

# The World's Course and its Discontents: Adorno's Lectures on History and Freedom

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'What has the world made of us!' So asks Karl Kraus in rhetorical fashion in one of his late poems. The line is quoted by Adorno at a pivotal point in his lectures on *History and Freedom*, part of his *opus postumum*, now available in English translation for the first time (2006). Kraus's words serve as a motto for Adorno's wider project in these lectures – a series of often sombre reflections on the attenuation of freedom in modern societies and the failings of the Enlightenment idea of historical progress. Interestingly, the quotation appears within a lecture devoted to a little-known concept from Hegel's philosophy, the notion of the *Weltlauf* or 'World Course'. Why might Adorno have thought it necessary to devote an entire lecture to this topic of the *Weltlauf*, one which is hardly a central idea in Hegel, and – on the face of it – only tangentially related to debates concerning freedom or history? This is what I want to try to answer here, and in so doing I will suggest that when we unpack this notion of the world-course we see in a new light the often explored difference between Hegel and Adorno, and what may have been the real focus of Adorno's critique of Hegel's philosophy. Examining the notion of the *Weltlauf* in turn sheds light on what Hegel might have had to say about some of the perennial problems of social theory, for example attempts to reconcile individual and social system, or agency and structure, and that Hegel's reflections on these themes have a depth and relevance Adorno may have underestimated. But before turning to Hegel it might be helpful to stay with Adorno for a moment, to try to get a sense of why he focuses on the

idea of the 'world's course' by quoting a few more places where this concept appears in his work.

Firstly this from *Negative Dialectics*:

When Franz von Sickingen, a condottiere at the outset of the modern age, lay mortally wounded and found the words "Nothing without a cause" for his fate, he was expressing two things with the vigor of that age: the necessity of the social course of the world, which condemned him to perish, and the negativity of the principle of a course of the world in line with that necessity. With happiness, even of the whole, the principle is downright incompatible (Adorno, 1966: 312-3, 1973: 318, amended).

Next this from the posthumous lectures on the *Problems of Moral Philosophy*: 'the way of the world [*der Weltlauf*] which [Hegel] defends against the vanity of protesting interiority – is [for him] always in the right over against the human subject' (Adorno, 2000: 165).

This from Adorno's *Mahler* book, where he is discussing the Third Movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony:

The *Rondo Burlesque*, the name of which announces that it intends to laugh at the world's course, finds itself bereft of laughter [...] This movement, which despite its length, rushes past, does not present the world's course as something alien and painful to the ego, but as if it were internalized in the subject, as if the subject himself were enslaved to it, and so was of as little concern to it as Spring to the drunken man [...] The world's course [here] brings desolation into the subject's own heart (Adorno, 1992: 162).

Next this from the aforementioned lectures on the *Theory of History and Freedom*: the idea of the world course is one of 'heaping insult upon injury' (Adorno, 2001: 97). Hegel is 'hypostasising' a 'Kantian dualism as a kind of positivity' (ibid).

And finally this from Adorno's *Notes to Literature*: 'Art is not about creating polemical alternatives; art means rather, through nothing other than its form, resisting that world-course which everyday points a gun at mankind's chest' (1965: 413).

What to make of these comments? And what to make of Adorno's repeated return to this topic in his work during the 1960s? What might it be in Hegel's philosophy that Adorno is objecting to so vehemently, and yet taking so seriously that it needs to be addressed repeatedly in this manner? What too could be so important in it that would lead Adorno to adopt the term himself as a kind of shorthand for present social ills, the irrational rationality of late modernity? What is Adorno's debt to Hegel here? Has he understood Hegel correctly? Might his understanding or misunderstanding have important ramifications both for himself and for our idea of Hegel's philosophy? The only way to answer this is to turn to Hegel's writings themselves, and to unpack this notion of the 'world's course'. The *locus classicus* of this term is section B of the chapter on 'Reason' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled 'The actualization of rational self-consciousness through its own activity' subsection c., '*Die Tugend und der Weltlauf*', which Miller translates as 'Virtue and the Way of the World' but which I am going to translate more often as 'world course'.

### **Hegel, Firstly**

Let us remind ourselves of what exactly is going on in section B of the reason chapter of the *Phenomenology*. In this Section, Hegel is, as earlier in the work, expounding forms of consciousness and self-consciousness as they strive towards stable and more adequate grounds, towards more complete knowledge of themselves and the world. By this point we have reached a stage of self-consciousness which is rational, which Hegel makes quite clear denotes the modern self that recognises itself as its own ground and as the maker of its own destiny. Reason is 'the certainty of being all reality' (Hegel 1977: 142). But reason follows as troubled a path towards self-knowledge as did the previous forms or shapes of consciousness. Reason continues to generate its own forms of opposition, its own other, whilst failing to recognise its own positing and its own mediation by and through the other. Reason has solved some of the problems that were inherent in consciousness and self-consciousness, but in other respects regresses once more. Indeed the fact that Reason itself follows self-consciousness in Hegel's exposition tells us something of this regression, since whereas self-consciousness became at least partly aware of its own relation to otherness, Reason has not fully learned the lesson and so falls back behind self-consciousness, notably in its lack of recognition that other self-consciousnesses are its proper object. Reason is thus, in Hegel's words, 'the thought that the single individual con-

consciousness is in itself Absolute Essence' (1977: 159). This is what Hegel calls 'Observing Reason', or, to avoid the ambiguity of the genitive, 'Reason in the act of Observing', the purest form of idealism, which sees no need to actualise itself in the world.

