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Hegel on Leadership: The Unfolding of the Absolute

"What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational."
—Georg W. F. Hegel

From the seeds of revolution that had germinated in England and France during the last half of the eighteenth century grew political and economic upheaval. The United States had declared its independence. The concept of the crown had become tarnished. The consciousness of the French people had erupted in revolt. The Napoleonic Wars had brought havoc to the nations of Europe, and social order throughout the Continent had been threatened.

Rather than embrace concepts of liberty taking root in England, France, and the New World, however, most German philosophers had rejected the underpinnings of democracy in favor of a worldview that acknowledged the absolute power of the state. They scorned concepts of individual freedoms and inalienable rights. *Responsibility* was far more important than *freedom*; only through *duty* could one become liberated from oneself.

Unquestionably, the most prolific and influential among these philosophers during the early years of the nineteenth century was Georg W. F. Hegel. His body of work is encyclopedic; it includes writings not only in philosophy but religion, art, ethics, and history. Thus, in our quest to gain a more enriching understanding of leadership, it is imperative that we examine his thought, for not only did he depart from those who had advocated individualism within the leader-follower dyad, he demanded that our considerations expand well beyond the nature of social contracts. Not only must we grapple with concepts regarding the nature of man, we must examine these concepts within a context that embodies the totality of existence.

We begin our journey by considering Hegel's understanding of the mind of man, for the mind, he believed, was simply a microcosm of the macrocosm of all reality. Accordingly, Hegel was an Idealist. He did not believe, however, that man's knowledge is directed toward an external *Ideal*. Instead, he held that man's ideas are a part of the *Ideal* itself.

As he developed his philosophy, Hegel observed that man's knowledge is always changing. It continuously moves from a state of unawareness to a state of consciousness. It affirms what it knows. Then it discovers the opposite of what it believes to be true, and a state of inner-conflict occurs. Finally, in order to restore consonance within itself, it synthesizes these opposites into one. Professor S. E. Frost summarizes the process as follows:

If one studies the mind, he will find it full of contradictions, full of disagreements, of opposites. But, a further study will reveal that there is a process in the mind by which each pair of opposites is reconciled in a synthesis which includes both but on a higher level.

This process is everywhere. First there is a thesis or affirmation, then we discover the antithesis to this thesis or its contradiction. The highest form of thought is the reconciling of both in a synthesis which lifts thinking one step higher. The human mind does not stop with contradictions, but strives to get rid of them by effecting a synthesis. This is not to be confused with a compromise. In a true synthesis the values of both the thesis and the antithesis are conserved and together they move toward new values.

The highest function of the mind, then, is that activity which enables one to see things whole, to see opposites unified. Here man rises to the true height of his nature. Thought moves from the simple ideas to more complex notions, from the individual to the rich and full.¹

Hegel believed that the process of the mind and the process of nature are the same. As the ideas of man evolve through the dialectic process, so, too, does the *universal mind* of all reality. It begins with a thesis. It proceeds to contradiction. It resolves through synthesis. From this synthesis develops a new antithesis, and the contradiction is resolved through a new and higher synthesis, *ad infinitum*.

History, then, records the unfolding of this dialectic. Man is not separate from the *Ideal* but is a part of it. His reason participates in divine reason. As such, the mind of man and the mind of God are one. It is this Spirit, this *Geist*, that drives the evolution of the universe: "reason is the *substance* of the universe," Hegel states, "that by which and in which all reality has its being and subsistence."² Historian Richard Tarnas explains it this way:

The world is the history of the divine's unfolding, a constant process of becoming, an immense drama in which the universe reveals itself to itself and achieves its freedom. All struggle and evolution are resolved in the realization of the world's *telos*, its goal and purpose. In this great dialectic, all potentialities are embodied in forms of ever-increasing complexity, and all that was implicit in the original state of being gradually becomes explicit. Man—his thought, his culture, his history—is the pivot of that unfolding, the vessel of God's glory. Hence theology for Hegel was replaced by the comprehension of history: God is not beyond the creation, but is the creative process itself. Man is not the passive spectator of reality, but its active co-creator, his history the matrix of its fulfillment. The universal essence, which constitutes and permeates all things, finally comes to consciousness of itself in man. At the climax of his long evolution, man achieves possession of absolute truth and recognizes his unity with the divine spirit that has realized itself within him.³

