
Ernst Troeltsch's Critique of Hegel: Normative Thought and History

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Introduction

Hegel's philosophy is as well known to us through the assessment of his detractors as from sympathetic readings. From Schelling's earliest critique to Karl Popper's diatribe we are afforded a range of criticism that reveals the unsettling tension that has led authors, in some cases, to wholeheartedly denounce Hegel's philosophical approach.¹

Not all negative critiques have been wholesale refutations of Hegel's system. Most have argued that Hegel's approach to history violates the fundamental premise upon which all history and historiography must turn—individuality. Leopold von Ranke, who disputed both Hegel's view of history and of God, laid the groundwork for subsequent critiques like Ernst Troeltsch's. Accordingly, the footing for Troeltsch's attack on Hegel lies in an un-

*Hegel misses
importance of
individuality
in history.*

¹ See especially Popper's argument against what he defines as Hegel's historicism in *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1957) and the more sweeping critique of Hegelianism as the foundation for totalitarianism in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 2, (Princeton, 1962). Kierkegaard's ironically tinged critique of Hegel's "existential system" is perhaps most well known, but the sarcasm in Kierkegaard was not unique. See, for example, Robert Flint's analysis of Hegel's philosophy in *The Philosophy of History in France and Germany* first published in 1874; see especially page 529 where Hegel is mocked for the "world-spirit's" tendency to eclipse the passions of individuals in the realization of its own freedom. "Why," Flint asked, "instead of creating humanity, and sacrificing the most of it, and toiling slowly and painfully through nations and ages, did the spirit not create Hegel alone, and find out what it wanted at once?"

derstanding of historical methodology to which Ranke devoted most of his theoretical speculation. Although Troeltsch would eventually advocate methods departing from Ranke's call for *Unparteilichkeit*, or objective reconstruction, he held Ranke in the highest esteem.² At times Troeltsch expresses an antagonism toward Hegel that seems paradoxical, but in some instances he cannot resist his debt to Hegel's conception of the dialectical complexity of history. Troeltsch was especially opposed to Hegel's eclipse of the individual in history, but, along with Hegel, Troeltsch was motivated by the intuition that history provides the necessary material presence from which totality and completion can be actualized, a completion and totality, he emphasized, that history forms from within itself.

For Hegel,
reason
constitutive of
reality.

An historical reading of Hegel means that we must regard his philosophy in light of Kant's epistemology.³ In reforming Kant's understanding of consciousness and experience, Hegel attempted to restore some sense of classical metaphysics to philosophy in that he historicized the Logos.⁴ Above all, Hegel's system redressed the Kantian tenet that consciousness has merely a regulative function. Hegel advanced the idea that reason was constitutive of reality; his understanding of the tenability of the unmediated contact between the subject and object of consciousness was a direct assault on Kant's program. In turn, however, the neo-Kantian movement that swept Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth century quickly rejected Hegel's system and restored cred-

² See Georg Iggers's accounts of Ranke in *The German Conception of History*, (Wesleyan Press, 1968) and his article "The Image of Ranke in Germany and America," *History and Theory*, Summer 1975, for an understanding of Ranke's ambiguous status. Troeltsch repeatedly refers to Ranke as the "master" of historiography in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, but he ultimately agreed with Ranke's most outspoken critics that history must begin with the past's awakening a special interest in the contemporary historical observer. This formulation of history runs throughout Troeltsch's body of work. For example, in asking what the purpose of all history is, Troeltsch adamantly claimed that it is to understand the present (*Protestantism and Progress*, translated by W. D. Montgomery [Boston, 1912], 3).

³ Gadamer agrees with R. Wiehl's assessment of Hegel, i.e., *The Phenomenology* cannot be understood without reference to Kant. See chapter 2, "Hegel's Inverted World," in *Hegel's Dialectic*. Gadamer quotes from Wiehl's article in *Hegel-Studien*, supplement 3, 1964, 103ff.