Part B of the Reason chapter follows the attempted remedy, Reason's attempts to make itself actual, to realise itself through action. This will involve, for example, the acknowledgement on Reason's part of the priority of laws, and of the ethical context in which it acts – the community; it will partially acknowledge that the general other of the community is the precondition of its own self-realisation, will '[d]iscover the world as its new real world, which in its permanence holds an interest for it which previously lay only in its transiency' (1977: 140). Yet it remains fixated on an assumption that since the self generates the laws which are the condition of knowledge (Observing Reason) it too must be the authentic source for the laws which govern the ethical world of the community (Actualising Reason). Despite turning its face to the other, it remains sure of its own autonomy.

On the face of it reason here lapses back behind what self-consciousness and the phenomenological observer have already achieved in Hegel's eyes. The Reason chapter is slung awkwardly between 'Self-consciousness' with its glimpse of mutual recognition, and the 'Spirit' chapter which introduces the ethical order – recognition in society and history, the rich context of what had thus far been presented only in outline. Yet it is through the parallels, and the similar mistakes which Reason carries over from self-consciousness and consciousness, that we are able to see the perennial problems of individuality, of idealism, and of reason itself. Reason is forgetful and simultaneously not yet insightful, forgetful of its origins and not yet aware of its own social and historical preconditions. Whilst 'Actualising Reason' is an advance to the practical over the merely observing, it is also a problematic and divided form of thinking, often incorrigible to boot. To underline this Hegel deliberately models part B of the Reason chapter on what has gone before, both in the tri-partite 'Freedom of Self-consciousness' section and prior to that, the tri-partite Consciousness chapter.

In part B of the Reason chapter, which is our focus, Hegel follows Reason's stumbling attempts to prove its own objectivity through action, to find its own reality in what it discovers is a social and communal world which it is compelled to negotiate. We might say that pure reason is here becoming

practical, though we should remember that Kant's philosophy, and this Kantian distinction, have not yet been explicitly engaged at this point of the *Phenomenology*. In attempting to actualise itself, Reason falls back upon its own assumption of self-generated, self-legislated principles. Chapter five is thus a careful dissection on Hegel's part of various ethical forms of autarky or autonomy. History is present in this dissection as an often indistinct backdrop, and we often have to guess at Hegel's intended targets (more on this below) but we can see that the initial attempts to negotiate practical or ethical concerns show up here as various forms of 'inwardness' – rejections of the external norms of an ethical order or community in favour of internally grounded values: these are, in order of exposition, the principle of following pure 'Pleasure', the 'Law of the Heart', and 'Virtue'. What each of these forms of inwardness encounters, is their frustrating opposite – pleasure as a principle finds its negation and frustration in Necessity; the Law of the Heart pits itself against 'the Frenzy of Self-Conceit' and Virtue tries its best to resist the world's course, the *Weltlauf*.

To put some flesh on the bones of this outline, then. The following of pure pleasure (*Lust*) discovers its negation in necessity, the fact that the freedom of pleasure-seeking relies upon the availability or absence of the objects of pleasure. By contrast, the Law of the Heart already defines itself negatively, turning away from what it sees as a fallen world and looking inwards for its moral worth, the sheer goodness of the Heart, castigating the debased laws it finds in the community. Virtue, different again – and this is our real focus here – finds this community to be an immoral or amoral course to which the world has become subjected, a perversion of the good. 'Virtue's purpose...is to reverse the perverted 'way of the world' and to make manifest its true essence' (1977: 230).

What exactly does Hegel mean by this? We get a better idea by pausing and remaining for a moment with the Law of the Heart. The Law of the Heart came to define itself by means of that which it stands so resolutely against. As a self-generated moral principle it defines itself as being 'oppressed' by 'a violent ordering of the world' (1977: 221), a humanity which doesn't follow its own heart-felt law but is 'subjected to an alien necessity' (just as pleasure faced an alien necessity). It sets about trying to eradicate this necessity and the suffering caused by it, and so acquires 'the earnestness of a high purpose which seeks its pleasure in displaying the *excellence* of its own nature, and in promoting the welfare of mankind' (1977: 222). Its law is the real good of

mankind, whether mankind recognises it or not. Yet this recognition is precisely the problem. How can you have a law which resides in just one individual? In becoming a law, the Law of the Heart ceases to be individual and becomes a universal power. 'The individual who wants to recognise universality only in the form of his immediate being-for-self does not therefore recognise himself in this free universality, while at the same time he belongs to it, for it is his doing' (1977: 223). His 'heart-throb for the welfare of humanity therefore passes into the ravings of an insane self-conceit' (1977: 226), striving to expel any moment of the world's perversion from itself, though it itself is this very perversion (*Verkehrung*). Seeking to establish its reality, the law of the heart has only learned 'that its self is not real and that its reality is an unreality' (1977: 226). Yet it needs this perverted reality from which it draws its pious *raison d'être*. And once we start to get other laws of the heart, a multiplicity of pious individuals, we can only get competition between them (1977: 227-8) in which each claims the validity of their own law of the heart. What seems to be a universal order turns out to be a state of war between individual laws, each seeking its own perverted self-interest.