Within this context we can begin to unravel Hegel's thought regarding the nature of the leadership dyad. Unlike Locke or Rousseau, he held no presuppositions regarding the inalienable rights of man. In the state of nature, Hegel notes, man is little more than an animal. He is savage. He is barbaric. Within the primitive state, man has not become aware of his consciousness, and, as a result, he cannot be free, for freedom demands that the consciousness of the will be exercised. Thus, he lives in a state of *unfreedom*. In his work, *Philosophy of History*, Hegel explains,

What we find such a state of nature to be in actual experience answers exactly to the idea of a *merely* natural condition. Freedom as the *ideal* of that which is original and natural, does not exist *as original and natural*. Rather must it be first sought out and won; and that by an incalculable medial discipline of the intellectual and moral powers. The state of nature is, therefore, predominantly that of injustice and violence, of untamed natural impulses, of inhuman deeds and feelings. Limitation is certainly produced by society and the state, but it is a limitation of the mere brute emotions and rude instincts; as also, in a more advanced stage of culture, of the premeditated self-will of caprice and passion. This kind of constraint is part of the instrumentality by which only, the consciousness of freedom and the desire for its attainment, in its true—that is, rational and ideal form—can be obtained. To the ideal of freedom, law and morality are indispensably requisite; and they are in and for themselves, universal existences, objects and aims; which are discovered only by the activity of thought, separating itself from the merely sensuous, and developing itself, in opposition thereto; and which must on the other hand, be introduced into and incorporated with the originally sensuous will, and that contrarily to its natural inclination.⁴

Freedom, then, did not exist in man's primitive state, for *ideal* freedom is that toward which reality evolves. Thus, there can be no freedom without the consciousness of the will, and as man began to evolve, he began the long process of becoming conscious of the *ideal* state of freedom. Through continuous thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, he developed law. He developed culture and religion. He

gave assent to social restraint, and through his sense of responsibility and duty toward the *ideal*, he became free from the passions of his animal existence.

Yet, freedom does not come without struggle. Conflict is essential for progress to occur; it drives the dialectic. Within this context, even war can be considered good. Likewise, peace can be considered evil, for it fails to synthesize the oppositions inherent within its thesis and antithesis. "The history of the world is not the theatre of happiness," writes Hegel. "Periods of happiness are blank pages in it, for they are periods of harmony, periods when the antithesis is in abeyance."⁵ Philosopher Will Durant explains the thought of Hegel regarding man's struggle for freedom as follows:

Not that strife and evil are mere negative imaginings; they are real enough; but they are, in wisdom's perspective, stages to fulfillment and the good. Struggle is the law of growth; character is built in the storm and stress of the world; and a man reaches his full height only through compulsions, responsibilities, and suffering. Even pain has its rationale; it is a sign of life and a stimulus to reconstruction. Passion also has a place in the reason of things: 'nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion;' and even the egoistic ambitions of a Napoleon contribute unwittingly to the development of nations. Life is not made for happiness, but for achievement. . . . History is made only in those periods in which the contradictions of reality are being resolved by growth, as the hesitations and awkwardness of youth pass into the ease and order of maturity. History is a dialectical movement, almost a series of revolutions, in which people after people, and genius after genius, become the instrument of the Absolute.⁶

Freedom, then, evolves through the conflict of history, with each stage raising man's level of consciousness. In nature, no man is free. All men are prisoners of their passions and impulses. As man's consciousness develops, he becomes aware of his own freedom; yet, he lacks the consciousness to be aware of the freedom of others. Humans continue to evolve, however, and as they meet the struggles necessary for synthesis, they become conscious of *Ideal* freedom, i.e., they become aware of the Truth that all humans, as humans, are free, and they exercise their wills to affirm the Absolute. It is only then that they become free. Hegel explains with examples from history:

The Orientals have not attained the knowledge that spirit-man *as such*—is free; and because they do not know this, they are not free. They only know that *one is free*. But on this very account, the freedom of that *one* is only caprice; ferocity—brutal recklessness of passion, or a mildness and tameness of the desires, which is itself only an accident of nature—mere caprice like the former. That *one* is therefore only a despot; not a *free man*. The consciousness of freedom first arose among the Greeks, and therefore

they were free; but they, and the Romans likewise, knew only that *some* are free, not man as such. Even Plato and Aristotle did not know this. The Greeks, therefore, had slaves; and their whole life and the maintenance of their splendid liberty, was implicated with the institution of slavery: a fact moreover, which made that liberty on the one hand only an accidental, transient and limited growth; on the other hand, constituted it a rigorous thralldom of our common nature, of the human. The German nations, under the influence of Christianity, were the first to attain the consciousness that man, as man, is free: that it is the *freedom* of spirit which constitutes its essence.⁷

Ideal freedom, then, is not the proper domain of the particular nature of humans, but evolves only among those who become conscious of its existence.