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of this understanding, see Tillich's interpretation of Hegel in *The Interpretation of History* (New York, 1936).

ibility to Kant's philosophical gain, the productivity of the epistemological self.⁵ Within this circle of mutual critique Ernst Troeltsch's response to Hegel insightfully acknowledged the tension that drove Schelling and Kierkegaard in their efforts to counter Hegel's insinuation that an "existential system" was not only tenable, but a matter of historical outcome. Troeltsch, who is known in theological circles for his major work on the social teachings of Christianity, delivered a broadside against Hegel in his culminating work on history and historiography, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (1922). But throughout the course of his literary output one can trace the development of his later and more incisive critique.⁶

⁵ See Herbert Schnaedelbach's *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*, translated by Eric Matthews, (Cambridge, 1984), especially page 6. Schnaedelbach views the Kantian renaissance in light of the political tensions in Germany during this period. He argues that the call back to Kant was almost independently guided by Hegel's expression: "what is real is the rational, and what is rational is the real." It is no wonder that this synoptic grasp of Hegel's philosophy has stimulated such controversy. Within the context of Hegel's methodology, or understanding of the manner in which philosophy should be a science, there is an obvious contradiction. Doesn't Hegel's insistence on the special ability of the dialectic to preserve, negate, and transcend suggest that the striving for "actual" knowledge should naturally involve the sublation of previous forms of thought? In that case, the provocative tenet contained in *Philosophie des Rechts* represents an assault on the nature of the *Aufgehoben*, so critical to Hegel's scheme. The identity of thought and being, contained in this formulation of Hegel's philosophy, can only be a momentary gain in light of the movement of *Aufhebung*.

⁶ Troeltsch was well known for his participation in liberal theological circles at the turn of the century. He was associated with Ritschl's liberal theology and the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, but eventually left this "circle," since it did not fully appreciate the repercussions of historical-critical methods for comparative religion. See Troeltsch's article "The Dogmatics of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*," *The American Journal of Theology*, January 1913, Volume XVII, Number 1, for his understanding of this movement. Troeltsch's final work on historicism is a compendium of articles, some of which had been previously published. *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* was the first of an anticipated two-volume work, and primarily dealt with a formal logic of history, identified as "the irrational logic of the new and creative," in contrast to Hegel's rationalistic logic. Though the majority of this volume consists of a sweeping critique of historical theory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the most original part is Troeltsch's formulation of a logic of history. Both Troeltsch's critique and formal logic of history are understandable in light of the larger refutation of Hegel's system. In the end, Troeltsch did not find complete satisfaction with any one theory of history. In fact, those thinkers of whom he most approved did not directly address either history or historiography. The second volume, which was never started, was to consist of a material philosophy of history. It is anticipated in what he referred to

What drove Troeltsch to make Hegel the focus of his sweeping critique of historical speculation in the nineteenth century is partially answered by his active participation in the “call back to Kant.” But fully to appreciate Troeltsch’s argument against Hegel requires a view of Troeltsch within the context of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, where he took his first stand against Hegel. To trace Troeltsch’s critique of Hegel from his earliest dispute with the dogmatic and evolutionary apologetics of Christianity, to his final work, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, reveals a literary trail that begins with an affirmation of Hegelian developmental logic and ends with a staunch position on the indissolubility of individuality in historical movement and the interpretation of history.

Like Kierkegaard’s appropriation of Hegel’s terminology, Troeltsch’s critique of Hegel is testimony to the ambiguous stand many of Hegel’s critics adopted. In the end, I believe, Troeltsch proved, along with Kierkegaard, that to argue with Hegel is somehow always to agree with him.

Historical Theology

As early as 1898 Troeltsch was actively involved in extricating himself from what he considered the dogmatic tendencies of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, and Hegel provided an escape route. The tendency of the historically minded theologians to regard the historical person and teaching of Jesus Christ as the sole criterion for the essence of Christianity, according to Troeltsch, effaced the historical nature of Christianity. This conservative tendency—amounting to the acknowledgment of the primacy of the purely historical past—neglected the active, living principle in history. The fascination with the historical Christ was mere antiquarianism for Troeltsch, whose methodological approach to the essence of Christianity was his first effort to reveal the active and creative principle inherent to all things historical.