It is at this point that Hegel introduces the way of the world, for this world course just is an extrapolation from this situation of universal self-interest. Thus arises a new form of individuality which knows this assertion of individuality 'to be perverted and to be the source of perversion, and therefore knows it must sacrifice the individuality of consciousness' (1977: 228). This shape of consciousness is Virtue.

As an aside, it is worth noting here something which is pointed to by Judith Shklar in her excellent commentary on this part of the *Phenomenology*. Within the logical structure of the Reason chapter, the relation *between* the different forms which Actualising Reason takes, reason's various flawed experiments in social and moral realisation, remains less than clear (Shklar 1976: 102). How Hegel thinks we pass from each to the next – from hedonism to the Law of the Heart to Virtue - is not entirely convincing, and is certainly less obvious than the transitions at other points in the *Phenomenology*. Shklar's contentious idea is that hedonism, the law of the heart and virtue figure not so much as forms of consciousness which clearly anticipate or generate more advanced responses to their particular problem, as a more synchronic set of character-types or divided *Gestalts*. It is as if Hegel is leading us through a gallery of vain portraits, each displayed in all their distortion, their flawed attempts to achieve ethical and social ends by asocial means. Hegel the satirist, Shklar

suggests, for once got the better of Hegel the philosopher (1976: 102).

Whilst Shklar may be right that the internal relation is unclear, the external relation with what has gone before seems clearer. 'The actualisation of rational self-consciousness through its own activity' seems to be modelled on the earlier cycle of consciousness (chapters I through III). Thus where 'Pleasure' corresponds to 'Self-certainty', the 'Law of the Heart' mirrors what had been said previously of 'Perception'; and lastly, and most importantly for our discussion, 'Virtue' evokes 'the Understanding' which fails to recognise its own positing of an inert and supersensible realm of laws. Likewise the three-part division resembles the forms of self-consciousness set out in Chapter 4 part B: Stoicism, Scepticism and most relevant here, the Unhappy Consciousness, which projects its fulfilled recognition into a timeless beyond, set above the vagaries of this world (Shklar, 1976: 101; Harris, 1997: 7).

To return to the exposition, then. The virtuous individual finds himself or herself confronting a universal 'perverted by individuality' (Hegel, 1977: 229), which individuality (including its own) is to be nullified. In the self's self-sacrifice the individualism of the world's course is also to be eradicated. This world-course has a two-fold character, though: not just 'the single individual which seeks its own pleasure and enjoyment' but also the product of this self-interest, since in acting self-interestedly the individual 'satisfies the universal' (Hegel, 1977: 229). This is just what virtue will object to and try to annul, both in the world and in itself.

Something of the law of the heart remains here, but instead of standing opposed to the law of the community, virtue internalises this opposition of law and individuality: 'The universal law, it is true, preserves itself in the face of this conceit, and no longer makes its appearance as something opposed to consciousness and empty of content, as a blind necessity, but as a necessity *within consciousness itself*' (1977: 229). But, as Hegel notes, the opposition of necessity and individuality cannot be held together in the same consciousness; subjectively experienced this would be a form of madness (*Verrücktheit*) (this, as we will see later, is a point which he will cross paths with Adorno).

Virtue attempts then to conquer the reality of the world's course. But its battle is something of a sham, a 'fencing in front of a mirror' (*Spiegelfechtere*) because virtue must 'preserve its own weapons', must remain virtuous throughout the fight, and must at the same time preserve its enemy who in

his debauchery is its own *raison d'être*. It is a sham too because virtue only *wills* to accomplish the good, whereas its enemy has the advantage in being able to *point* to the good. In battling the supposedly perverted world virtue finds 'a universal animated by individuality and existing for an other'; it 'hits upon places which are the actual existence of the good itself' (1977: 232). Everyone seeking their own self-interest, yes, but really seeking their own happiness, finding their own good. In this sense the world's course is 'invulnerable', it 'faces in every direction' (1977: 233); it will not be told what is right when it already finds what is right for it in its actual existence and activity. What frustrates Virtue most is that the way of the world, in its egoism, might actually be the unintended realisation of the good, that Virtue may not have a monopoly on good outcomes.

The world's course was supposed to be the perversion of the good because it had individuality for its principle; only, individuality is the principle of *actuality*, for it is precisely individuality that is consciousness, whereby what exists *in itself* exists equally *for an other*; it does pervert the Unchangeable, but it perverts it in fact from the nothing of abstraction into the being of reality [...] The individuality of the way of the world may well imagine that it acts only for itself or in its own interest. It is better than it thinks, for its action is at the same time an implicitly universal action (Hegel, 1970: 289, 291, 1977: 233, 235, amended).

