

# HEGEL'S HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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**Abstract.** *Starting from Koselleck's notion of «historical anthropology», I propose to rethink Hegel's philosophy of history in the light of a series of questions: What is the human being as a historical being? What explains why human beings, unlike other animals, have a history as event and narrative? What are the categories rooted in «human nature» that define the conditions of possibility of this history? In other words, I propose to explore Hegel's anthropology not in his philosophy of the subjective spirit, in the section he called «anthropology», but rather in his philosophy of the objective spirit, primarily in the lectures on the philosophy of history. This approach will focus on the concepts of development (natural versus spiritual) (1), thought (2), freedom (from nature) (3), and culture (Bildung) (4) as historical categories. Finally, I will consider the contemporary relevance of Hegel's approach to the relationship between the human being – understood as «spirit» – and nature.*

**Keywords.** *Hegel; Anthropology; Freedom; Historicity; Nature*

In his essay on *Mensch und Geschichte*, Scheler defends the following thesis: «Every theory of history has its foundation in a certain kind of anthropology, whether or not the historian, sociologist, or philosopher of history is aware of it and familiar with it»<sup>1</sup>. In his view, Hegel's philosophy of history belongs to the anthropology of human being as a being endowed with *logos*, established by the Greeks, with the specificity that it introduced into the notion of reason – *logos, ratio* – the idea of process and becoming. In this study, I would like to explore this hypothesis in greater depth by looking more closely at how Hegel's philosophy helps to answer the following question: what

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<sup>1</sup> M. Scheler, *Mensch und Geschichte*, Zürich, Neuen Schweizer Rundschau, 1929, p. 15.

explains why human beings, unlike other animals, have a history, in the double sense of events and narrative? Hegel's position on this question is all the more interesting because, while in the philosophy of nature he draws numerous parallels between human beings and animals, both of which are subsumed under the category of «subjectivity», in the philosophy of spirit he contrasts them by establishing history as an anthropological difference: to have a historical «development» is one of the differences between human beings and animals, spirit and nature. But why exactly?

In order to investigate these questions, I will explore Hegel's anthropology along a new path: not the one that leads to his philosophy of the subjective spirit, in the section he calls «Anthropology», which is actually about the «soul» (*Seele*) or «spirit-nature» (*Naturgeist*), i.e., the natural basis of human existence<sup>2</sup>; but rather his philosophy of the objective spirit, mainly in the lectures on the philosophy of history. In the wake of Koselleck, I call «historical anthropology» anthropology insofar as it focuses on the historicity of the human being<sup>3</sup>. What could be more logical than to look for Hegel's historical anthropology in the part of his system that deals with history? As Odo Marquard has pointed out, Hegel wanted to bring anthropology into his philosophy of history, replacing the «turn to nature» of Romantic anthropology with a «turn to history», which needs to be further analyzed<sup>4</sup>. We will see that the

<sup>2</sup> In the 1817 edition, Hegel calls «The Soul» the section he renames «Anthropology» in later editions (§§ 388-412 of *The Philosophy of Spirit* in the 1827 and 1830 editions of the *Encyclopedia*). On this text, see A. Arndt, J. Zovko (eds.), *Hegels Anthropologie*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2017; G. Lejeune, *Hegel anthropologue*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2016; A. De Laurentiis, *Hegel's Anthropology: life, psyche, and second nature*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2021. For the link between Hegel's anthropology of the *Encyclopedia* and his philosophy of history, see L. Corti and F. Sanguinetti, *Hegel's Theory of Character: Bringing Nature Into History* (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> See R. Koselleck, *Historik and Hermeneutics*, in *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*, trans. and ed. by S. Franzel and S.-L. Hoffmann, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018, pp. 41-59.

<sup>4</sup> See O. Marquard, *Zur Geschichte des philosophischen Begriffs «Anthropologie» seit dem Ende des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts*, in *Schwierigkeiten mit der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1992, pp. 122-144. In this study

study of Hegel's historical anthropology will also lead us to look for elements of response scattered throughout the system, especially in the philosophy of nature, which provides points of comparison between animals and humans. I will examine different but complementary responses to the question of the historicity of the human being as Hegel conceived it in his time. Human beings, understood in terms of the category of «spirit», have a history especially because they must free themselves from nature and produce themselves through culture. In my conclusion, I will discuss the relevance of these answers to the problem of historical anthropology today by considering another relationship between human beings and nature that is present *in nuce* in Hegelian thought.

### 1. *An Actual Capacity for Change*

In his *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel emphasizes the many similarities between humans and animals, ranging from their status as living beings to their subjectivity. The animal's subjectivity refers to its capacity to be aware of deficiency and the activity of overcoming it, thus transforming nature into an object as opposed to a subject<sup>5</sup>. Like animals, humans are subject to the three great processes of life: formation (birth and growth), assimilation, and reproduction. Conversely, animals, like humans, possess voice, sensation, self-feeling, impulse, desire, and above all, «contingent self-movement», the power to move by itself, which gives them freedom in space (they can change place) and time (they can act when they want to)<sup>6</sup>. Like

however, Marquard has not analyzed the anthropological considerations of the Hegelian philosophy of history.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, (henceforth cited as TW, followed by the number of the respective volume) ed. by K.M. Michel and E. Moldenhauer, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 9, p. 469; trans. by J.M. Petry, *Philosophy of Nature*, (henceforth cited as PN), vol. III, New York, George Allen & Unwin, 1970, p. 141, § 359.

<sup>6</sup> TW 9, § 351, p. 431; PN, vol. III, p. 103. See the 1805 fragments on the philosophy of spirit, G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (henceforth cited as GW,

humans, animals have both a theoretical and a practical relationship with nature. In the former, they simply perceive natural things through their senses without destroying them. In the latter, they destroy them in order to consume and assimilate them, or they modify them by shaping their environment through the «tendency to form» (*Bildungstrieb*), which refers to the shaping of the external world to meet their vital needs, such as nests, burrows, and lairs<sup>7</sup>. When they consume things, animals manifest a kind of spontaneous idealism, which is another unexpected similarity to the human being as a spiritual being<sup>8</sup>. Animals are unconscious idealists. By destroying other living things (plants and animals) in order to feed themselves, they affirm the negativity of the finite, demonstrating that the finite has no existence in itself, which for Hegel is the central thesis of idealism and all true philosophy. Given this proximity, why don't animals have a history in the same sense as humans? And the fact that this is not the case raises the opposite question: why shouldn't humans, like animals, remain «without history»?