Although Troeltsch’s essay “Was heisst ‘Wesen des Christentums’?” (1903) was repeatedly revised to accommodate his chang-

as a “present cultural synthesis,” a phrase he borrowed from Rickert. Troeltsch’s anticipated material philosophy of history was to be the outcome of wedding value to history. It is debatable if Troeltsch would have successfully outlined a material philosophy of history, since his formal logic of history did not entail content. It did, however, imply an activism or praxis that Paul Tillich identified as an activism toward the *Kairos*, in contrast to an activism toward the Logos.

ing attitude toward Hegel's philosophy of history, it remains as testimony to Troeltsch's allegiance to the Hegelian principle of the dialectical energy underlying historical movement. This principle of development (*Entwicklung*) was the guiding theme of Troeltsch's historical thinking in 1900, but it eventually would be subsumed under the more encompassing category of individual totality by the time he completed *Der Historismus* in 1922. The evidence for this transition already was apparent in "Was heisst 'Wesen des Christentums'?", in which he characterized the concept of "essence" as: (1) an abstraction of the unity of manifestations, (2) a critique and act, and (3) an ideal incorporating a normative principle (to be formed through the assumption of the future). The first aspect is readily understandable, but the latter two categories designate the historical and temporal dynamic which made the concept of "essence" really a concept of development for Troeltsch. Troeltsch's methodological treatment of this theme acknowledges his philosophical prejudice, since the subject of Christianity seems secondary to the understanding of the mechanism of historical criticism. Accordingly, I will refer to the essence of Christianity as "essence" to reflect this bias. Troeltsch's rendering of the "essence" as act emphasizes the developmental premise of historical phenomena, but he was emphatic that historical movement in no wise is to be embraced by unadulterated rationality.

In "Was heisst 'Wesen des Christentums'?" Troeltsch began to articulate the individuating tendencies inherent to historical reason. Troeltsch would defend this subjectivism in this essay, and until he died he maintained his faith in overcoming history with history, i.e., he defended historicism against relativism, and argued, in the way Karl Mannheim did, for the epistemological legitimacy of historicism as relationism.⁷

*Historicism
defended
against
relativism.*

In arguing against the concept of the "essence" as exclusively based on an original event, e.g., the preaching of Christ, Troeltsch questioned the primacy of the past as the sole subject of history. Hegel's influence had inspired in Troeltsch a certain appreciation for the dynamic power of the "essence." For Troeltsch, the "es-

⁷ See *Ideology and Utopia*, translated by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York, 1936), 78-79, for Mannheim's distinction between relativism and relationism. The latter theory of knowledge, he argues, is defensible, while truth is inconceivable without the value-context of the subject.

Troeltsch's
"essence"
entails power
of creation
and assimila-
tion.

sence" had to be an entity with "inner living flexibility, and a productive power for new creation and assimilation."⁸ The "essence" could be no mere abstraction, "it must be a developing principle" embodying purpose and value and geared toward accommodating new creations. Troeltsch intended no simple, logically necessary law commanding an objective teleology. The historical formula Troeltsch uncovered in defining the "essence" (of Christianity) signified a unity or totality that was not merely the result of a judgment about history (the past), but a critical act that was itself "a piece of history."⁹ As such, the "essence" is not an abstraction of manifestations but an assessment of that which is "not yet in terms of the driving ideal."¹⁰ Here Troeltsch was unmistakably taken with Hegel's historical dialectic, but only to a point. Where Troeltsch began to take his leave from Hegel was in his consideration of the future as a facet of historical criticism.

Purpose of
history to
understand
present in
developmental
context.

Troeltsch guarded against historical prediction in historiography, for he was aware that the future always turned on the critical stance of the historical spectator. The estimation of the future indeed had its place in the concept of the developing "essence." In dismissing the reconstruction of the past as the task of history, Troeltsch turned his methodological inquiry to understanding the present in its total developmental context: a context that is not framed by the consideration of the simple past, but one that must embrace what still persists of the past in the present and what theoretically can be extended into the future on the basis of the enduring dynamic of historical happening. This "historical disciplining of our thought,"¹¹ he promised, would produce guidelines for the future, and in turn the "essence" could no longer be construed as an abstract concept; it automatically becomes an ideal.