Whilst the world's course inadvertently realises the good, Virtue, by contrast, as a form of self-sacrifice for the public good, proves to be little more than self-assertion, just as much forethought of reward, that is, its nemesis egoism. The fight begins to slip out of its hands, and the world's course 'triumphs over what, in opposition to it, constitutes virtue' (1977: 233). Triumphs not, however 'over something real but over the creation of distinctions which are no distinctions, over this pompous talk about doing what is best for humanity, about the oppression of humanity, about making sacrifices for the sake of the good' (1970: 289, 1977: 234, amended).

Hegel concludes this section by noting that what virtue protests against in the seemingly invulnerable way of the world, but without knowing why, is in fact what the 'way of the world' *stands in for*. It stands in for the loss of the ethical life in which virtue had an actuality. The way of the world is a situation in which reason and inwardness have replaced the exoteric laws of the polis

and the clear path of ethical action, the 'happy state of being the ethical substance' (1977: 215). We get confirmation here that what Hegel may be describing is an era of renaissance humanism, whose remnants were still visible in the spirit of his own times, a nostalgia for the ideals of the classic world amidst the backdrop of emerging modernity. But modern virtue lacks what was so great in ancient virtue, namely that it 'had its foundation, full of content, in the substance of the nation, and for its purpose an actual good already in existence' (1977: 234). In ancient times, virtue 'was not directed against the actual world as against something *generally perverted*, and against the world course' (1977: 234) but was an unforced expression of the laws and customs of the whole. Modern virtue, by contrast, 'has its being outside of the spiritual substance,' it is 'unreal', 'a virtue in imagination and name'. The modern man of virtue might always keep to hand a copy of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the world in which *andreia* or *virtus* had a meaning and a power in the everyday lives of the citizen is no longer.

As this last point suggests, the historical determination of virtue and the way of the world is its own unacknowledged context, virtue's own repressed. Yet Hegel remains coy about the real referents of his exposition, leaving the field clear for the speculators of the secondary literature. What might be the referents or prototypes of each of his character-portraits? Shklar has some interesting suggestions. Whilst subsection A, 'pleasure and necessity', is directed at both ancient and a modern forms of hedonism, subsection B, 'the law of the heart' captures certain reformation forms of religious thought, in particular Pietism, Anabaptism, Quakerism. *Tugend*, or virtue, by contrast, seems less easy to identify. On the face of it, it seems to describe a stern republican moral ideal, characterised by renunciation and self-cultivation, a turning away from the selfishness and egotism which reign destructively in the world. The man of virtue sees the course of the world as self-interest raised to the level of the universal, a community only of the self-seeking. Withdrawing from this immorality he makes himself superior, cognisant of humanity and its oppression, yet in reality remaining inwardly directed and self-satisfied. Reason here is not just hypocritical, but ineffective, 'a private utopia' in Shklar's words; 'in trying to preserve only his own inner purity' the virtuous individual has 'lost the objects of his love: other people' (1976: 109).

Hegel may also have had in mind, as Shklar suggests, more literary targets. Some of the heroes of Schiller's dramas, for example, bear close resemblance

to the *Gestalten* which people Section B, those who embody noble ideals with great pathos but also an incorrigible and dangerous piety: Ferdinand in Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*, for instance, is so committed to the dictates of sincerity that his beloved Luise's failure to share his morality sees her murdered in a jealous rage; likewise with the hero of Jacobi's novel *Woldemar*, who is so sensitive and righteous that he finds he can no longer abide the presence of other people (Shklar, 1976: 113). A more obvious touchstone for many interpreters reading the section on Virtue is Don Quixote, though this reading is quite adamantly rejected by Henry Harris in his latest book (Harris, 1997: 74 n. 79).

Staying with Harris's interpretation for a moment, his own suggestions of prototypes are quite interesting. For the Law of the Heart, Harris proposes Rousseau's *Emile*, or more specifically, 'The Creed of the Savoyard Vicar'. He agrees with Shklar, however, that Schiller may also lie in the background: Karl von Moor, the idealistic bandit from *The Robbers* goes from being a law unto himself to a repentant voice of virtue. But does reference to Schiller explain the political overtones of this section of the *Phenomenology*? Harris's response, and the result of an exhaustive genealogy, is that Hegel may have had in mind a little-known polemic against Machiavelli by none other than Frederick the Great.