We know that Hegel adopted the position of Cuvier against that of Lamarck. In his view, natural species have a history only in the sense that they can become extinct, as the many fossils discovered in his time attest, but they do not evolve, they develop only at the level of the individual, not of the species<sup>9</sup>. The refusal to consider

followed by the number of the respective volume), ed. by R.-P. Horstmann, Hamburg, Meiner, 1975, vol. 8, p. 186: «Like the animal, the spirit is in itself arbitrary movement, freedom, the self of time and space; it arbitrarily places content here or there in *space and time*» (translation C.B.).

<sup>7</sup> TW 9, § 365, Addition, pp. 494-495; PN, vol. III, pp. 166-167. The term *Bildungstrieb* does not have Blumenbach's meaning of reproduction, but that of production: the «tendency to art» in the sense of the innate ability to modify the environment (Herder's *Kunsttrieb*).

<sup>8</sup> TW 9, § 359 Addition, p. 472; PN, p. vol. III, 144: «Animal appetite is the idealism of objectivity, whereby this objectivity loses its alien character».

<sup>9</sup> On this question, see E. E. Harris, *How final is Hegel's rejection of the Evolution*, in *Hegel and the Philosophy of Nature*, ed. by S. Houlgate, Albany, SUNY Press,

a history of living beings is intended to mark the clear-cut difference between animals and humans, between spirit (historical) and nature (unhistorical):

Historical change in the abstract sense has long been apprehended in a general way as involving a progression toward a better and more perfect condition. Changes in nature, no matter how diverse they are, exhibit only an eternally recurring cycle. In nature there is nothing new under the sun, and in this respect the manifold play of its shapes carries on in wearisome fashion. Something new emerges only through the changes that take place in the spiritual realm. Purely natural things have one and the same quality [*Bestimmung*], an always stable character, into which all changes return and within which they are subject to it. The phenomenon of the spiritual as it appears in humans shows an altogether different character [*Bestimmung*] – an actual capacity for change [*eine wirkliche Veränderungsfähigkeit*], indeed, as has been said, a change in the direction of completion, an impulse of perfectibility [*ein Trieb der Perfectibilität*]<sup>10</sup>.

Monotony, repetition, cycle on the side of nature, change, progression toward the better, perfectibility on the side of spirit. The human being is spirit, and spirit is history. The concept of spirit, which Hegel uses more readily than that of reason in his philosophy of history, makes it possible both to name thought as specific to human beings and to grasp them as beings living in communities and institutions. It also involves the preservation of the past in memory

1998, pp. 189-208. Since the Hegelian system is a philosophy of process and becoming, it is possible that Hegel would have amended his position had he been contemporary with Darwin, as suggested by S. Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2005, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> GW 18, *Vorlesungsmanuskripte II (1816-1831)*, ed. by W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 1995, pp. 181-182; trans. by R. F. Brown and P. C. Hogson, *Lectures on the philosophy of world history. Vol. 1, Manuscripts of the introduction and the lectures of 1822-1823*, Clarendon-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011 (henceforth cited as LPH), pp. 107-108. LPH contains the translation of the introductions of 1822, 1828, 1830-31, and the lectures on the philosophy of history of 1822-23.

(*Erinnerung*), traditions, written texts, etc., which is an essential condition for any form of progress (if a culture gradually forgets all its achievements, it cannot progress at all)<sup>11</sup>. The image of the sun, borrowed from Ecclesiastes, symbolizes the cyclical dimension of natural time to which plants and animals, deprived of history, are subject. To develop this thesis, Hegel implicitly mobilizes a modern concept of history associated with the categories of change and novelty<sup>12</sup>: according to him, history implies «actual» or «concrete» changes, that is, progress or regression. Human beings have an «actual capacity for change» in the sense that their ways of life have changed considerably over the last millennia. Hence the fact that Hegel reserves the category of history for human beings, who as such are the only historical beings. While it may be disputed that history always brings progress, this power of change is an undeniable fact that contrasts with the stability of the animal species' lifestyles, at least on the scale of human history. This point was already made by Herder: «The bee builds in its childhood as it does in advanced age, and will build the same way at the end of the world as in the beginning of creation»<sup>13</sup>.

Assuming, as Hegel does, that history is specific to human beings and synonymous with change, our question arises again. Why do humans, unlike animals, have this «actual capacity for change», for «improvement»? A classical answer, already used by Herder in the tradition of Rousseau, is to ground human history – in the sense

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, ed. by J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg, Meiner, 1994, p. 183; trans. by H. B. Nisbet, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 151: «Those moments which the spirit appears to have outgrown still belong to it in the depths of its present».

<sup>12</sup> See R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1988, pp. 300-348.

<sup>13</sup> J.G. Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache: Text, Materialien, Kommentar*, ed. by W. Pross, München, C. Hanser, 1978, p. 76; trans. by M.N. Forster, *Treatise on the origin of language* (1772), in *Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 130.

of progress – in the human tendency to improve, both as an individual and as a species: perfectibility<sup>14</sup>. Human beings are historical beings because, unlike animals, they are perfectible. Hegel mentions this historical category and at the same time criticizes it:

Perfectibility is in fact something almost as indeterminate as change itself; it is without aim and end; that toward which it supposedly tends, the better and the perfect is completely unspecified<sup>15</sup>.

Not only does the notion of perfectibility fail to specify the criterion by which improvement is measured<sup>16</sup>, it is also a descriptive, not an explanatory, concept. To say that human beings have a history in the sense of progress because they are perfectible is like saying that opium makes you sleep because it has a sleeping virtue. Hegel intends to give a more precise anthropological foundation to human perfectibility by appealing to a category derived from biology, that of development (*Entwicklung*), of which he distinguishes two fundamental types<sup>17</sup>: natural and spiritual. For human beings,

<sup>14</sup> On this notion, coined by Rousseau in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* and taken up by Condorcet, Iselin or Herder, see B. Binoche, *Les équivoques de la perfectibilité*, in *L'Homme perfectible*, ed. by B. Binoche, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2004, pp. 13-35.

<sup>15</sup> GW 18, p. 182; LPH, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> Id., *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*; GW 27, 3, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte III (1826/27)*, ed. by W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 2019, p. 813; GW 27, 2, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte II (1824/25)*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and R. Paimann, Hamburg, Meiner, 2019, p. 479.