The impulse toward the future, which remained integral to Troeltsch's formulation of history, necessarily complicates its logical nature. This complication stems from the effect of personal presuppositions on the attempt to imagine any further unfolding of

⁸ Troeltsch, "What is the Essence of Christianity?", *Writings on Theology and Religion*, translated by Robert Morgan and Michael Pye (Atlanta, 1977), 151. The original essay was first published in *Die christliche Welt* (1903) and is also contained in Troeltsch's collected works, *Band II* (Tübingen, 1913).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

the “essence.”¹² Objective clarification of the “essence” is confused, but to reconcile the subjective and the objective amounts to a “creative act.”¹³ Troeltsch’s later formulation of the logic of history would reflect this conceptual confusion. He referred to his final expression of the formal logic of history as “the irrational logic of the new and creative.” While this logic incorporated individuals into a supra-individual connection fed by heredity and tradition, it simultaneously preserved an indissoluble moment of originality. This indissoluble moment of originality accompanies all historical connections, according to Troeltsch, and invariably possesses the power of transforming the whole (of the past). One consequence is that the simple past, construed as the once-happening, can no longer be the source of history-as-writing, since it runs into and is augmented by the germ of originality.

Troeltsch’s initial effort to clarify the concept of “essence” predated his turn to Kant, but one can discern the stirrings of his later emphasis on the willing and constructive self (in history). Troeltsch did not seek an abstract unity of what has been in defining the “essence”; he sought a unity of what has been and what is to be. By no means was he occupied with the consideration of mere factual relations in history, he wished to uncover “a rule for our wills” and “a driving spring of future history.”¹⁴ Troeltsch’s allegiance to the activist philosophical history first conceived in the *Historische Zeitschrift* is evidenced in these remarks. (Sybel, the first editor [1859], wrote a preface describing the theoretical foundation of the periodical; it delivered a stinging critique of Ranke’s reluctance to incorporate the future as a legitimate facet of historical speculation.) The act of combining the purely historical (the past) and the normative, which belongs to the future, in order to assess the present (the real goal of history for Troeltsch) has interesting consequences which reflect an internal temporal transcendence: “This act involves an overcoming of space and time in the judgment itself, an immediate reinsertion of the judgment into space and time for the purpose of further development of the whole”¹⁵ The “essence,” then, is really “the emergence into consciousness of an inner process which really does drive forward

¹² *Ibid.*, 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

“Historical seeing” the basis of all thinking.

the forces of the future out of those of the past.”¹⁶ On these terms, the scientific study of the past is limited; it does not inspire the historical instinct which would forever disengage Troeltsch from Hegel. The “essence” is a “living, individual formation” combining the concrete present with the already formed past continuum.¹⁷ The instinct that drives us toward the future, then, is not a “naive continuation,” propelled by an inner necessity, but an historical insight that always shapes the “essence” afresh. Needless to say, this understanding of such a plastic notion of “essence” has been instilled with the kind of dynamic that typifies historical movement. That Troeltsch referred to this movement as a kind of insight suggests that it is derivative of the activity of the historian. This “historical seeing,” however, had implications beyond Troeltsch’s logic of history; he considered it to be the basis of all thinking.¹⁸ The exemplar for thinking and consciousness, then, could be read in the process of the historical imagination. What may have appeared to some, like Otto Hintze, as a mistake in Troeltsch’s logic of history, i.e., that he conflated historical methods with a more speculative approach to history, is really the crux of Troeltsch’s argument.

Troeltsch’s flexible and developmental rendering of the “essence” challenges our ordinary understanding of this term, but, within this context, it sets forth the problem of the relationship of normative thought and history. The derivation of norms from history was a preoccupation with Troeltsch, and on this issue he disagreed early with the solution set forth by Hegelian evolutionary idealism. Hegel’s solution, i.e., divining from history the underlying course of objective reason, represents an identity of the factual and the rational (the necessary). Troeltsch declared this process of abstraction a “panlogical prejudice” which neglected the “irrational, creative factuality and intricacy of history.”¹⁹ In rejecting this form of historical idealism Troeltsch began to enunciate an alternative view: “the doctrine of an ever renewed, purely factual and irrational combination of that which is recognized to be necessary and true with historical tradition and experience.”²⁰ This doctrine, to be further articulated along the lines of Rickert’s and Windel-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁸ *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, 59, hereinafter referred to in the text as DH.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

band's methodological insights, meant that the "essence," as a developmental entity, required the simultaneous personal appropriation of the "already acquired" (Troeltsch referred to this as a form of historical unconscious whose connection forms the living foundation of effective-history) "and of newly creating the value for the future." This activity (historical efficacy), canonized as *Wirkungsgeschichte* by Hans-Georg Gadamer, is embedded in a personally conscientious appropriation of tradition.²¹ Together with Gadamer, Troeltsch revealed a profound debt to Hegel, since the subjective grasping of the rational content of the present is to be aligned intuitively "with the creative course of world teleology."²²

