

Time & History in Hegelian Thought & Spirit. Sally Sedgwick, Oxford University Press, 2023, 208 pages, £ 60.00, ISBN: 9780192889751

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As the title suggests, Sally Sedgwick's new book revolves around two of the most enduring and intricately connected themes in Hegel's thought: time and history. These themes have already figured in Sedgwick's earlier work – at least in a preliminary way – particularly in relation to Hegel's philosophy of history (Sedgwick 2010; Sedgwick 2015). The book appears at a particularly timely moment, amid a growing wave of interest in the notions of history and historicity in Hegel, explored from multiple angles over the past two decades (Houlgate 2005; more recently Morani 2019 and Pinkard 2017). At the same time, philosophical inquiry into the concept of time – especially within the context of the philosophy of nature – has been gaining remarkable traction (Erle 2001; Grieser 2005; Ruggiu 2013).

Sedgwick's study is the first monograph to weave these two lines of inquiry together within a Hegelian framework. The result is a work of striking originality. What makes this book particularly compelling is its engagement with some of the most difficult and often paradoxical issues in Hegel's thought: the tension between necessity and freedom, the specter of fatalism, and the very conditions for human autonomy and knowledge. While these questions have long animated Hegel scholarship – often approached through action theory or readings of world history (as in Alznauer 2015) – Sedgwick offers a fresh and original analysis. She traces these problems back to Hegel's own conception of time and history, bringing the threads together with remarkable clarity and philosophical insight.

The volume is structured into seven chapters, preceded by an introduction. Without aiming to provide an exhaustive account, the following pages will outline Sedgwick's main themes and arguments, following the structure of her text and highlighting, where appropriate, elements that warrant particular critical attention.

In the Introduction, Sedgwick draws attention to a key insight that sets the tone for the entire book: Hegel's major works – including the *Science of Logic* – unfold as developmental narratives, moving from the abstract to the concrete. This structure reflects Hegel's dialectical view of reality, in which even the most abstract concepts

acquire meaning through their developmental unfolding. Rather than taking this narrative form for granted, Sedgwick asks a fundamental question: why does Hegel structure his works this way? Her answer points to a deep connection between Hegel's historical sensibility and his conception of reason as something that develops over time, in and through the world. At the heart of the book lies a bold and provocative thesis: human reason and freedom are not timeless ideals but historical achievements – shaped, tested, and realized through their temporal and worldly conditions. Time and history, Sedgwick argues, are not merely the backdrop of thought, but constitutive of it. In challenging the idea that we can step outside our historical situation when we think or act, she places the embeddedness of spirit and thought firmly at the center of philosophical reflection.

In the opening chapter, *History and Human Finitude: Kant versus Hegel*, Sedgwick begins to articulate a central claim of the book: that freedom is temporally conditioned. Through a careful comparison between Kant and Hegel, Sedgwick shows that while both thinkers affirm moral progress and the centrality of human freedom, their approaches diverge in decisive ways. Kant maintains that the goal of history remains ultimately unknowable. In his 1784 *Idea for a Universal History*, he argues that history can only be read through a regulative idea: empirical evidence is insufficient, and progress must be posited a priori. Yet, despite the seeming chaos of history, Kant glimpses signs of development in the species as a whole. This tension yields a vision of history driven by hope – a hopeful teleology grounded in our “unsocial sociability”, which spurs reason but never guarantees its triumph. Hegel, by contrast, insists that reason is both finite and historically actual. While not reducible to empirical facts, freedom unfolds through the real, and history makes it knowable. Here too conflict plays a decisive role – through war – and history, guided by the cunning of reason, becomes the site where freedom is realized concretely. As is well known, Hegel argues that the idea of freedom must be both philosophically justified and historically realized, and is therefore, for him, knowable – in contrast to Kant, who maintains that we cannot have theoretical knowledge of our freedom, but only postulate it as a condition of moral action. Both thinkers adopt a broadly teleological outlook and acknowledge the limits of human knowledge. Both combine a priori reasoning with attention to empirical reality. Yet Sedgwick stresses a crucial divergence: Kant treats moral progress as an unrealized ideal, perpetually

deferred; Hegel sees it as an actuality in the making. For Kant, freedom remains fundamentally unknowable; for Hegel, the denial of its knowability is evidence of a defective metaphysics.