<sup>17</sup> On the transition from the biological to the historical meaning of this category, see C. Bouton, *From Biological Time to Historical Time: The Category of «Development» (Entwicklung) in the Historical Thought of Herder, Kant, Hegel, and Marx*, in *Biological Time, Historical Time. Transfers and Transformations in 19th Century Literature*, ed. by N. Bender and G. Séginger, Leiden, Brill, 2019, pp. 61-76.

development, therefore, is not just a harmless and conflict-free process of emergence, as in organic life, but rather a hard and obstinate labor directed to itself; moreover, it involves not merely the formal aspect of developing as such but rather the production of a purpose or end with a specific content. We have established from the beginning what this end is: it is spirit, and indeed spirit in accord with its essence, the concept of freedom. This is the fundamental object and thus also the driving principle of development<sup>18</sup>.

For organic life, development is immediate and automatic, like the germ that becomes the plant, the flower, and then the fruit, whereas in the realm of the spirit it requires activity, labor in the service of a goal that is achieved in the long run: the realization of freedom. The historical anthropology underlying Hegel's philosophy of history is an anthropology of freedom, which defines the human being as a free being. At the very beginning of the lecture, Hegel states that «the human being as human is free, that the freedom of spirit constitutes humanity's truly inherent nature»<sup>19</sup>. For him, the proof of this freedom lies in world history itself, which illustrates «the progress of the consciousness of freedom»: one person is free (the Oriental world), some are free (the Greek and Roman worlds), and finally all human beings are free (the «Germanic-Christian» world). I am not here discussing the sources and content of the Hegelian philosophy of world history<sup>20</sup>. I just want to point

<sup>18</sup> GW 18, p. 184 (1830/31); LPH, p. 109. These two forms of natural and spiritual development are also two different forms of *self-production*: «Thus the organic individual produces [*produciert*] itself; it makes itself into what it is in itself. Spirit too is simply what makes itself; it makes itself into what it is inherently. But the development of the organic individual is such that it produces itself in an immediate, unopposed, and unhindered fashion; [...] With spirit, however, it is otherwise. The transition of its determinate nature into its actual existence is mediated by consciousness and will» (ivi, pp. 183-184; trans. p. 109). We will return to this concept of self-production in the third section.

<sup>19</sup> GW 18, p. 153 (1830-31); LPH, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> See C. Bouton, *Le procès de l'histoire. Fondements et postérité de l'idéalisme historique de Hegel*, Paris, Vrin, 2004; T. Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense? Hegel on*



out that Hegel historicized the concept of human nature, which he had already begun to do in his early writings: «The general concept of human nature admits of infinite modifications; and there is no need of the makeshift of calling experience to witness that modifications are necessary and that human nature has never been present in its purity»<sup>21</sup>. Human beings are free by nature, but this freedom takes very different historical forms at different times.

## 2. *The Universal Animal*

Freedom is the criterion and goal of perfectibility, its specific content. To define perfectibility with the help of freedom, is it not to go from Charybdis to Scylla, to explain one vague concept with another that is even more indeterminate? Throughout his philosophy of history, Hegel sets out to clarify the concept of freedom, not only in its political dimension, as realized in institutions, but also in its anthropological roots. He formulates the concept in the light of anthropological difference:

Since, in distinction from animals, human beings alone think, they alone possess freedom, and they possess it solely because they are thinking beings. Consciousness of freedom consists in the fact that the individual comprehends himself as a person, i.e. sees himself in his singular existence as inwardly universal, as capable of abstraction from and renunciation of everything particular and therefore as inwardly infinite<sup>22</sup>.

*the Historical Shapes of Justice*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2017, and S. Sedgwick, *Time and History in Hegelian Thought and Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. by H. Nohl, Tübingen, Mohr, 1907, p. 140; trans. by T.M. Knox, *Early theological writings*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975, p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> GW 18, p. 206; LPH, p. 125.

What is the connection between thinking and freedom, two qualities that, according to Hegel, are denied to animals? Thinking is the knowledge of the universal, the ability to abstract universal concepts from the sensible, to idealize reality. It thus introduces intermediate representations, mediations between desires and actions. Thought therefore has the power to inhibit impulses:

The unending drive of thinking is to transpose what is real into ourselves as something that is universal and ideal. What human beings are as real they must be as ideal. Because human beings know the real as the ideal and know themselves as ideal, they cease being merely natural; they cease living in their immediate intuitions, in their drives and satisfactions, and in their productions. Because they know this inwardly, they restrain their drives; they interpose representation, thought, the ideal between the urgency of the drive and its satisfaction, and they separate their representations from the execution of the representations. With animals this is not the case because for animals there is a constant connection between drive and satisfaction, a connection that can be interrupted only outwardly, by pain and fear, not inwardly. The animal does not interrupt this connection by itself; it does not oppose an outer to an inner. The animal does not cleave itself, but human beings do; they think, they restrain the drive<sup>23</sup>.

Hegel adopts Kant's idea of freedom from impulses as one of the characteristics of anthropological difference<sup>24</sup>. Will is nothing

<sup>23</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. 1822-1823*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1996 (henceforth cited as VPWG), p. 28; LPH, pp. 148-149. Note that there are exceptions, special cases in which the animal refrains from its desires, for example when storing food for the winter. Hegel mentions this point in the addition to § 365 of TW 9, p. 495; PN, vol. III, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> See E. Kant, *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin, *Akademie Ausgabe*, 1902-1912 (henceforth cited as AA, followed by the number of the volume), vol. III, pp. 363-364; trans. by T. Guyer and A.W. Wood, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 496: «For a power of choice is sensible insofar as it is pathologically affected (through moving-causes of sensibility); it is called an animal power of choice if it can be pathologically

but thinking, understood as the ability to inhibit impulses. Animals have a form of freedom, freedom of movement (self-motion), but not freedom of inhibition. They «lack will, cannot restrain their drives, because they do not have their representations in the form of ideality, actuality»<sup>25</sup>. Human beings have impulses in common with animals, but on the other hand they are able to mediate them through representations that postpone their satisfaction. According to Scheler's formula, the human being is the one who can say no, *der Nein-sagenkönnner*<sup>26</sup>. Through the freedom of the will, the human being is «the completely undetermined, stands above his impulses and can make them his own, can position them in himself as his own»<sup>27</sup>. This negative freedom is a first liberation from the yoke of instincts and the pressure of natural impulses, and makes possible both theory – the ability to think the universal through the abstraction of the sensible – and practice: the ability to act according to universal ends, which is one of the conditions of history. The human being is «the universal thinking animal» (*das allgemeine, denkende Tier*)<sup>28</sup>, the animal that has access to the universal, which, according to Hegel, paradoxically places it within and beyond animality<sup>29</sup>.

necessitated. The power of choice is indeed an *arbitrium sensitivum*, yet not *brutum* but *liberum*, because sensibility does not render its action necessary, but in the human being there is a faculty of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses».

