</sup> *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume III, page 389. University of Nebraska Press, 1995, translated by E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson. All references will be to the *Lectures*.

<sup>18</sup> *Lectures*, page 389.

“stupidity” and “the squandering of riches”. Hegel is no more flattering to the temporal powers of state at the time. He writes,

The blindest tyranny of ministers and their mistresses, wives and chamberlains; so that a vast army of petty tyrants and idlers looked upon it as a right divinely given them to plunder the revenues of the state and lay hands upon the product of the nation's sweat.<sup>19</sup>

This is the world that Helvétius lived in and rebelled against. Hegel points out that the philosophers of this time period did not advocate revolution, they simply desired and demanded reforms. He then suggests that, “The French Revolution was forced on by the stiff-necked obstinacy [stubbornness] of prejudices, by haughtiness [arrogance], utter want of thought, and avarice.”<sup>20</sup> Helvétius would have expressed similar opinions, without doubt.

Hegel also states that, “A leading characteristic of its [éclaircissement] teaching... is the assumption of primitive feelings of justice which man has in himself... for example benevolence and social instincts...”<sup>21</sup> Now, as Hegel suggests, this *may* be true of the éclaircissement generally speaking, but it is not, we must observe, the case with Helvétius specifically. For Helvétius, any “benevolence and social instincts” that humans possess are rooted primarily in self-love, which is reducible to the natural desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Hegel also observes that, “...those philosophers made war on all external authority of state and church...”<sup>22</sup> Helvétius most certainly wages such war against the powers of organized religion, in particular Catholicism. Further, he is equally aggressive in his attacks upon the corruption of the state. Hegel does not disagree, and writes of the conditions of those times, “...in the sign of the cross [crucifix] lying and deceit had been victorious, under this seal institutions had become fossilized, and had sunk into all manner of degradation, so that this

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19 *Lectures*, page 389.

20 *Lectures*, page 390.

21 *Lectures*, page 392. Hegel was very much influenced by and impressed with the works of Rousseau. See *Hegel, A Biography* by Terry Pinkard. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

22 *Lectures*, page 397.

sign came to be represented as the epitome and root of all evil.”<sup>23</sup> Helvétius would no doubt admit that he could not have said it better himself.

Writing specifically of the metaphysics that these thinkers offered, Hegel states, “...they accept sensation and matter as the only truth, to which must be reduced all thought, all morality, as a mere modification of sensation. And with respect to, “...*sentir* and *penser*... the latter [is] only a result of the former...”<sup>24</sup> Further to this Hegel writes, “The reduction of all thought to sensation, which in certain respects took place with Locke, becomes a widely extended theory.”<sup>25</sup> We know that Helvétius refers often to the influence of Locke upon his own thinking. Hegel concludes his analysis of the time period by referring to and quoting Robinet, who wrote, “Abstract thoughts are only modes in which our inmost organ views its own modifications. The words goodness, beauty, order, intelligence, virtue, &c., have no meaning for us if we do not refer and apply them to objects which our senses have shown to be capable of these qualities, or to modes of being and acting that are known to us.”<sup>26</sup> This sounds very much like the analysis given by Helvétius in *De L'Homme*, Section II. It also sounds very much like a thinker from earlier in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, George Berkeley.

As a result of the influence of the French thinkers, Hegel suggests that the Germans, “...were gradually breathed upon by the spirit of foreign lands, they made acquaintance with all the developments which there came to pass... and plunged into the *Aufklärung* [enlightenment] and into the consideration of the utility of all things- a point of view which they adopted from the French.”<sup>27</sup> Hegel we observe is clear and unequivocal in expressing his respect for the French philosophers that the 18<sup>th</sup> century produced. His own philosophical thought and the advent of the German *Aufklärung* could not have come about

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23 *Lectures*, page 398.

24 *Lectures*, page 398.

25 *Lectures*, page 399.

26 *Lectures*, page 399. The reference given by Hegel is: “*Système de la Nature* (T. I. Chap. x. p 177)”.

27 *Lectures*, page 403.

otherwise. This is the nature of the Hegelian dialectic. Hegel would be contradicting his own principles if he did not place himself into the context of the historical pattern that lead to himself as a philosopher.

## VI

Finally, Hegel devotes one paragraph containing a total of five sentences to Helvétius directly. And as is often the case with Hegel his precise meaning is perhaps unclear. Hegel writes:

This reduction of thought to feeling in the case of Helvétius takes the form that if in man as a moral being a single principle is sought, this ought to be called self-love, and he endeavoured to demonstrate by ingenious analysis that whatever we term virtue, all activity and law and right, has as its foundation nothing but self-love or selfishness, and is resolvable thereinto. [This is a typically long-winded Hegelian sentence. Hegel points out that for Helvétius all thought is reduced to sensation, and further that the first principle of morality is self-love.] This principle is one-sided, although the “I myself” is an essential moment. [Hegelian places Helvétius into the context of his own system of metaphysics.] What I will, the noblest, the holiest, is *my* aim; I must take part in it, I must agree to it, I must approve it. [This is Hegel putting Helvétius into his own words. And further, doing so in a spirit of agreement.] With all self-sacrifice there is always conjoined some satisfaction, some finding of self; this element of self, subjective liberty, must always be present. [Hegel equates “self-love” as defined by Helvétius with “subjective liberty” as defined in his own metaphysics.] If this is taken in a one-sided sense, there may be consequences drawn from it which overthrow all that is sacred [A possible reference to the results of the philosophy of the *éclaircissement* historically?]; but it is found in equal degree in a morality as noble as any can possibly be [We observe that Hegel concludes by himself agreeing completely with the first principle of Helvétius, that of self-love].<sup>28</sup>

And out of self-love we must now conclude ourselves.