We get less help in looking for prototypes for the 'way of the world'. What set of ideas Hegel might have had in mind when describing how self-interest brings about the universal? It is possible he was thinking of Bernard de Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, or, as it was subtitled, *Private Vices, Public Benefits* (published in 1714). Mandeville spars wittily with the hypocrisy of moralists whilst giving a spirited defence of the public good created by egoism. An alternative source, which Hegel would have found to be a mainstay of the political economy he read, lies in the ideas of Adam Smith. In the image of the world's course in which 'when it acts in its own interest, [the individual] simply does not know what it is doing' because 'its action is at the same time an implicitly universal action' (Hegel, 1977: 235) we have a close approximation to Smith's 'invisible hand' which, through appeal solely to man's self-interest rather than to his benevolence, engenders the self-regulating and spontaneous order of a market economy.<sup>1</sup>

## Adorno Again

The problem this raises of course – and here Adorno and his unease at the concept of the world-course might be helpfully re-introduced – is that this ‘universal’ is a highly problematic one. A society premised on the division of labour, as is that society which delivers benefits as though by an invisible hand, certainly has the appearance of community and universality. But, as could soon enough be glimpsed in the *Philosophy of Right*, and as would be brought out more clearly by a subsequent reader of Hegel, under the surface such a society is in fact a world of alienation, atomisation, the anarchy of unregulated production, and social division into classes (Hegel, 1967: 149-50; Marx, 1976: 280; Marx, 1992: Ch. 50). Moreover we discover that this ‘civil society’, far from immediately producing the good, is reliant upon the state to regulate its endemic excesses. Can Hegel really be recommending the machinations of what appears a modern civil society over the claims of protesting virtue, and suggesting that it is a manifestation of the good?

I suspect that something of this inference may well have been at the back of Adorno's mind when he suggests that there is a ‘conformist’ moment to the idea of the *Weltlauf*. To suggest that universal self-interest brings about universal benefits may well amount to that most contemporary of rhetorical modes - ‘spin’; or in less fashionable terms, there is surely something ideological about it. The *Weltlauf* in the implicit form here of a market economy may well deliver beneficent ends to many, but as even Smith notes, it does not do so through benevolent actions. Or, to put it another way, it functions best by bringing out the worst in us. Now if this is the *Weltlauf* as Hegel characterises it, is it really an ethical advance over individual virtue?

Harris in his commentary describes the *Weltlauf* as ‘the justice of the marketplace’ and concurs that Hegel seems to be describing what he will elsewhere identify as the modern economy. But if we have been keeping Adorno's quotes at the back of our minds, we may now want to bring them forward in the form of a question. Is not Hegel in seeming to approve of virtue's defeat by the *Weltlauf*, or as Harris puts it, virtue's being made obedient to the “‘divine and human order” of Civil Society’ (Harris, 1997: 61), precisely confirming Adorno's suspicions that this concept of the *Weltlauf* amounts to a kind of ‘appeasement’ (Adorno, 2001: 98). Or to put it less dramatically than Adorno would, isn't Hegel being somewhat naïve about what civil society actually entails? Certainly, what Hegel knew in his own day as newly devel-

oped forms of atomisation and egoism, was a civil society which could still disguise itself as socially beneficial. But surely this appearance has been thoroughly unmasked in the intervening centuries. Hardly anywhere now do we find the actions of individuals to be 'immediately universal' in the sense implied by Hegel; nowhere does civil society on its own achieve what it was originally believed to do, to create the good by its own unconscious actions; it is not unmediated action on the part of individuals but mediation by the state which now ensures the semblance that a market produces social goods, rather than producing mere exchange-values. And for every exchange-value produced, the diremption of society into classes will remain the presupposition, a process overseen by a state which is no longer separate, if ever it was, from civil society. What is universal in the individual's actions is not so much the working of an invisible hand as that of a total social process in which the individual is coercively enmeshed, a world whose rationale seems to be merely that of keeping to the same course. Not so much a 'divine and human order', as an infernal and inhuman one. If this is the whole, Adorno might say, then the whole is unjust.

I am of course interpolating into Adorno's misgivings to try to determine what line of thinking may have lead him with such vehemence to reject this concept of the *Weltlauf* as 'conformist', or as a form of 'appeasement'. I may be reading into his argument what is not actually there. This may be a good point therefore at which to turn to exactly what Adorno *does* say about the *Weltlauf*.

If we recall the quote from *Negative Dialectics* – Franz von Sickingen's 'nothing without a cause' – we can now make a few observations. Firstly, what Adorno is doing seems to jar with our understanding of what the *Weltlauf* meant for Hegel. In fact Adorno seems to be eliding two different things, namely the idea of the *Weltlauf* as the antithesis of virtue, and the idea of reason amidst the incidental in history. This is a typical move on Adorno's part: more often than not, the *Weltlauf* appears in his writings just as frequently as a concept of the philosophy of history as it does a phenomenological moment of rational self-consciousness. Surely it is something of a sleight of hand on Adorno's part. We might admit that Hegel's term does appear to carry unfortunate connotations of necessity (in German, for instance, one can describe phenomena such as planetary motion as *Weltlauf*, and these overtones of inexorable procession are unlucky). They may be why Adorno feels able to lump together virtue's enemy with the more unpalatable statements

from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, to the effect that we should be looking not at the negative in history but at the affirmative, those events which contribute, however indirectly, to the augmenting of freedom.<sup>2</sup> Adorno, as is well known, takes it upon himself in his late work to reverse the coin of Hegel's philosophy of history and focus upon what is *left out* of this story of emerging freedom, to focus in particular upon an historical event which in his own lifetime seemed to resist any sense being squeezed out of it, that is, Auschwitz. This gives Adorno's late philosophical-historical reflections, both in the *Lectures*, and in the text of *Negative Dialectics* which they would inform, an inverse grandeur, an almost world-historical desperation. This might help to explain the passage in the *Lectures*, where he speaks of