<sup>25</sup> VPWG, p. 29; LPH, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> M. Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1991, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup> TW 7, § 11, Addition, p. 63; G.W.F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. by T. M. Knox, revised by S. Houlgate, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008 (henceforth cited as PR), pp. 35-36; «Der Mensch steht aber als das ganz Unbestimmte über den Trieben und kann sie als die seinigen bestimmen und setzen».

<sup>28</sup> TW 9, § 361 Addition, p. 495; PN, vol. III, p. 147.

<sup>29</sup> On this thorny issue of human animality, see T. Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, and C. Schuringa, *Hegel on spirited animals*, «Philosophy», XCVII (4), 2022, pp. 485-508. According to Schuringa,

### 3. *Freedom from Nature*

What exactly makes the «universal animal» a historical animal? One explanation lies in the relationship to nature that this implies. On the one hand, for Hegel, human freedom has a natural basis; it is not a noumenal power, as in Kant, but a «natural power», a capacity that is given along with others correlated with it, such as will, thought, the power of abstraction<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, by virtue of the fact that they possess thought and freedom, that they are spirits, human beings transcend their naturalness. The first sense of human freedom that Hegelian historical anthropology puts forward is liberation from nature. The spirit presupposes nature in order to free itself from it, to cease to be «merely natural», to «break» its naturalness, to «cast off the natural» inside and outside itself<sup>31</sup>. Hegel may have

the human being is «a distinctive kind of animal» that differs from plant and animal life by «self-consciousness» and «concrete universality» (p. 497). With regard to the first point, we can quote the introduction to the *Aesthetics* (Hotho edition), which states that self-consciousness creates an «tremendous difference [*ungeheuren Unterschied*]», an «infinite difference» between the human being and the animal: «precisely because they *know* that they are animals, human beings cease to be animals and attain knowledge of themselves as spirit» (TW 13, p. 112; G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, trans. by T.M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon – Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 80). This passage is also in the 1826 *Nachschrift* by Griesheim, GW 28, 2, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst II*, ed. by N. Hebing and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 2018, p. 558. With regard to the second point, the animal returns to the universality of the genus only through its death, whereas human beings can have *non-lethal access to the universal*, in the simple fact of saying «I», and more generally through their thinking, which consists in «knowledge of the universal», and through their «cultural formation» (*Bildung*), which is «the activity of the universal, the form of thinking» (VPWG, pp. 28, 42; LPH, pp. 148, 158).

<sup>30</sup> See Sedgwick, *Time and History in Hegelian Thought and Spirit*, pp. 118-127. To counterbalance her thesis of freedom as a natural power, Sedgwick quotes this sentence from Hegel: «What the human being is supposed to become, is not settled by instinct» (TW 7, §174). She rightly concludes that freedom is not just natural in so far as it is not a matter of instinct and allows an overcoming of natural externality.

<sup>31</sup> VPWG, pp. 28-29; LPH, pp. 148-149 and p. 151.

found this *topos* of human history as a gradual liberation from nature in Stuhr's *Der Untergang der Naturstaaten* (1812), to which he refers in § 355 of the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*<sup>32</sup>. But this motif of the «struggle» of the spirit against nature is older in his thought, going back to his early writings: «The essence of the spirit is this: it finds itself opposed to a nature, it fights this opposition, and it returns to itself, as the victor over nature»<sup>33</sup>.

In the philosophy of history, the gradual overcoming of nature is formulated in the great periodization into four «worlds» (*Welten*) or «realms» (*Reiche*), which goes from the Oriental spirit «sunk in naturalness» deprived of freedom, to the Christian spirit which understands that the human being is free as a human being, through the Greek and Roman worlds, where the «first breaking loose [*Losreißen*] [from its natural state] is incomplete and partial»<sup>34</sup>. World history achieves the titanic program of overcoming (*Aufhebung*) nature. It is a «discipline [*Zucht*] of the natural will»<sup>35</sup>, «the drive, the impulse of spiritual life within itself to break through the bond, the rind of natural and sensuous life, of whatever is alien to it, and to come to the light of consciousness, that is, to itself»<sup>36</sup>. What human beings must free themselves from, according to Hegel, is both nature *in the spirit*, the instincts and impulses they have in common with animals – which presupposes a long process of *Bildung*, the education of mankind<sup>37</sup>, – and nature *outside the spirit*: they must

<sup>32</sup> F. Eggo (Stuhr's pseudonym), *Der Untergang der Naturstaaten*, Berlin, Salfeld, 1812, p. 96: «Here, too, the history of the formation of the Frankish constitution confirms this idea, as if the life of history consisted in a liberation from natural bonds and the awakening of an inner principle conditioned by human freedom [*in einem Freiwerden von natürlichen Bänden und dem Erwachen eines innerlichen, durch menschliche Freiheit bedingten Princip*]».

<sup>33</sup> GW 5, p. 370.

<sup>34</sup> GW 18, p. 185; LPH, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> GW 27, 4, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte IV* (1830/31), ed. by W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 2020, p. 1230.

<sup>36</sup> GW 18, p. 186; LPH, p. 111.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of spirit of 1805*, GW 8, p. 287: «Human beings do not become masters of nature until they have become masters of themselves [*Der Mensch wird nicht Meister über Natur, bis er es über sich selbst geworden ist*]».

transform their environment in order to create a second nature, a niche where the otherness of nature is reduced in favor of freedom, understood, in a second sense, as «being at home with oneself in one's other» (*in seinem Anderen bei sich selbst zu sein*)<sup>38</sup>. The departure from immediate naturalness is an *Aufhebung*, since nature is never suppressed, but rather preserved in another form, transformed and surpassed in a second nature superimposed on the first. Second nature does not only designate the customs acquired in ethical life and internalized in the form of habits, according to the Aristotelian genealogy of this notion<sup>39</sup>. It also refers to nature transformed by human activity, with its cultivated fields, roads, bridges, villages, cities and so on. This is the meaning given to it by Cicero in antiquity:

and we alone have the power of controlling the most violent of nature's offspring, the sea and the winds, thanks to the science of navigation, and we use and enjoy many products of the sea. Likewise the entire command of the commodities produced on land is vested in mankind. [...] In fine, by means of our hands we essay to create as it were a second world [*quasi alteram naturam*] within the world of nature<sup>40</sup>.