Nevertheless, freedom requires duty. In order to be free, we must be rationally responsible. It is our duty to liberate ourselves from our passions and willingly restrain our natural impulses. In doing so we free ourselves from subjectivity and begin to participate with the Spirit, the *Geist*. "In duty," Hegel writes, "the individual acquires his substantive freedom."⁸ Thus, human virtue can only be attained by our uniting our minds with the universal mind, with that of the Spirit. It is attained when we recognize the *end* which moves us to act. It is attained when we know that our own dignity is grounded in the dignity of the Spirit. And for Hegel, this Spirit culminates in the state. It resides in those laws and customs that integrate the particular interests of individuals with the universal mind. Through thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the state has evolved to provide oneness with the *Geist*.

The *universal mind* of Hegel must not be confused with the *general will* of Rousseau. It does not represent the collective will of the people. It is in no manner dependent upon the particular wills of individuals. Rather, it is divine. It is the Absolute revealing itself to itself. Thus, Hegel scoffs at Locke and Rousseau and those who would suggest that individuals should share in the deliberations of the state. For Hegel the individual does not inform the state, the state informs the individual. In his book *Philosophy of Right*, he explains his reasoning:

To hold that every single person should share in deliberating and deciding on political matters of general concern on the ground that all individuals are members of the state, that its concerns are their concerns, and that it is their right that what is done should be done with their knowledge and volition, is tantamount to a proposal to put the democratic element without any rational form into the organism of the state, although it is only in virtue of the possession of such a form that the state is an organism at all. . . . The concrete state is the whole, articulated into its particular groups. The member of a state

is a member of such a group, i.e. of a social class, and it is only as characterized in this objective way that he comes under consideration when we are dealing with the state....

Another presupposition of the idea that all should participate in the business of the state is that everyone is at home in this business—a ridiculous notion, however commonly we may hear it sponsored....

Since the laws and institutions of the ethical order make up the concept of freedom, they are the substance or universal essence of individuals, who are thus related to them as accidents only. Whether the individual exists or not is all one to the objective ethical order. It alone is permanent and is the power regulating the life of individuals. Thus the ethical order has been represented by mankind as eternal justice, as gods absolutely existent, in contrast with which the empty business of individuals is only a game of see-saw.⁹

As is readily apparent, Hegel had little use for democracies, for to him the evolution of the state is the *march of God in the world*. It is not a reflection of the will of the people. It is the *Ideal* as it has evolved through history. It is the Absolute. It is God.

Who, then, should lead? In whom has the Absolute posited the authority to rule? What gives one the right to exact obedience from another?

For Hegel the answer is simple. In terms of the state, a monarch should lead. More specifically, a constitutional monarchy consisting of civil servants and representatives of the various classes that constitute civil society. A monarchy provides focus. It provides unity. "This ultimate self," he writes, "in which the will of the state is concentrated is, when thus taken in abstraction, a single self and therefore is *immediate* individuality."¹⁰ The state is saved from the risk of being drawn down into the sphere of diverse opinions. Moreover, under a monarch, leadership is always available. "This must happen," Hegel states, "since everything done and everything actual is inaugurated and brought to completion by the single decisive act of a leader."¹¹ He continues,

The rights of birth and inheritance constitute the basis of legitimacy, the basis of a right not purely positive but contained in the Idea.

If succession to the throne is rigidly determined, i.e. if it is heredity, then faction is obviated at a demise of the crown; this is one aspect of hereditary succession and it has long been rightly stressed as a point in its favour.¹²

In Hegel's mind the very presence of the monarch provides stability for the state, and it matters little who the monarch might be. Personal characteristics are insignificant:

Monarchy must be inherently stable and whatever else the monarch may have in addition to this power of final decision is part and parcel of his private character and should

be of no consequence. . . . In a well-organized monarchy, the objective aspect belongs to law alone, and the monarch's part is merely to set to the law the subjective 'I will.'