the strange appearance of reconciliation, the appearance that always in history, no matter how horrible and negative, it always looks as if man and the Weltlauf which is being done to him, looks as if the two were really identical, as if the world were just as man deserves it, as if therefore nobody had the right to accuse the Weltlauf which has made man like this, and for this reason: what the Weltlauf has made out of man, to a large extent *just is* the affirmation of the Weltlauf; the modification or formation of men's social character in such a way that they sell themselves to the Weltlauf and especially there where the Weltlauf is most irrational and demands its most senseless sacrifices from them (Adorno, 2001: 107, my translation).

One can see here that Adorno has elided two different thoughts and two different works of Hegel, and perhaps without that elision his argument might not retain the same force. This said, Adorno does on occasion appear to try to work through this idea from within the parameters of the *Phenomenology*, such as here where he suggests that the opposition of virtue and world-course recalls a Kantian problematic.

The opponent of Hegel – Kant – would admit that conscience and the way of the world are absolutely incompatible, but add: so much the worse for the way of the world. But if I say, like Hegel, that the individual and the way of the world are dependent upon each other, that the individual conscience must find itself again in the world's course, and then if *at the same time* I teach that it *can't* find itself in the universal with right and with reason, then Hegel is doing nothing other than hypostasising a Kantian dualism as a kind of positivity. It means, to quote an English saying, 'heaping insult upon injury'. Not only do the world's course and its institutions do injustice to the individual, but

also, if the individual recognises this and pleads his case instead of taking part and identifying with the world's course, then the individual is being insulted as stupid, sentimental and god knows what else; a philosophical finger is being waved at it, until the critical conscience cowers (Adorno, 2001: 97, my translation).

Leaving aside the fact that Adorno seems to confuse terms, calling 'conscience' (*Gewissen*) what Hegel called 'virtue' (*Tugend*), there is surely something in this, particularly the recognition of the interdependence of the protesting individual and the *Weltlauf* which shows that Adorno has not simply caricatured Hegel. Adorno's argument seems to be that history itself has altered the meaning of this opposition; that today, or in Adorno's day at least, 'finding oneself again in the *Weltlauf*' could rationalise the worst sort of injustices, reactionary behaviour, the 'appeasement' he speaks of. It is this worry about an inherent conformism in the idea of the *Weltlauf* that leads Adorno to suggest (in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, contemporary with those on *History and Freedom*) that Hegel's conception of 'ethical life' actually proves less critical and radical than *Kant's* moral philosophy, which, contra Hegel, allows us to indict *all* situations in which an affront to human autonomy is committed (Adorno, 2000: 165). Formalist *Moralität* proves more critical than content-filled *Sittlichkeit* when that content becomes historically intransigent.

Perhaps we can concede something to Adorno, at least in acknowledging that the world itself may have changed since Hegel's day, with the result that privileging the world's course over the individual of virtue, itself changes in character. Whilst the legitimate problem in Hegel's day might have been the proliferation of virtuous individuals and crusading hearts, the problem facing Adorno twenty years after the Second World War, where mass consumption was fuelled by Cold War anxiety, was the *dearth* of dissenting voices and the *univocity* of the world's course, a seemingly headlong destructive movement. It was the *extinguishing* of protest and the ever more subtle art by which individual egoism could be made compatible with general conformism, which characterised his own historical actuality. Arguably the situation has changed once more in our own time, where a dissenting individual protesting, for example, against war, might find herself in the majority, where a majority in fact relinquishes self-interest for compassion towards another country threatened by invasion. Yet this individual might still find herself, together with her fellows, over-ridden by the world's course; that it doesn't recognise them, just

as they have trouble recognising it. What would Hegel say, faced with each of these very different forms of actuality, actualities which any philosophy of experience must aspire to comprehend? Might Adorno's misreading of Hegel at least have brought to light the need for us to update or rethink Hegel's ideas here?

I am tempted by this line of criticism, but also tempted by the alternative, namely that it is where Adorno *misses* the point of Hegel that we find the most illumination, and for both philosophers. I am tempted to suggest that Adorno's relentless disputes with Hegel's ideas of history and freedom may indeed boil down to a failure to adequately understand this idea of the *Weltlauf*. And that what this misreading may conceal is that Adorno himself is forced into that position of virtuous resistance to the *Weltlauf* which defines its other as irredeemably perverted, and refuses to recognise the good which individualism may bring about. Perhaps what Adorno fears, and tries so hard to cover up, is that his voice too may be absorbed back into the universal, shown up as mere self-assertion against selfishness, mere will to power.