Hegel emphasizes the essential role of agriculture in early human history, based on the principle of foresight, and praises the ship, «this swan, so easy in its movement», which «is an instrument that

<sup>38</sup> TW 8, § 24 Addition 2, p. 84; G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, trans. by K. Brinkmann and D. O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 60.

<sup>39</sup> This is the meaning that Hegel gives to the concept of second nature in TW 7, § 4 and § 151. On this topic, see I. Testa, *Verkörperte Freiheit. Erste Natur, Zweite Natur und Fragmentierung*, in *Momente der Freiheit. Beiträge aus den Foren freier Vorträge des Internationalen Hegelkongresses 2011*, ed. by T. Stahl, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2015, pp. 73-91; C. Menke, *Autonomie und Befreiung: Studien zu Hegel*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2018, chap. 1 and 4, and J. Christ, A. Honneth (eds.), *Zweite Natur: Stuttgarter Hegel-Kongress 2017*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, 60, § 152, trans. by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (MA)-London, Harvard University Press/William Heinemann, 1979, pp. 269-270.

pays tribute to the audacity of the understanding»<sup>41</sup>. To describe this practical relationship between human beings and nature, he prefers to quote the famous chorus from Sophocles' *Antigone*: «Need and ingenuity have enabled human beings [*Menschen*] to discover endlessly varied ways of mastering and making use of nature. As Sophocles says: οὐδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει, ἄπορος ἐπ' οὐδὲν ἔρχεται»<sup>42</sup>. By constantly modifying nature, humanity modifies itself and its way of life. These cascading changes give rise to a history in the sense of a series of events consisting of trial and error, progress and regression, with the idea of freedom in the foreground: to be ever more «at home with oneself in one's other». Again, Hegel's comparison between human beings and animals is instructive. Every animal has a sphere of activity that is limited by its instincts. But «as the universal thinking animal, the human being has a widely extended range, and can treat everything as his inorganic nature, and as the object of his knowledge»<sup>43</sup>. This conception of humanity as a «universal animal» underlines its power to appropriate the whole of nature through its practices and knowledge, transforming its strangeness into the familiarity of an ethical world.

It is worth noting that the thesis of the liberation from nature is used by Hegel to justify the predominance he accords to the European countries in the world history. It is because European nature is more hospitable – especially due to its temperate climate and the Mediterranean Sea – that European people have been able to free themselves from it more easily and play the leading role that Hegel attributes to them:

<sup>41</sup> VPWG, p. 108, p. 112; LPH, pp. 202-205. See on this point N. Waszek, *Hegel and the sea*, in A. Gräfe and J. Menzel (eds.), *Un/Ordnungen denken. Beiträge zu den Historischen Kulturwissenschaften*, Berlin, Quintus-Verlag, 2017, pp. 153-172, and J.-B. Vuillerod, *Hegel. L'histoire du monde et la conquête des mers*, «Archives de Philosophie», LXXXIV (2021), pp. 153-169.

<sup>42</sup> TW 9, § 245 Addition, p. 13; PN, vol. I, p. 195 (trans. modified: in this paper, I translate «Mensch» as «human being(s)» and not as «man»). Hegel quotes lines 340 («Nothing is more prodigious than human beings [*anthropou*]») and 360 («They are embarrassed by nothing») from Sophocles' *Antigone*.

<sup>43</sup> Ivi, § 361 Addition, p. 475; PN, vol. III, p. 147 (trans. modified).

In European nature no single type of typography stands out; here, rather, one form of nature is offset by the others. The land here is such as to bring with it freedom from the forces of nature [*Freiheit von Naturgewalt*]; here, therefore, universal humanity can excel. Human beings can live in all (climatic) zones, but some zones exert a natural force over them, which, as compared with their general character, seems to be a force *within* them. Thus, European people are indeed by nature freer beings because here no particular environment is predominant<sup>44</sup>.

If we assume, as Hegel does, that humanity has its specific history, for the reason that it must free itself from nature inside and outside itself, the question remains: why should human beings free themselves from nature? Hegel gives factual and conceptual reasons. Animals live in «sympathy» with the universal course of nature<sup>45</sup>. Their efficient instincts enable them to adapt all the more easily to their environment, which is restricted to a well-defined sphere of action. The animal «lives in this supposedly happy union with nature; it belongs to it»<sup>46</sup>. On the other hand, the «need for shelter and clothing, the necessity of no longer leaving food raw but making it fit to eat and of destroying its natural immediacy, both mean that

<sup>44</sup> VPWG, p. 110; LPH, p. 204 (trans. modified). I thank L. Corti for drawing my attention to this text in his forthcoming paper mentioned in note 2. In this passage, Hegel tries to give his Eurocentrism a naturalistic basis. For the purposes of this paper, I will leave this question aside in order to concentrate on the origin of human historicity. On Eurocentrism, see D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, and (in Hegel) Z. Olvera, «Geography and history. The (problematic) triumph of *political* time over the earth in G.W.F. Hegel's philosophy of history» (forthcoming).

