

Owls of Minerva

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Hegel on the relation of philosophy to life

Philosophy always comes too late to instruct, to say in a word what the world should be. The world, in time, first appears as thought only after its formative action has completed and shaped its actuality. What the concept teaches, history also essentially shows, that the ideal appears vis-à-vis the real only with the maturation of reality, and in the intellectual sphere these together build up the form of the world, determined in its substance. When philosophy paints it gray on gray, then a form of life has become old and cannot rejuvenate itself with gray on gray; it can only diagnose and be aware of itself. The Owl of Minerva first begins its flight with the encroaching twilight.

G.W.F. Hegel. *Elements of the philosophy of right*, Foreword (McClintock, trans.).

We cannot comprehend the forms of life now working towards their fulfillment through all the churning activities in our historical experience. Every form is immanent in the actualities we are living, immediate and infinite, imperious in time, boundless in scope. Each will become ripe for reflection only as it has come to completion, to the full realization of the possibilities inherent in it. Here, then, we face a question. If thought follows fulfillment, how, then, can it serve life? It does so, not by telling us what to choose. It does so by sharpening our judgment, informing our choosing. For this purpose, we study *the Owls of Minerva*.

Over and over again in historical experience, polities, cultures, communities, cities, enterprises, families, persons — all of them, forms of life — have arisen, developed, and reached a vital consummation, a flowering, an optimum, perhaps extending for a time before their onset of decline, transformation, or death. With these historical fulfillments, when people have achieved the peak possibilities in their forms of life, thoughtful reflection can then recognize the generative principles that worked to make the life form what it was able to become. What

reflection discloses may be tinged with regrets, proud dignity, a sense of wonder, but whatever the tone, reflection will be elegiac: these were things that were and these were the generative strengths and weaknesses through which people made them what they were. That is what the Owls of Minerva can recognize. What can we, living our lives still in a state of incompleteness, learn from those who looked back from a state of closure?

Each form of life — past, present, and future — was, is, and will be unique. Hence the Owls, reflecting on the formative actions that inherently shaped their unique historical experience, cannot teach those now forming anew their unique historical lives *what the world should be*. The Owls nevertheless can yield insight into the trials that people undergo, the actions they bring to bear in forming lifeworlds as best they can.

A nascent life — think of an infant — has a vast spectrum of possible experience. The child, the youth, the adult will make all sorts of choices and commitments, from the minor to the important, which will transform the possible experience into a life fully lived. Each of those choices and commitments will have particular purposes, which may or may not succeed, but each will also have formative influence affecting, not the particular purpose, but the person's capacities for further choices and commitments. Those effects will not really be evident until the occasion for the further deeds has come to pass, disclosing what the effects on the person's capacities had really been. Thus, to take an extreme, very simple example, the addict believes he can manage his addiction, enjoying the high without suffering longterm degradation of his abilities or resources, until some change in circumstances forces a change in the apparent equilibrium. Then the formative effects of the addiction start to surface. Far more subtle formative effects suffuse life, personal and collective, and these, holistically, are what Owls seek to comprehend.

Closure, the encroaching twilight, enabled the Owls to understand what Hegel called the "*Bildungsprozess*," historical experience denoted by *Bildung* — that is, forming, cultivating, educating — combined with *Prozess* — that is, a trial, an action, lawsuit, litigation, proceeding. The *Bildungsprozess* is not some natural development that unfolds according to some inherent course independent of human agency. It delimits teeming activities that form, shape, cultivate, and educate; with each working through a *Prozess*, not a process, through complex actions, innumerable efforts brought to trial, a point of decision, many

proceedings with diverse litigants, all of which culminate with existential force. The Owls of Minerva inform us about the formative actions they can see, looking back, that shaped, well and ill, the historical experience endured by a form of life. The understanding they can convey does not teach us what to do; but their reflective insight may enable us, their autonomous students, to judge more clearly how to conduct our own formative proceedings, our *Bildungsprozesse*, as we work to bring our own possibilities to fulfillment in our turn. The Owls can sensitize people to the feedbacks with which they exercise judgment in making existential decisions.