In the second chapter, *Hegel's "Philosophic" Approach to World History*, Sedgwick turns to Hegel's hybrid method, which balances a teleological view of history – partly inherited from Kant – with a commitment to grounding historical development in actual events. While Hegel acknowledges that the concepts of philosophy of history are *a priori* in some respect, he insists that philosophical history must also answer to empirical reality. Reason, for Hegel, is historical: every concept, however rational, is shaped by the world in which it arises. World history, then, is the unfolding of spirit – whose essence is freedom – as it takes increasingly concrete form in human societies governed by law. History begins when spirit becomes aware of its own freedom and its need for self-determination. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel distinguishes three forms of historical writing: original, reflective, and philosophical. Original history offers firsthand, descriptive accounts, with little critical distance. Reflective history, which interprets past events, includes several subtypes – universal, pragmatic, critical, and specialized – each seeking meaning but often drifting into subjectivism or failing to separate the necessary from the contingent. Hegel's understanding of philosophical history, by contrast, aims to mediate these approaches, offering a conceptually rigorous account of human development. Drawing on Kant's insight that we interpret the world through categories, Hegel nonetheless rejects Kant's skepticism about the purpose of history. Thought and reality, for Hegel, are mutually entangled. History is not rational by presupposition but becomes intelligible through reflection – a process in which subjective understanding and objective structure converge.

In the third chapter, *Necessity in Hegel's Philosophy of History*, Sedgwick addresses a fundamental tension in Hegel's thought: if history unfolds necessarily, how can it still be a domain of freedom? Rejecting strong fatalistic readings, she argues that for Hegel, it is precisely freedom that gives history its necessity. Freedom, in his view, is not merely subjective but becomes objective – realized through historical development itself. Hegel's method, Sedgwick shows, operates on both conceptual and empirical levels. While concepts mediate our grasp of facts, historical claims must remain accountable to actual events. She surveys various notions of necessity – causal, logical, and conditional

– ultimately focusing on a form of conceptual necessity grounded in freedom. Moreover, Sedgwick identifies three key senses in which Hegel conceives historical necessity: first, world history abstracts from individual particularities to address humanity as a whole; second, it rejects blind causality in favour of rational, purposive development; third, it demands systematic coherence, with freedom serving as the unifying principle that gives the process philosophical rigor and scientific respectability. While Hegel inherits from Kant the emphasis on final causality, he departs from him in claiming that purposiveness is not merely a regulative idea but something knowable and active in nature and self-conscious beings. Historical necessity, then, is not mechanical but teleological: freedom is both history's aim and its measure. Contingency, far from being denied, is absorbed into the dialectical unfolding. Sedgwick concludes that Hegel articulates a form of necessity that does not suppress moral agency, but rather makes it possible – a vision of freedom realized through a teleological logic that gives history its inner necessity.

The fourth chapter, *Hegel's Fatalism as a Theory of Freedom*, deepens the inquiry into how Hegel reconciles historical necessity with human freedom. Sedgwick contends that even if Hegel can be said to adopt a form of fatalism, it is neither blind nor externally imposed. Rather, it is an immanent and intelligible fatalism – one in which freedom is not denied but affirmed as the very principle that imparts necessity to historical development. Unlike traditional conceptions of fate – unknowable and inescapable in ancient thought, or external and consolatory in modern religious narratives – Hegel's vision sees history as *our* destiny, but one shaped from within, by human reason and agency. He thus rejects mechanical causality in favour of final causality: events unfold with purpose, directed toward the realization of freedom. Sedgwick emphasizes Hegel's selective engagement with both ancient and Christian sources: from the ancients, he inherits an aware and positive confrontation with necessity; from Christianity, a sense of revelation. Yet he ultimately distances himself from both traditions in refusing to see fate as either mysterious or imposed from without. For Hegel, history is something we can understand – and participate in shaping. Thus, philosophical history must attend to what is substantial, without denying the role of contingency. In this light, Hegel's fatalism is not a resignation but a framework in which freedom is realized through necessity. History unfolds as the progressive manifestation of freedom – a process at once determined and open to human agency.