<sup>45</sup> TW 9, § 361 Addition, p. 474; PN, vol. III, p. 146 and TW 10, § 392, Remark, p. 52. Id., *Philosophy of Spirit*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>46</sup> GW 27,3, p. 836. Hegel says «supposedly happy», because the animal's adaptation to its natural environment does not prevent its exposure to danger, which causes it to live in a «feeling of *insecurity*, *anxiety* and *misery*» (TW 9, § 368, p. 152; PN, vol. III, p. 179).



the human being has less comfort than an animal, and indeed, as spirit, he ought to have less [*daß es der Mensch nicht so bequem hat wie das Tier und es als Geist auch nicht so bequem haben darf*]<sup>47</sup>. Without taking up Herder's thesis of the human being as a «deficient being» (*Mängelwesen*), forgotten by nature<sup>48</sup>, Hegel points to a certain inadequacy between humans and nature, that forces them to shelter, clothe themselves, etc., as if their necessarily mediated relationship with nature stemmed from their organic nature itself (humans are naked, unarmed, vulnerable, etc.). Because nature is dangerous and hostile to them, due to disease, natural disasters, etc., it is an environment from which they must protect themselves. If they do not have the right to be comfortable with nature, it is also more profoundly because of the «state of nature» itself, that is, the way of life of «animal-like humanity» (*tierische Menschlichkeit*)<sup>49</sup>. Hegel sees the state of nature not as an imaginary hypothesis, but as a long period in which human beings, scattered in hordes or tribes, lived without a State. The first peoples lived *like* animals, but their «animal humanity» did *not* make them animals, for they were rational in themselves, possessing the will, that is potentially free, just as the child is in itself a potential adult:

If we begin with a natural state, what we find is an animal-like humanity [*tierische Menschlichkeit*], not an animal nature, not animal stupor [*Dumpfheit*]. Animal-like humanity is something wholly different from animal nature [*Tierheit*]. Spirit does not develop out of the animal, does not begin from the animal; rather it begins from spirit, but from a spirit that at first is only implicit, is a natural and not an animal spirit – a spirit on which the character of the human is imprinted. Thus a child has the possibility of becoming rational, which is something wholly different and much higher than the developed animal<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> TW 7, § 190 Addition, p. 348; PR, p. 188.

<sup>48</sup> Herder, *Treatise on the origin of language* I, p. 1 and A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, § 9, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> VPWG, p. 35; LPH, p. 153.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

The natural state is unhistorical, because it is without a State and without writing (and therefore without a possible historical narrative), two criteria that, for Hegel, condition the birth of history<sup>51</sup>. What led human beings to leave the state of nature and enter a historical and political state? Playing on the two meanings of the word «nature» (essence and state of nature), Hegel formulates a Spinozist, or more precisely Hobbesian, answer to this question: «But when we see what humanity is by nature, we can only say with Spinoza, *ex eundem est e statu naturae* [‘it (humanity) has to depart from the natural state’]; That state lacks freedom and is one of sensuousness»<sup>52</sup>. In the expression «the human being is free by nature», «nature» must therefore be understood in the sense of essence, and not of natural life. Following the travel accounts of his time, Hegel presents the «natural man» of primitive societies as oscillating between situations of violence, arbitrariness, fear or torpor, all of which make effective freedom impossible<sup>53</sup>. He castigates theories about the beginning of world history, such as Friedrich von Schlegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which postulate the existence of a golden age in the distant past, a «original paradisiacal human condition» in which an «original people» would have lived in peace and harmony with nature, creating a brilliant civilization whose few traces are preserved in myths and legends<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> GW 18, pp. 193-194; LPH, pp. 116-117. Without developing this point further, we can notice that this classical conception of history is restrictive, since it excludes from history many so-called «history-less» cultures (especially «primitive peoples»).

<sup>52</sup> VPWG, p. 33; LPH, p. 152 (trans. modified).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. GW 27,4, p. 1189. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, vol. 2, Hamburg, Meiner, 1983 (henceforth cited as VPRel), p. 424; Id., *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion. One-Volume Edition. The Lecture of 1827*, trans. by R. F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988 (henceforth cited as LPRel 1827), p. 215: «human beings at the animal state are wild, are evil, are not as they ought to be».

<sup>54</sup> GW 18, p. 186-188; LPH, p. 111-114. Hegel refers to the lectures on the philosophy of history given by F. Schlegel in Vienna in 1828. They were published in 1829 (Vienna, Schaumburg).

In their primitive forms of life, human beings, for Hegel, are not effectively free they do not live in accordance with their own nature. From this point of view, the story of the Fall in Genesis is a source of confusion. As it is described in the *Old Testament*, life in Paradise actually applies only to animals, who «are better off, their needs more easily satisfied»<sup>55</sup>. On the other hand, Hegel claims that «natural humanity does not exist in the form that it ought to be», because «the natural human being is not liberated within itself vis-a-vis itself and external nature»<sup>56</sup>. Thus, Paradise is a «zoological garden» (*Tiergarten*) in which the human being has nothing to do but to leave<sup>57</sup>. For Hegel, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, which in his eyes symbolizes the exit from naturalness and the first awareness of freedom – the knowledge of good and evil – is not a fall but a progression, an elevation of the human being to the status of spirit.

#### 4. *Self-production*

In Hegel's view, then, human beings have a historical way of life that differs from the natural way of life of animals, because in order to realize their destiny as free beings, they must free themselves from their naturalness, by creating a second nature that does not deny the first, but establishes a relationship with it mediated by practices, techniques, norms and symbols. On this last point, let us simply recall that, for Hegel, Adam appropriated nature by naming the animals. Language thus enables human beings to live in a «spiritual

<sup>55</sup> VPRel, vol. 3, p. 43; G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III: *The Consummate Religion*, trans. by R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart, Oxford, Clarendon-Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> VPRel, vol. 3, p. 30; Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, p. 93. In other words: «His nature is not to have what is natural be definitive for him» (Pinkard, *Hegel's Naturalism*, p. 60).

<sup>57</sup> VPRel, vol. 3, p. 224; Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. III, p. 300; GW 27,3, p. 834.

nature, in their world»<sup>58</sup>. Liberation from nature also presupposes a conception of freedom as negativity, inside and outside the individual. In his philosophy of history, Hegel mobilizes another meaning of freedom different from the ability to liberate oneself from nature: autonomy. Not in the moral sense of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, but in the sense of self-production<sup>59</sup>. Human beings must generate themselves, they become what they ought to be only through their own efforts:

Human beings initially and immediately are only the potentiality of being rational and free; they have this potentiality only as a vocation [*Bestimmung*], an imperative. By means of discipline [*Zucht*], education [*Erziehung*], and culture [*Bildung*] they become for the first time what they ought to be, rational beings. Humans have only the potential of being human when they are born. Animals are born nearly complete; their growth is basically a strengthening, and in instinct they have straight away everything they need. We must not regard it as a special benefit of nature for animals that their formation is soon complete, for the strengthening is only a matter of degree. Because humans are spiritual beings, they must acquire everything for themselves, must make themselves into what they ought to be and what otherwise would remain a mere potentiality; they must cast off the natural. Thus, spirit is humanity's own achievement [*Der Geists ist also sein eigenes Resultat*]<sup>60</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> Id., Lecture on the philosophy of spirit of 1805, GW 8, p. 190. See I. Testa, *Selbstbewußtsein und zweite Natur*, in K. Vieweg and W. Welsh (eds.), *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes – Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2008, pp. 286-307, p. 297: «With the formation of the world into language, consciousness, according to Hegel, did not have to break away from nature, but rather had to express nature in a new form [*Mit der Bildung der Welt zur Sprache habe sich das Bewußtsein, so Hegel, nicht von der Natur loszureißen, sondern es musste vielmehr die Natur in einer neuen Form ausdrücken*]».

