

# I The Meaning of Meaning:

Since the question whether life or history has any meaning at all has been ~~a~~ hotly debated by many throughout the ages, from the ancient ~~Stoics~~ <sup>Stoics</sup> to <sup>some</sup> contemporary existentialists, it becomes necessary to provide some precision to the ~~the~~ definition of meaning for our context.

By meaning we understand

(a) some fundamental significance to us;

(b) the assumption of a certain purposiveness

in individual human lives and in <sup>man</sup> ~~man~~ as well as world history;

for translation equivalent <sup>modern western</sup> when one looks at other languages we see that e.g. in German Sinn, Bedeutung and Meinung among other words could be used. In French, there are sens, signification and signifié. Obviously the German Sinn and the French sens corresponding more to English sense and sensibility rather than to meaning, have their etymological origin in the Latin sensus, which probably has behind it the idea of a "significant message received by our senses". The English word "meaning", though equivalent to it "it makes sense", is perhaps less sense-experience-oriented than thought-oriented.

In our context we are looking for something that "makes sense" of this phenomena of "life" and human history - both in terms of a coherent pattern which we can grasp and within which life and history "make sense" as well as in terms of an explanatory principle that accounts

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They are, and helps us to "make sense" of a welter of contradictory phenomena by bringing them all under rules and principles of a universal nature. Meaning must therefore inhere in a structure, pattern or Gestalt that we can grasp, and the inner structure of this gestalt should be explicable by universal principles.

Our understanding of meaning is usually based on two fundamental principles - Causality and purposive action by conscious beings. So if we are to understand life and history and grasp their meaning, we probably need a causal explanation of how life and history came to happen, and integrate into that explanation any purposive action on the part of human or other beings.

One can say "History is bunk" (no pattern and so no explanation) or that history is like an orchestra where the players play without notes and the Conductor weaves whatever notes are played into some coherent and meaningful whole (R. G. Collingwood). Now whichever answer is given, the question is to fit as much concrete historical data into this pattern as to "make sense" of the pattern itself. It will not do, for example, to do what Arnold Toynbee has done, to provide a pattern of the rise and fall of civilizations, and then to give us an impressive number of illustrations that fit the pattern. One has to leave it open to ~~other~~ critics to bring counter-examples that do not fit the pattern and thereby "debate" the

historical event of substantial significance could be fitted into the model without too much tailoring, or at least there should be sub-theories enough in the "cluster of theories" which constitutes the model, to account for all historical phenomena. And we have to find a model for life itself, which then fits in or "gives up" our model for history.<sup>1</sup>

Many models have been presented in the past, the most significant ones being the Hegelian and Diltheyan models. For Hegel the basic lineaments were provided by History, which incorporates all the activities of the Human Spirit in Time which ~~in turn~~ proceed in accordance with the laws of logic or Reason, as well as with those of Space or Geometry. History, thus incorporating the actions of the World Spirit through the human Spirit, is the working out of what is the Spirit Idea is in-itself - i.e. Reason or Freedom. The Spirit is the synthesis of Idea (in-itself) and Nature (for-itself), and history is the working out of the dialectic between Idea and Nature, as well as between the Spirit which is eternal

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In the German tradition, R. Eucken, Der Sinn und Wert des Lebens (1908) still provides an interesting perspective, along with Wilhelm Dilthey's Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften (1902). Among other important German works one should mention R. Becher, Eine Sinnphilosophie (1941), H. Reiner, Der Sinn Unseres Daseins (1964), H.-G. Gadamer, 1910-1911 ... 1915 and finally Jürgen Habermas

and the individual life which is mortal and passing  
All actuality that is passing from the present into the  
past is however gathered up by the Idea or by  
Thought or Consciousness in memory, every  
actuality thus enriching the Idea, and leading to  
its fulfillment and ~~self-consciousness~~ full  
self awareness.

But not just everything that happens  
There is a norm for history in Hegel. This norm is  
nothing other than the goal or purpose of the Spirit  
which is freedom. So the Spirit favours these  
historical movements that foster freedom. World  
history is the progress of freedom.

True freedom is defined by Hegel  
as the situation in which the subject-object alienation  
is overcome in the act of self-reflection or self-  
awareness in which the Spirit as Conscious awareness  
makes itself into its own object and content of  
Knowledge.

The opposite of Spirit, for Hegel, is  
of course matter, which is the essence of  
unfreedom. It can never have its substance in  
itself, being constituted even as an object by others;  
it is inert and has no dynamic in itself,  
except that of negating freedom - e.g. by causing  
obstacles to the Spirit, like poverty, disease, famine etc.  
The Spirit progresses by overcoming these obstacles.