The fifth chapter, *Freedom's Necessary Limits*, deepens Sedgwick's analysis of Hegel's concept of freedom, emphasizing its fundamentally historical and natural character. Human freedom, she argues, does not originate from abstract reason or innate principles, but emerges over time, shaped by the contingencies of world history. Concepts, laws, and institutions – far from being merely *a priori* – are historical achievements. For Hegel, freedom is not a transcendent or disembodied power. A key contribution of this chapter is Sedgwick's demonstration that, for Hegel, freedom arises not in opposition to our animal nature, but from within it. However, while animals display forms of self-relation and inner life, only human beings possess a form of freedom mediated by consciousness and will – a moral and reflective freedom, to borrow Hans Jonas's term. Against Kant's dualism, Hegel offers a vision of a continuous nature in which freedom is a latent potential, realized only through history. Though rooted in our natural being, freedom is never reducible to it – an insight that, we may add, anticipates developments in 20th-century philosophy (Jonas 1966). This connection between nature and history allows Sedgwick to compellingly bridge Hegel's Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of History, showing how freedom is both naturally given and historically achieved. In the state of nature, freedom is however undeveloped: without institutions, conflict leads to violence, and justice becomes private. Yet such conflict is also the engine of progress, forcing the creation of new ethical forms. In Ethical Life, the will recognizes itself as the source of right, and new content emerges through historical struggle. Like a seed that contains the full form of the plant, freedom exists in nature as potential, but only history can bring it to fruition.

In the sixth chapter, *Thought's Temporality*, Sedgwick marks a turning point in her reading of Hegel by arguing that contingency is not merely accidental but fundamental to reality. She extends her central thesis by arguing that temporality is essential to Hegel's system as a whole: only by acknowledging spirit's temporal character we can grasp the full creative power of freedom. Taking contingency seriously, Sedgwick sheds new light on three key Hegelian commitments: the knowability of historical purpose, a freedom-compatible fatalism, and the demonstrability of human freedom. She anticipates common objections to Hegel's idea that "the actual is rational", particularly the concern that this implies everything that happens is justified. But Sedgwick stresses that for Hegel, rationality is not about endorsing every event – he fully recognizes

historical violence and tragedy. Avoiding the trap of reading Hegel as a positivist, she shows that rational norms are historically shaped – not reducible to prevailing opinion nor derived from pure reason alone. The rational and the actual, she argues, stand in dynamic interdependence. Thus, Hegel's logical categories, though grounded in pure thought, are historically contingent in content. As is well known, philosophy, for Hegel, is its time grasped in thought: always belated, always historical. Even the most abstract concepts emerge from within the world. However, in Sedgwick's reading, Hegel trusts in the self-correcting power of finite reason – history itself is the medium through which the actual can come to embody the rational.

The final chapter, *Coda: Permanence in Hegelian Thought and Spirit*, weaves together the key threads of Sedgwick's argument: that thought and freedom are deeply shaped by temporality, yet not reducible to historical flux. Sedgwick convincingly shows that, for Hegel, the rational is rooted in the actual, and that freedom unfolds historically in response to concrete conditions. But she also pushes back against the idea that Hegel embraces pure fluidity. While thought is dialectical and dynamic, Hegel retains a strong emphasis on permanence and necessity. This, Sedgwick argues, is not a contradiction but a complement to the thesis of temporality. Even Hegel's Logic can be read as tracing the development of concepts – from abstract to concrete – while the Concept itself remains constant: freedom, the essence of spirit, endures through change. Hegel thus affirms a dialectical permanence: thought evolves, but it also preserves, through *Aufhebung*, what came before. The past is never lost, but actively shapes the present. Sedgwick closes by addressing a final tension: in what sense is spirit said to annul time in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*? Hegel's spirit does not escape history but rather achieves a form of permanence beyond temporal immediacy. On the one hand, concepts retain a permanent form through time; on the other, the advance of history preserves the past. Spirit, then, remains historical – yet it also carries a kind of philosophical permanence.

The implications of Sedgwick's interpretation are far-reaching. Most notably, she presents a Hegel who refuses the rigid divide between empirical history and pure reason. In her hands, reason is not a timeless faculty detached from the world, but something that emerges through its entanglement with nature, history, and social life. This Hegel resists dualism and offers instead a vision of rationality that is both historically embedded and normatively robust. Crucially, Sedgwick does not sacrifice permanence for the sake of

change. On the contrary, she shows that in Hegel's thought, necessity and contingency, permanence and temporality, are not opposed but coexistent. The result is a Hegel who moves beyond the a priori/a posteriori divide, embracing a form of thought that is dynamic, historical, and yet philosophically rigorous.

In *Time & History in Hegelian Thought & Spirit*, Sedgwick offers more than a reinterpretation – she reframes the very terms through which Hegel is often misunderstood. Against the cliché of Hegel as excessively abstract or complicit in justifying the *status quo*, she gives us a thinker whose spirit and thought unfold *within time, shaped by history* rather than standing above it. For anyone seeking a deeper, more faithful, and more provocative understanding of Hegel, this is an essential and illuminating book.

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