<sup>59</sup> As C. Menke has shown (*Autonomie und Befreiung*, chap. 1), Hegel reformulated the Kantian concept of autonomy: it is not given by pure practical reason, but produced by the spirit through a social and historical process. For Hegel, «autonomy means autonomisation: liberation to autonomy» (*Autonomie und Befreiung*, p. 36). Autonomy is both the presupposition of the historical process and its result.

<sup>60</sup> VPWG, p. 31; LPH, pp. 150-151.

In this passage, we find two answers to the question of why human beings have a history in the sense of change and progress. We have already examined one of them in the previous section: they need to «cast off the natural». Hegel makes another point. Human beings are rational animals, but their reason is a potentiality that does not develop automatically, just as freedom is a destination (*Bestimmung*), in the double sense of a determination, a concept specific to «human nature», and a vocation, a purpose that they have to fulfill<sup>61</sup>. From this point of view, the human being is an unfinished animal, not in the sense of Nietzsche, who sees the human animal as a sick, degenerate animal<sup>62</sup>. For Hegel, on the contrary, the human being is «the perfect animal» (*vollkommenen Tier*), the «most perfect organism» (*der vollkommenste Organismus*), the «highest stage of the development», «the strongest of the animals»<sup>63</sup>. However, human beings are incomplete in the sense that they must realize their freedom by creating environments and institutions that are increasingly conducive to it. Unlike animals, which fully realize what they are at the level of the individual thanks to the innate instincts and aptitudes with which nature has endowed them, human beings can only develop their rational potential at the level of *the species*. This idea, which I call the *specificity* of the human being, was formulated by Kant in his *Anthropology*. Human beings are destined to develop from «an animal endowed with the *capacity of reason* (*animal rationabile*)» to «a *rational animal* (*animal rationale*)». Kant adds that «with all other animals left to themselves, each individual reaches its complete destiny; however, with the human being only the species, at best, reaches it». And the means of achieving this destiny is

<sup>61</sup> Cf. GW 18, p. 174; LPH, p. 102: «That humans are free by nature is completely correct in the sense that they have freedom as their concept, but only in terms of their destination or vocation [*Bestimmung*], that is, only *implicitly*».

<sup>62</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, § 13, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. V, ed. by G. Colli and M. Montinari, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1980, p. 367.

<sup>63</sup> TW 9, § 352 Addition, § 368 Addition, § 371 Addition, pp. 436, 504, 522; PN, vol. III, pp. 109, 181, 195.

«education» (*Erziehung*) as «instruction» (*Belehrung*) and «discipline» (*Zucht*)<sup>64</sup>. Hegel assumes this thesis, emphasizing the concept of freedom. In the margin of the passage in his manuscript where he states that world history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom, he notes: «education of the human race to what? To freedom – humanity educated to it – not directly. [It is a] result»<sup>65</sup>. For Hegel, the human being is a being of culture, reaching its destination only through a long process based on «discipline, education and culture». Discipline means education in its negative phase, the training of the natural will, the inhibition of immediate impulses. In this form, education is a way out of naturalness (*e-ducere*). The notion of cultural formation (*Bildung*) refers rather to the result of positive education: access to the universal through thought, with the help of learning and the transmission of knowledge<sup>66</sup>. Depending on the context, Hegel moves from a conception of *Bildung* as a cognitive capacity (grasping the universal) to a more cultural understanding that sees it as a formative process producing a spiritual world.

While animals are immediately what they are, human beings, as spirit, must accomplish their destination *by themselves*, they must «make themselves into what they ought to be», «produce» themselves. This is why they must not be too conformable with nature, nor content with their immediate natural existence, which Hegel calls the state of «torpor» or «stupor» (*Dumpfheit*). The freedom thus sought is independence from (immediate) nature, autonomy in the sense of being at home with oneself in one's other, but also production, creation, working on oneself and on nature. This is Hegel's

<sup>64</sup> AA VII, pp. 321-324; I. Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology*, trans. by R.B. Louden, in *Anthropology, History, and Education*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 417-41.

<sup>65</sup> GW 18, p. 153; LPH, p. 88. Hegel takes up the title of Lessing's book *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*.

<sup>66</sup> VPWG, p. 42; LPH, p. 158: «Cultivated human beings [*der gebildete Mensch*] are the ones who know how to place the stamp of universality on everything that they do, say, and think; they surrender their particularity and act in accord with universal principles».

most explicit answer to the question of the origin of human historicity: «Spirit has a history because of what it is, because it exists only through its labor [*Arbeit*], through the elaboration [*Verarbeitung*] of its immediate form, thereby raising itself to a consciousness of itself and thus to a higher standpoint»<sup>67</sup>. Here Hegel brings in another classical determination of human beings: they possess self-consciousness, unlike nature, which «does not know itself»<sup>68</sup>. Unlike animals, human beings can become aware of what they are: free beings. What the human spirit produces through its work on itself, what it elevates itself to, is self-consciousness, the knowledge of its own nature. And it is because they can become aware of what they are and what they have to be, that human beings can change themselves, and are therefore essentially historical<sup>69</sup>. Hegel puts forward the astonishing idea that history is precisely the knowing itself of the spirit, the process by which peoples become aware of their freedom, of their true nature. For him, this is the true meaning of the idea of perfectibility:

Those who have maintained this perfectibility have divined something of the nature of spirit, something of the fact that its nature is to have 'Know thyself' [Γνῶθι σεαυτόν] as the law of its being, and, since it apprehends that which it is, to have a form higher than that which constituted its mere being<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>67</sup> VPWG, p. 37; LPH, p. 156. This emphasis on work recalls God's command to Adam («By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread») which is for Hegel a blessing and not a punishment.

<sup>68</sup> VPWG, p. 39; LPH, p. 156.