*Contemporary
creative acts
the real
essence of
history.*

²¹ Gadamer's critique of romantic hermeneutics and scientific hermeneutics promulgates the original formulation of effective-history in Eduard Meyer's articulation of history as "any event of the past, the effects of which is not exhausted in its moment of appearance, but clearly continues to have an effect upon succeeding periods and to generate new processes in them." Meyer's theory only reiterated the sentiment that had guided Sybel in the founding days of the *Historische Zeitschrift*. Sybel—who had disputed the place of practice in historical research with his mentor, Ranke—had decided that history, which recognizes the "lawfulness of life's processes, is the expression of the past which is contemporaneous with the present (from the Preface to the first issue of the *Historische Zeitschrift* [1859]). The commitment of historical investigation, on the terms of effective-history, then, is neither antiquarian, nor political, but to material that has a vital link with present-day life. This theme was carried forward by Friedrich Meinecke, who later assumed the editorship of the *Historische Zeitschrift*, especially in his formulation of the special character of historical causality. Meinecke argued that the spiritual-ethical strata of reality could not be adequately penetrated by naturalistic models, since reality was not comprised of a strict causal nexus. If this were so, the totality of human events would be the proper theme of history. Such reasoning led Meinecke, along with Troeltsch, to postulate another form of causality alongside pure causal determination. Historical influence, as Meinecke put it, is more related to enduring and profitable effects than an original event precipitated. This supra-causal (*übercausale*) meaning of history, as it penetrates the practical realm of our existence, concerns life-values. "History gives us the content, wisdom and signposts of our lives," he declared. ("Kausalitäten und Werte in der Geschichte", *Band IV, Werke* [Stuttgart, 1965], 60). Troeltsch's interpretation of what he referred to as the non-equivalent causality inherent to the historical world agrees with Meinecke's turn from the naturalistic model of causality, but adds a further element that would guide Troeltsch's mature expression of historicism. The psychological motives in history always introduce incalculable elements: "In the historical process there ever emerges the fact of the new, which is no mere transformation of the existent forces, but an element of essentially new content. . . ." ("Historiography," *Encyclopedia for Religion and Ethics*, Hastings, editor, 1911, page 719).

²² Troeltsch, "What is the Essence." See *Truth and Method* for Gadamer's defense of the productive attitude in hermeneutics, and the tendency of repeated

Though the notion of totality is not dismissed on the terms of the developmental “essence,” Troeltsch restricted the goal of the “essence” to immediate possibilities demanded by the present and future.²³ The normative quality of the “essence” is not realized through a process of dialectical necessity, but through a contemporary creative act that Troeltsch regarded as the real essence of history.

The Modern Idea of History

Within the general framework of what Troeltsch called the “modern idea of history,” he assessed the standing apologetics for Christianity: the supernatural or miracle apologetic and the evolutionary apologetic. This was a continued reflection on the influence of Hegel’s historical thinking. By the “modern idea of history” Troeltsch meant historicism. At the writing of *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* (1901), he intended this idea to put an end to dogmatic conceptualizations which hypostatized history according to either the claims of revelation or the model of natural reasoning. The “modern idea of history” sought its orientation from history itself, a task he had already begun in previous essays, in which history was to be the foundation for norms and values and the “medium for self-reflection of the species upon its nature, origins, and hopes.”²⁴

The evolutionary apologetic, which Troeltsch credits with some understanding of the historical, was disputed since it viewed Christianity as the realization of the idea or essence of religion. Normative value, as evidenced in “Was heisst ‘Wesen des Christentums’?”, must always include the anticipation of and impulse toward the future, and neither supernatural revelation nor the absolute fulfillment of the principle of religion met this fundamentally historical criterion.

In *Die Absolutheit des Christentums* we can witness the influence of the methodological gains of Rickert and Windelband, especially as history is concerned with the unique and individual. The interpretation of the evolutionary apologetic, in subordinat-

Evolutionary apologetic leaves out individual ethical creativity.

acts of interpretation to approach “the totality of the objective course of history” (263).

²³ Troeltsch, “What is the Essence”, 179.

²⁴ Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, translated by David Reid (Richmond, 1971), 4.

ing history to the uniform regularity of a law, neglects the neo-Kantian interpretation of history. Furthermore, this law is raised to a normative status that results in the congruity of cause and result. With no ethical space, so to speak, between cause and effect, human ingenuity is eliminated at the expense of the tyranny of natural causality.