Who are the Owls of Minerva? This is a question of some complexity. The historical record is long and includes the work of powerful thinkers who looked on the many past life-forms with a sense of closure, of completion. Of the many, we can name a few exemplars: the great thinkers of classical Greece — Thucydides and Plato; Roman Stoics from Cicero to Marcus Aurelius; Dante; Machiavelli discoursing on the first ten books of Livy; Montaigne and Montesquieu; many critical thinkers at the cascading close of the *ancien régime* — Rousseau, Kant, Mendelssohn, Goethe, Hegel himself, among others; Nietzsche and Henry Adams; as well as diverse recent possibilities. But naming names, perhaps necessary, must not narrow our attention excessively. As living persons, those named and innumerable other Owls, could not know for certain that the life forms of interest to them were at their apogee. Only death unmistakably signals that any life form has passed the point of historical fulfillment and collective agents do not clearly die. Hence, in the flesh, Owls usually sense, not full closure, but a dimming dusk, and reflect *as if* a form of life had consummated its possibilities. Subsequently, some of them experience a kind of historical grace through which they stand out as members of the elect because further hindsight proved their anticipation, their *as if*, to have been correct.

Hence, in the flesh, Owls are thinkers who exhibit a characteristic discipline of mind. They think about life forms *as if* historical fulfillment were at hand. Thinking Owls, launching into flight, forego instructing the world how it should be. They assume closure: this form of life is what it could become, which enables them to diagnose the shaping interactions through which people made it what it has become. So we must ask again, Who are the Owls? They are people who work with this discipline of mind, and hence the historical record teems with many different Owls who have reflected on the crafting of many forms of life.

Innumerable forms of life seem to reach closure, from the lives of persons to those of epochs and empires. They may not be at a literal end, dead and finished. After consummation, many persist. If not in fact, at least in memory, but if actually consummated, their possibilities would have been fully disclosed and the persistence would merely be a continuation, devoid of further historical creation. For each, the *Bildungsprozess*, the formative action, may have achieved completion, and assuming that, for each form of life, Owls are incessantly critiquing the formative actions through which people may have brought their form of life to the fulfillment of the possibilities and limitations it evidences.

But in life, Owls hunt as well as hoot. Life forms are highly diverse, a kaleidoscope of vital potentialities. As a person living in historical time, an Owl often has special agendas, commitments that do not follow from an assumption of historic consummation but reflect instead a particular, partial purpose. It is not through these self-assertions in the world that a person becomes an Owl, however. A person becomes an Owl, not through particular programmatic efforts, but through the perception that some life form of importance was passing beyond its point of fulfillment. Sensing that historical circumstances harbored an accomplished form of life, one that had filled its possibilities out, the Owl can explicate the formative actions through which it had become what it was. Thus, for instance, Karl Marx could have two incarnations, one as an Owl and the other as a Revolutionary.

In doing their retrospective work, the Owls of Minerva do not generate a progressive body of knowledge, one that asymptotically approaches truth. Their reflections do not generate knowledge, objective or instrumental. Instead, their considerations inform judgment. People read biographies — accounts of a person in determinate circumstances, shaping a life exemplary in some way or other — not in search of knowledge, but to sharpen their awareness and discrimination. But beyond the lives of persons, many collective life forms are brought to fulfillment as many persons shape significant efforts through their exercise of judgment, sometimes sound and sometimes not. Owls contemplate and critique all these *Bildungsprozesse*, all these efforts cultivating the capacities with which a vast range of life forms work to bring their possibilities to fruition. Many of these reflections are historically distinguished and hence known well to many readers. But most readers are not themselves Owls, and therein lies the problem. People poorly grasp the work of Owls for what it is. They seek useful knowledge, not

sharpened judgment. Consequently, the work of Owls is often not grasped as such, as reflection by thinkers who have sensed the fulfillment of one or another life form and have turned to comprehend the formative action, the *Bildungsprozeß*, through which it became what it was able to become.

Instead, readers often correctly perceive that reflections on the shaping of important life forms do not try to say what the world should be, and they pass over them, believing them irrelevant to life. For instance, formative action as an historical phenomenon has largely escaped the attention of educators. Philosophers among them work with a narrow canon, considered a-historically. Historians among them concentrate on the life forms of formal education, ironically almost never from the perspective of historical closure. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences usually seek to generate knowledge, not to inform judgment, and therefore pay little attention to how the *Bildungsprozeß* has shaped the forms of life. There are of course distinguished exceptions, but despite those there are great gaps in our understanding of how formative action has worked in historical life. And these gaps may be widening for *the historical school*, once important in fields like economics, sociology, law, and theology, slipped into thorough eclipse during the 20th century.