<sup>69</sup> This point is made by R. Brandom in relation to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: «Essentially self-conscious creatures accordingly enjoy the possibility of a distinctive kind of self-transformation: making themselves be different by taking themselves to be different. [...] To be for oneself a historical being is to constitute oneself as in oneself a special kind of being: a self-consciously historical being» (Brandom, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution*, in *Recognition and Social Ontology*, ed. by H. Ikäheimo and A. Laitinen, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2011, pp. 25-51, p. 26. I thank E. Assalone for bringing this reference to my attention).

<sup>70</sup> TW 7, § 343, p. 504; PR, p. 316.

Animals achieve their destination without needing to know it: after a few weeks, the bee, guided by its instincts and innate tendencies, fully accomplishes its destination as a bee: it forages, produces cells, honey and so on. Human beings, on the other hand, are thinking beings, endowed with reason, reflection, and with the ability to know themselves. From this follows the famous definition of world history already quoted: «World history is progress *in the consciousness* of freedom» (emphasis added by me). In the final analysis, world history is nothing other than the progressive answer to the question «What is the human being?». Philosophy of history is applied anthropology.

### 5. Conclusion: *Liberate Nature*

Hegelian historical anthropology provides several answers to the question of why human beings have a different historical way of life from that of animals, which manifests itself in changes and progressions, rather than repetitions and cycles. Let us summarize the four main answers we have found. 1) Human beings are historical beings because they have an actual capacity for change. 2) Human beings are historical beings because they are thinking animals. What makes possible, in human nature, the actual capacity for change, is thought understood as cognitive access to the universal, to abstraction, which in turn makes possible negative freedom as the overcoming of nature. 3) Human beings are historical beings because they are free by nature. But this freedom, whose two negative and positive faces are independence (from nature) and autonomy, renamed being at home with oneself in one's other, is not effective in the state of nature. It must be conquered through a process of mediatization that transforms biological and physical nature into a second, institutional and symbolic, nature. 4) Human beings are historical beings also because they are cultural beings; they are not immediately conformed to their concept (freedom), but must produce themselves what they are, realizing their freedom through a work of formation, of culture (*Bildung*), which is only possible over many generations.



To conclude this paper, we can briefly put Hegel's philosophy of history into perspective with the current debates on the Anthropocene, which involve a retrospective and critical reflection on the relationship between human beings and nature as it has been conceived by past philosophies, especially in the Western tradition. Is the price to be paid for Hegelian historical anthropology not that it seems to be part of the project of making humans beings the «masters and possessors» of nature, which we now know has led us directly into the Anthropocene? Yet such a reading would be anachronistic and questionable. For Hegel, transforming nature does not necessarily mean destroying it, as shown by the agriculture of his time, which was not yet the capitalist agriculture exploiting the soil and the workers denounced by Marx a few decades later. He even preferred forms of domination over nature that did not transform it in any way, as we saw above (section 3) with the paradigmatic example of the ship<sup>71</sup>. Moreover, in his view, the true liberation of the spirit from nature has a primarily epistemic meaning: it is first of all a matter of knowledge, not of techno-scientific control of nature. Knowledge of nature is an appropriation, a reduction of otherness, which is by no means destructive. It can become so in its technological applications, but that is another problem that arose later than in Hegel's time (it will be up to Marx to diagnose it<sup>72</sup>). Freedom as being at home in the other is like the freedom of the forester who walks through the forest as if in a familiar environment that he knows «like the back of his hand». In a passage from his lectures on the philosophy of religion devoted to the «religion of nature», Hegel sums up his conception of a good relationship with nature:

The specially trained person [*der gebildete Mensch*] exercises a power [upon nature] through familiarity with the qualities of perceptible things, i. e. of things as they are relative to other things; that is where something else has an impact upon them and their vulnerability [*Schwäche*] is manifest. One learns to know this susceptibility, and though it acts upon things by equipping oneself

<sup>71</sup> See Vuillerod, *Hegel. L'histoire du monde et la conquête des mers*, p. 168: Hegel's reflection on the sea in the philosophy of history «proposes a harmonious articulation between nature and culture».

<sup>72</sup> See for instance P. Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective*, New York, St. Martin's, 1999.

with a means through one leads hold off this weakness. One brings external things into such a connection that they act upon one another. Thus it is the one trained who freely releases [*frei entläßt*] the world in its quality and qualitative connections. This really entails that human beings are free – inwardly free. For only free persons can allow the external world, other human beings, and natural things to confront them free [*sich frei gegenüber treten*]. But for the one who is not free, other are not free either<sup>73</sup>.

For Hegel, freedom has at least three meanings: 1) infinite negativity, the power of liberation; 2) the autonomy of being at home in one's other; 3) and the liberation of the other: «to be free is to set free»<sup>74</sup>. Hegel's use of the verb «entlassen» highlights the ambiguity of the relationship of the human being to nature. On the one hand, this verb means to dismiss, to banish; on the other hand, it means to release, to give one's freedom back. It is this second meaning that he certainly favors. If we follow this line of thought, we could conclude that human beings have reached such a stage in the world history that their freedom should now consist in letting nature (inorganic, vegetable and animal) take its course, loosening as much as possible the economic and technological stranglehold in which they have imprisoned it. No longer to liberate ourselves from nature, but to liberate nature, which means, in other words, to reconcile ourselves with nature:

The human being is essentially spirit, and spirit is essentially this: to be for oneself, to be free, setting one self over against the natural, withdrawing oneself from immersion in nature, severing oneself from nature and only reconciling oneself with nature for the first time through this severance and only on the basis of it; and not only [reconciling oneself] with nature but with one's own essence too, or with one's truth<sup>75</sup>.

<sup>73</sup> VPRel, vol. 2, p. 437; LPRel 1827, p. 227.

<sup>74</sup> B. Bourgeois, *Études hégéliennes*, Paris, PUF, 1992, p. 123, p. 333.

<sup>75</sup> VPRel, vol. 2, p. 423; LPRel 1827, pp. 213-214.

*Acknowledgments:* A first draft of this paper was presented at the conference «Historia de la filosofía y filosofía de la historia. Legado y presente. II Congreso Internacional de la Sociedad Iberoamericana de Estudios Hegelianos (SEH)» (Barranquilla, September 18-20, 2024). I would like to thank the audience at the conference, as well as Zaida Olvera and two anonymous referees for their questions and suggestions, which improved the published version of this paper.