The State was the then (in  
Hegel's time) the most advanced of the expressions  
of the Spirit, for here liberty was organized  
into a concrete objectivity, within which the  
Individual can also exercise his or her freedom

e self-awareness, untainted by matter.

II Meaning of History and Meaning of Life

Hegel was very much concerned about the relation between the meaning of collect history and the meaning of personal life. The individual person is not simply lost in the historical process. <sup>Persons</sup> They have different <sup>roles</sup> in history, (a) as citizen, governed by <sup>laws</sup> the moral of the State; (b) as person, who transcends the State and exists as an end in himself or herself subject only to the morality of the Absolute Idea (c) as Hero, as maker of history, as the one who acts in History and thereby creates history; and (d) as Victim, or passive recipient of all the blows of history.

~~all-compr~~ For <sup>the early</sup> Hegel, "the realm of the Spirit is all-comprehensive; it includes everything that ever has interested or ever will interest man. Man is active in it; whatever he does, he is the creature within which the Spirit works" <sup>3</sup> Human nature is where Spirit and Nature unite, in his body/soul combination, and this is the universal element in human nature. This personal human nature is a microcosm of the larger Cosmos where the Absolute Idea is working itself out in Nature, thus Reason actualizing itself in history. The Cosmos has a purpose in itself - namely, to work out its own Reason as self-aware Freedom. "It is an insight of speculative philosophy that Freedom is the sole truth of Spirit" <sup>4</sup>

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G.W.F. Hegel <sup>(1770-1831)</sup> Reason in History, Eng. Tr. Robert S. Hartman, The Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill Indianapolis, 1837/1953, Fiftenth reprint, 1979, p-20

"Spirit... is that which has its centre in Itself", unlike its opposite, matter, which being essentially complex or unimple or composite, seeks unity which is the opposite of its own character, and by finding which it would cease to be itself. Spirit has being in itself, by working out its own Idea, and becoming aware of itself, it can organize the world within itself, within its own self-consciousness.

But individual freedom, where only one is free, is the search of Orientals, who want always a tyrant who is free to do what he likes. Orientals do not know freedom as the search of the whole cosmos. So for them only the tyrant is free. The Greeks and the Romans had a higher consciousness of freedom, but they sought only the freedom of the few or some, not of man as such. So they had oligarchy and slavery. "Only the Germanic peoples ~~know~~ came, through Christianity, to realize that man as man is free and that freedom of Spirit is the very essence of man's nature."

Now if history is the vast arena on which the Absolute Idea is working out itself through the establishment of freedom as the universal reality, human actions which constitute history, are the result of passions, <sup>personal talents</sup> private aims, and <sup>desires for</sup> satisfactions of selfish desires coming into dialectical conflict with the demands of reason, in seeking to be converted

from potentiality to actuality. The private interests of persons and individuals constitute the motive for their action; but Reason as Absolute Idea governs the pattern in which these private actions blend with each other. <sup>World</sup> Reason provides the warp and human personal interests the woof "of the vast tapestry of world history".<sup>6</sup> The national state is the concrete form in which this history is woven at the local level.

World history has been working long before the emergence of man - as Nature; but now in the organization of the state, there comes into being a new form of world history, where human beings become conscious of the forces that shape them. Through the actions of persons which they themselves unreflectively regard as the result of their private passions, desires, desires or decisions, the World Spirit shapes history and achieves its purpose - namely that of actualizing its potentiality as freedom.

Man is thus the antithesis to the thesis of the natural world. But in nature and <sup>in</sup> history it is the Spirit that manifests itself as freedom. As the Spirit works in the world of human persons or history, there is a contradiction between people's personal interests and the interests of the World Spirit or of History as such. But the World Spirit so governs the over-all pattern that even these selfish and evil actions of individuals

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<sup>6</sup> ibid. p 29.

be made to serve the purposes of the Absolute - it works itself out as Reason. World History, without each individuals being made aware that it is the Idea that acts in and through them. The State with its structure of law becomes the form in which Reason manifests itself, the <sup>necessary</sup> condition for the manifestation of Freedom which is the nature of the Spirit.

For Hegel, then the meaning of history and the meaning of life are related to each other. Life is one manifestation of Spirit; ~~action~~ human life is where the World Spirit works through people to fulfill their own personal ends, but in the process achieves the purpose of history itself, i.e. the self-manifestation to itself of the Spirit by actualizing freedom - the Spirit fulfills itself as freedom by first objectifying itself and then thinking its own being. The contradiction between the present of the Spirit and its own true being as Freedom and Reason, lead to negations of the present and actions to create a new future.