What Adorno doesn't acknowledge is that by the 'way of the world', Hegel intended not some alien and immoral realm from which the critical conscience is necessarily isolated, but rather the field of possible action for individual reason, the realm in which reasoning, even critical reasoning, must actualise itself, the place where, and only where, its generalisations can be validated. It would be a merely abstract and aprioristic philosophy which saw this field of action as unequivocally irrational, as a space of absolute conformism, to which the critical conscience could only respond by complete rejection and distancing.<sup>3</sup> Adorno also seems to have forgotten Hegel's qualification that virtue and individual moral protest come to predominate only where their substantial content or context has been lost, that is, where the substantive ethical life in which virtue first arose, is no more, is nothing but a memory. Modern virtue has as its precondition the loss of that web of rational norms and customs, the absence of those certainties which graced our ancient beginnings, the movement out of the ancient world, which is inevitably met with nostalgia and hope. The faithful reader of Hegel will recognise this precondition of the world-course, and turn her attention to the insubstantial ethical life which generates the isolated moral self and its fantasies. It is the nature of our insubstantial modern ethical life which needs to be critically engaged by the Hegelian philosopher, rather than the world-course which conceals that insubstantiality.

One might make another point: that Hegel is surely right that ethical life must involve self-interest as well as altruism, or better, it is only where the two coincide, and inclination and the good are no longer divorced (as they were, for instance, in Kantian morality), that ethical life proper, exists. It is not possible to bracket-out the self and its interests from social deliberation, but rather the task is to reconcile self-interest and other-interest. Hegel clearly sees the virtuous individual as being less objectionable than other manifestations of inwardness, the 'the Law of the Heart' for instance, which wilfully rejects norms and customs. Virtue at least battles with them; it has good intentions. Only it doesn't recognise that the other may have good intentions as well, or that in seeking my own self-interest, I may actually be seeking the good.

Virtue has failed to recognise that it has itself created its other, a world of ignoble interests, of Machiavellian intentions, of grubby politics, and it has created this other as all-powerful, as the invulnerable Lordship of the 'way the world goes' (cf. Harris, 1997: 43). Yet it is thereby dependent for its very existence on this other which it renews and which renews it. And this rebounds back upon those such as Adorno who would subsequently set themselves against the social world course of their own day. Thus 'Critical Theory' fails to recognise its own construction of the 'totally administered world', of the 'culture industry', these latter-day forms of the *Weltlauf*. It has stigmatised this world as unreservedly alienated, human goings-on become fixed world-course. But the values whereby such a situation might be subject to critique can only come (even if only negatively) from existing actuality. It is at least consistent that critical theory sometimes drew its weapons from the 'standpoint of redemption', from the dark shadow cast on this world by one bathed 'in the messianic light' (Adorno, 1974: 247). But whether as virtue or as critical theory, such protest remains poor in actuality; standing outside World's course, one pays the price for moral goodness with impotence.

For virtue to argue that it alone is right and reasonable and that the entire ethical order is invalid amounts, as we have seen Hegel already suggest, to a form of rational madness (Hegel, 1977: 229). We cannot rely upon ourselves for our standard of reason; we will forever court megalomania or paranoia. But the madness virtue ascribes to the ethical order as 'the world's course' is really its own internalised conflict in negating that very world which it needs for its actualisation. Adorno seems on occasion to realise that this is what is at stake in his own critique, such as when he suggests that psychology and psy-

choanalysis are complicit in the excesses of the *Weltlauf*, that indeed psychology 'devolves the madness of the world's course to the individual, against the individual's reason' (Adorno, 2001: 106). What psychoanalysis, which was unavailable to Hegel, may tell us about our own society is that 'we incorporate the irrationality of the *Weltlauf* and make it our own' (Adorno, 2001: 112). Mahler's *'Rondo' Burlesque* becomes the bizarre accompaniment to Freud's writings on civilisation. Moreover – and here psychoanalysis itself is indicted for its conformism – we incorporate that very irrationality which tells us it is eminently reasonable, the repression of our desire, and we incorporate it by means of an 'identification mechanism' that makes us precisely like our enemy.

And this leads us to an extraordinarily vicious circle: all subjects whose objective interest should be the change of the *Weltlauf* – and without whose actions such change would not be possible – are for their part so much shaped by this identification-mechanism that they are unable to act in such a spontaneous and conscious way that might change the *Weltlauf*; indeed, in identifying with it (an unhappy, neurotic, harmful identification) they actually reinforce the *Weltlauf*. And this, I would say, is the truth about man's position in history (Adorno, 2001: 112, my translation).