* * *

Monarchs are not exactly distinguished for bodily prowess or intellectual gifts, and yet millions submit to their rule. Now to say that men allow themselves to be ruled counter to their own interests, ends, and intentions is preposterous. Men are not so stupid. It is their need, it is the inner might of the Idea, which, even against what they appear to think, constrains them to obedience and keeps them in that relation.¹³

Others, of course, are required to carry out the functions of government. Regardless of the leadership position one might hold, however, Hegel insisted that one's qualifications be based on knowledge. "Those who know ought to govern—*hoi aristoi*, not ignorance and the presumptuous conceit of 'knowing better.'"¹⁴

Like Plato, Hegel's held that not all men are born with equal talents and abilities. *Not all men are born to lead:*

Men are made unequal by nature, where inequality is in its element, and in civil society the right of particularity is so far from annulling this natural inequality that it produces it out of mind and raises it to an inequality of skill and resources, and even to one of moral and intellectual attainment. To oppose to this right a demand for equality is a folly of the Understanding which takes as real and rational its abstract equality and its "ought-to-be."¹⁵

Thus, in order to address these inequalities among men, Hegel visualized three classes of citizens. The *substantial* or immediate (agriculture) class, those who work with the soil and harvest the crops, those whose work requires little reflection and independence of the will. The reflecting or *formal* (business) class, craftsmen, manufacturers, tradesmen, and bankers. The *universal* class, civil servants whose task was to address the needs of all citizens. Similar to Plato's philosopher-kings, members of the universal class were freed from physical labor in order that they might devote themselves exclusively to the good of all citizens.

Hegel did not, however, define his classes as a caste system in which one's birth determines the boundaries of his profession. Instead, he taught that one's station in life should be determined by his natural endowments in combination with the passion of his individual will:

A man actualizes himself only in becoming something definite, i.e. something specifically particularized; this means restricting himself exclusively to one of the particular spheres of need. In this class system, the ethical frame of mind therefore is rectitude and

esprit de corps, i.e. the disposition to make oneself a member of one of the moments of civil society by one's own act, through one's energy, industry, and skill, to maintain oneself in this position, and to fend for oneself only through this process of mediating oneself with the universal, while in this way gaining recognition both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of others.¹⁶

Even though Hegel structured individuals into classes, he readily acknowledged certain rights among men regardless of the class to which they might belong. All humans have the right to their own person, to their life; thus, no one should be required to be the slave of another. All have the right to choose a profession within the limitations of their individual abilities. All have the right to private property. All have the right to commerce, to enter into agreements with one another. For Hegel, however, such rights were not based on natural law as proposed by Hobbes and Locke or on convention as noted by Rousseau. Instead, they were based upon the awareness of a higher consciousness.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, this higher consciousness had yet to affirm an equality between men and women. Even though a Platonist, Hegel drew significant distinctions regarding their abilities:

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy, and certain forms of artistic production. Women may have happy ideas, taste, and elegance, but they cannot attain to the ideal. The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling. When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions. Women are educated—who knows how?—as it were by breathing ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.¹⁷

In summary, then, Hegel's understanding of the leadership dyad becomes more clear. Like Plato, he believed that only the most intelligent, the *hoi aristoi*, those whose consciousness have awakened to the universal mind should assume roles of leadership. For the monarch, leadership is a right of birth; for others, it reflects a combination of natural ability and individual will. As such, Hegel's perspective concerning the dialectic of the universal mind throughout history supports the contentions of his early Greek predecessors that *leaders are born, not made*. Only he takes their proposition a step

further. Not only does he recognize the talent *within* individuals that give rise to their *potential* to lead, he also acknowledges the converging forces of history that provide them the *opportunity* to lead. Will Durant explains the process as follows:

Great men are not so much begetters, as midwives, of the future; what they bring forth is mothered by the *Zeitgeist*, the Spirit of the Age. The genius merely places another stone on the pile, as others have done; 'somehow his has the good fortune to come last, and when he places his stone the arch stands self-supported.' 'Such individuals had no consciousness of the general Idea they were unfolding; . . . but they had an insight into the requirements of the time—what was ripe for development. This was the very Truth for their age, for their world; the species next in order, so to speak, and which was already formed in the womb of time.'¹⁸