Even more often, people misapprehend what prominent Owls have had to say, taking diagnosis as prescription and finding it incomprehensible, even perverse. The work of Owls involves *concept formation*, not theory generation, and one neither validates nor falsifies a concept, and one does not try to actualize it, alchemically transmuting the ideal into the real. But all too often important thinkers have wrongly construed reflection on the *Bildungsprozeß* and anathematized peers like Plato, Rousseau, and Hegel. Many concepts that serve to describe with some care what has happened in the *Bildungsprozeß* will appear very dangerous if taken as statements of what the world should be.

In conclusion, let us ask, is the twilight encroaching? Our world hums with proclamations — post-modernity, post-capitalist, post-industrial, etc. These are only signs, which each must make of what he will. But in addition, we can engage in the *as if* and consider the *Bildungsprozeß* taking all things into account, *as if* our life forms, our possibilities, are fully consummated.

- Are the formative actions shaping our world robust and well-directed?
- If our possibilities are fulfilled is it because there is nothing in our form of life left to do, has it all been actualized, filled out, brought to closure?

- In this reflective mood, it might be well to ask why, if we are at closure, that condition has come to pass?
- And in doing so, would it be unreasonable to wonder whether somehow in our form of life we have pursued endless ends in view to the point where we have lost control of the *Bildungsprozess* itself?
- Have we compounded historical complexities with which we must deal on pain of suffering the consequences without having taken concomitant care for shaping our powers of judgment well enough to make the decisions that we face?
- Does the twilight encroach, not because there are no more possibilities worth trying to achieve, but because our capacities for formative action no longer suffice for forming the will to do what might be done?

These are questions to which we will try to respond through *OwlsOfMinerva.org*. The website will create a working community for serious scholars who want raise the scope and quality of work elucidating the *Bildungsprozess*. Educational leaders obsessively proclaim, in contradictory voices, what the world should be. Parents, educators, and the public adopt diverse nostrums without deep attention to long-term formative effects. Owls cannot fix that. Around the world they are untimely and a dearth of attention to the quality of judgment with which we act. *OwlsOfMinerva.org* is a website for persons who want to study the *Bildungsprozess* fully and rigorously. It is a place for sumitting serious essays, unconstrained by prior restraints, to a community of informed and sympathetic commentators. It is a site to assemble and comment on classic examinations of the *Bildungsprozess*. It is a venue for diverse scholars who are disperse geographically of to meet regularly online to share ideas and drive each other's work to higher levels.

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1. G.W.F. Hegel. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, "Vorrede", p. 26-7. (Werke. Band 7, Frankfurt,1979) . Zeno.org.

Um noch über das Belehren, **wie die Welt sein soll**, ein Wort zu sagen, so kommt dazu ohnehin die Philosophie immer zu spät. Als der Gedanke der Welt erscheint sie erst in der Zeit, nachdem die Wirklichkeit ihren **Bildungsprozess** vollendet und sich fertig gemacht hat. Dies, was der Begriff lehrt, zeigt notwendig ebenso die Geschichte, daß erst in der Reife der Wirklichkeit das Ideale dem Realen gegenüber erscheint und jenes sich dieselbe Welt, in ihrer Substanz erfaßt, in Gestalt eines intellektuellen Reichs erbaut. Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt, dann ist eine **Gestalt des**

Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau in Grau lässt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur **erkennen**; die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der **einbrechenden Dämmerung** ihren Flug.

2. For a classic explication of such formative influences, showing the interconnection of the personal and the public in what can happen, review Plato's description of the transformations in personal and political character in Book 8 of the *Republic*.
 3. See, for instance, *How economics forgot history: the problem of historical specificity in social science* by Geoffrey M. Hodgson (London ; New York : Routledge, 2001).
 4. A prominent example was *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by Karl Popper (1945), which Princeton University Press has recently reissued and touted as "one of the most important books of the twentieth century."
 5. For kicks, check out the English Wiktionary " Category:English words prefixed with post-", 522 of them as of November 11, 2014.
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