But Adorno only shows here that he too has not escaped his enemy. Talk of 'objective interest' is just what virtue tried to teach an incorrigible world-course; once more we find virtue's familiar lack of self-recognition. Likewise we find virtue's unqualified belief in its other's invulnerability. How could the protesting individual articulate this double bind if his delusion were so complete, if the subject's identification with the *Weltlauf* is total? If the world's course is madness, then what individual could with reason articulate this fact and expect to be heard? The answer is that here, at critical theory's furthest outpost, we witness the transformation of the individual of virtue into something akin to a virtuous eccentric; one who, as Hegel seemed to predict, could not be sure whether they remain on the side of reason. On one fascinating occasion Adorno follows through the implication of where his thinking is leading him, and I think that is why all the tendencies of his later philosophy come together most clearly in a paragraph from *Minima Moralia*, his small or minimal ethics, where he recalls a song about the two hares shot by a hunter, and who, surprised to find themselves still alive, decide to 'show a clean pair of heels'. For Adorno the innocent lyric teaches something profound about

how the individual can reasonably react to the suffering of world history:

What would happiness be that was not measured by the immeasurable grief at what is? For the world's course is deeply ailing (*Denn verstört is der Weltlauf*). He who cautiously adapts to it by this very act shares in its madness, while the eccentric alone would stand his ground and bid it rave no more. He alone could pause to think on the illusoriness of disaster, the 'unreality of despair', and realize not merely that he is alive but that there is still life (2003: 228; 1974: 200, amended).

Attenuated ethics, the circumscribed teaching of the good life, the form of Adorno's late philosophy, is not so much the proud protestations of virtue over a vicious world, as might have been possible in early modernity, at the origins of civil society. Now it is a modest compendium of counterfactual virtues modelled on a jaundiced eccentric confronting an unstoppable social mechanism. Its prototype not Karl Moor but King Lear, a dethroned King, the Lord, his power diminished, sent out into the storm of the world.

### **Kraus Once More, and Lear, Finally**

Adorno has revealed much about what Hegel might have meant by the world's course, even on the occasions when he misrepresents what we have seen are the real subtleties of this concept. But there is one oversight which I haven't yet mentioned, and which I want to mention in closing. Significantly it is one which other commentators have missed too. What Adorno's pathos of protest overlooks, is a small phrase which precedes Hegel's introduction of the concept in the *Phenomenology*. He misses the transition from the 'Law of the Heart' to 'Virtue', in which Hegel introduces what the Law of the Heart has really been objecting to, the social order which it had so sternly and unforgivingly resisted. Hegel says that this order is what he will now call the *Weltlauf*, '*Der Schein eines bleibenden Ganges*'. The appearance of an unchanging course (Hegel, 1970: 282).

It is just appearance, just show. The appearance of an unchanging course to things, the appearance that things can only be thus. Of course appearance is never *just* appearance in Hegel's philosophy. Things 'appear' with reason; the 'essence must appear', as Hegel says in the *Logic* (1969: 479, 499). Appearance is always the real determination by which essence exists. But appearance it is no less unessential for that.

Adorno appears to have taken the appearance for essence, and so much follows from this oversight, not least for any critique of the social world course. Instead of the mock battle between vain individual and *Weltlauf*, we have now only the frail voice amidst the storm, urging it to stop. Instead of the struggle between individual and universal, Adorno has hypostasised both, exactly what he accused Hegel of, the world unchanging, the individual unrelenting. But what protestation at the world's unchanging course masked was precisely the changing movement of our history, its movement out of its ancient beginning, the loss of substantial ethical life, the trials of reason attempting to find again that happy state, the vagaries of our own modernity. The world does indeed move on, but its course is not something ultimately separate from us or our history; what the world has made of us is no different from what we continue to make of the world, as Kraus's saying, taken with the irony it deserves, allows us to see.

Only when one fails to see with sufficient radicality the mediation between the virtuous protesting individual and the world's course, can one hypostasise an emasculated subject facing a total and inexorable social power. These two distortions, which give Adorno's thought its great pathos but also its sense of futility, are complementary. For Hegel it was the virtuous individual who projected the irredeemably perverted world-course, and to the same degree that this individual believed himself untainted by it, more sinned against than sinning. Which should put us in mind of Shakespeare, who may well have recognised the same thing, and why Adorno's borrowings from him tell only half the story. Lear's storm is of his own making, his wholly ungrateful daughters, his 'heart-struck injuries,'<sup>4</sup> just as much a product of his own hard heart. When the storm abates, it seems as if we are left only with madness, but we will witness before the end the mutual recognition that is forgiveness, and with it reason's restoration, the outcast reconciled with what remains of damaged ethical life. Too late, of course, for the protagonists – this is the tragedy – but never too late for the audience, emerging finally into the daylight, knowing what they have seen was only a show.

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### **Endnotes**

1. Cf. Smith (1981: 25): 'The division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends the general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though very slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another'.

2. Adorno 2000: 164. He seems to have in mind that point in the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History where Hegel says of philosophical history, that it 'should enable us to comprehend all the ills of the world, including the existence of evil, so that the thinking spirit may be reconciled with the negative aspects of existence [...] A reconciliation of the kind just described can only be achieved through a knowledge of the affirmative side of history, in which the negative is reduced to a subordinate position and transcended altogether. In other words, we must first of all know what the ultimate design of the world really is, and secondly, we must see that this design has been realised and that evil has not been able to maintain a position of equality beside it' (Hegel 1975: 42-3).

3. Cf. Marx's comment, probably directed at Bruno Bauer: 'No world-historic opposition is formed, however, by the statement that one is in opposition to the whole world' (Marx and Engels, 1975: Chapter VII).

4. King Lear, III. i. 18.

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