Without question, there are many illustrations regarding leaders who share Hegel's view of the leadership dyad. There are many who acknowledge that their roles as leaders were thrust upon them. They merely play out a role given them by destiny, by the *Geist*. For example, when discussing the rebellion in Czechoslovakia, then newly elected Czech President Vaclav Havel commented,

The entire revolution is a peculiar drama, which no earthling could have written. It has features from all genres: it is an absurd play, it is a Greek tragedy, it is a Goldonian farce, it is a fairy tale. And I am only a second assistant to the director, or maybe one of the actors. . . . This was not my choice, it was fate. But I accept it, and try to do something for my country because I live here.¹⁹

Yet, Havel is but one example of how leaders within Western culture have been influenced by Hegel. When American political leaders of the nineteenth century based the annexation of Texas as well as its subsequent expansion of the United States throughout North America on *Manifest Destiny*, were they not acknowledging agreement with Hegel? When Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that his generation had a *rendezvous with destiny*, was he not basing his assertions on the teachings of Hegel?

Likewise, when leaders acknowledge that their *time has come*, are they not acknowledging a belief that somehow Providence has given them the *ability* as well as the *opportunity* to lead? Are they not recognizing the Spirit of their Age? The *Geist*? The Source that drives the universal mind? Are they not stating that regardless of the innate talents leaders might possess, without the timely emergence of situational forces they would not have become leaders? Without chaos in the Roman Catholic Church, would Luther have posted his

ninety-five theses in Wittenburg? Without Hitler would Churchill have been proclaimed a hero among leaders of the free world? Without racial tension in the United States, would Martin Luther King have become a martyr for social justice? Without the historical evolution of advanced technology, would Bill Gates have emerged as the guru of contemporary capitalism? Not according to Hegel. Just as the individual mind and the universal mind are one, so too is the leader and the situation in which he finds himself. Both are interconnected parts of the unfolding of an *Absolute*.

The same is true for those leaders who believe that struggle is a painful yet necessary component of achievement, that change is necessary for progress, that man's consciousness is elevated only through the synthesis of opposition. According to Hegel there can be no progress without conflict. Satisfaction brings stagnation. Conflict, whether it be in the boardroom or the state room, is the driving force of achievement.

Equally important, the same is true for all who believe that mankind continues to inch forward toward *Ideal* freedom. Slowly, perhaps. Step by step. Conflict by conflict. Synthesis by synthesis. Whether in Yugoslavia or Pakistan, whether in Israel or Tibet, the conflict is never over. Out of every synthesis evolves a new antithesis. Always painful; yet, always forward. There is more freedom today than there was yesterday; there will be more tomorrow than there is today. Everything at any moment in time is exactly as it should be as man continues to evolve in his consciousness of *Ideal* freedom. And our leaders are the midwives of our future as they play out their roles in the unfolding of the universe.

Certainly, not all would agree with Hegel. Nevertheless, his influence regarding our understanding of leadership has been significant, for his thought would lead Western man in a direction dramatically different from those philosophers who had preceded him. His advancement of the dialectic would serve as the basis of a political philosophy that would alter the course of history in Eastern Europe. Yet, the dialectic that would follow would not be rooted in the *Geist*. Instead, it would be based on economics; its driving force would be materialism. Again, our paradigm for leadership would shift.

Notes

1. S. E. Frost, Jr., *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1962), 258-259.
2. Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, as reprinted in *Great Books of the Western Mind*, Vol. 46, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 157.
3. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 381.
4. Hegel, 171-172.
5. Ibid., 165.
6. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Time Inc. Books Division, 1962), 277.
7. Hegel, 161.
8. Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, as reprinted in *Great Books of the Western Mind*, Vol. 46, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 56.
9. Georg W. F. Hegel, "Philosophy of Law," in William Ebenstein and Alan O. Ebenstein, eds, *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to the Present*, 5th ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1991), 695-696.
10. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 94.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 95.
13. Ibid., 146.
14. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 368.
15. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 67.
16. Ibid., 69.
17. Ibid., 134.
18. Durant, 277.
19. Richard Z. Chesnoff, "The Prisoner Who Took the Castle," *U.S. News & World Report*, February 26, 1990: 33.