The “modern idea of history,” however, recognizes no universal principle from which history can be deduced. Troeltsch dismissed the idea of universal laws, as he did universal history. The “modern idea of history knows only concrete, individual phenomena, always conditioned by their context and yet, at bottom, underivable and simply existent phenomena. For this reason, the modern understanding of history cannot obtain values or norms that coincide with actual universals.”²⁵

A further complication ensues, Troeltsch argued, if the Hegelian dialectic is consistently pursued. The absolute realization of religion is really embodied in the nexus of historical manifestations taken as a whole, in which case there can be no absolute religion exhaustively embodying the universal principle. If emphasis is placed on the gradual realization of the absolute, then we must await the end of history. Troeltsch, in an obvious allusion to Hegel, acknowledged that, “There must be complete twilight before the owl of Minerva can begin its flight in the land of the absolute principle.”²⁶ In this final moment of completion the efficacy of history is abandoned, and the coincidence of truth and fact cannot be the result of historical production. This final moment of truth can only be the realization of a latently complete revelation, which means that history could only be a medium for transformation and not the real energy of historical development. Hegel’s speculative construction violated the causal structure that was intended in Dilthey’s aspiration to a critique of historical reason. This causal structure or “acquired psychic nexus” (*erworbener Zusammenhang des Seelensleben*) which Dilthey viewed as the creative core of historical reality was probably first articulated in Droysen’s concept

Hegel’s construction ignores historical role of unique actions.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69. Ernst Cassirer, for example, points out in his chapter on Hegel in *The Myth of the State* (Garden City, 1955), that Hegel’s *aufgehobenes Moment* undermines the canonization of the subsisting (see note 5). According to Cassirer, therefore, Hegel’s system as grounds for a Christian (evolutionary) apologetic self-destructs. See page 318 of this edition.

“A doctrinaire assault on history.”

of history as a self-contributing causal nexus, and can be seen in Troeltsch’s interpretation of the so-called non-equivalent causality inherent in the historical realm.²⁷

Hegel’s dialectic, according to Troeltsch, represented a “doctrinaire assault on history,” since it did not adequately appreciate the bifurcation of the natural and historical worlds. Hegel’s logic did not take into account the dual nature of human activity. To relegate the historical to the systematically causal structure of natural science is to ignore the “mysterious double nature” of humanity and the complicated concepts of freedom and personality.²⁸ These forces can never be calculated by a simple addition of antecedent events, they can only be construed as a “result of original developments.”²⁹ The footing that the Hegelian construction of history has in the natural science conception of causality assumes an equal correspondence between cause and effect. Furthermore, the idea of the absolute is a realization of thought that tends to efface the material of history. Hegel’s interpretation of the absolute and the place of Christianity within this context has no place in history. According to Troeltsch, absolute anything is a self-contradiction.³⁰

The facile transfer of the methods of natural science into the historical realm forces the individual and unique out of history.³¹ Troeltsch did not deny the forces of the natural world; he joined with those who wished to establish the credibility of another world alongside mere physical conditions: a world whose claims of validity and certainty were not to be based on their origin in a strictly causal nexus, “but upon their truth.”³² In arguing against the “naturalization” of history, Troeltsch, in the same way as Vico delineated the natural and historical worlds, looked to the material production (*factum*) of history to establish truth (*verum*). This convertibility or merging of truth and what is made, then, never represents an absolute goal, since it is always conditioned “by a

²⁷ See note 21 for the reference to Troeltsch’s non-equivalent form of causality. The natural science model of causality is predicated on the reciprocal transformation of forces, while historical causality, involving psychological motives, always introduces incalculable elements.

²⁸ Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity*, 74.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

³² *Ibid.*

given historical moment.”³³ But mere descriptive history is transcended because of essentially new forces created through the evaluative structure inherent to any historical moment. Troeltsch, however, reveals the vestiges of Hegel’s philosophy in not dismissing a common goal “out in front,” which really requires “a turn to the metaphysical.”³⁴

The goal-oriented facet of evolutionism remained with Troeltsch, though he regarded this transcendent force as embedded in the “creative core of reality” and not as hovering over the course of history. Troeltsch, at this point in his career, would not fully accept the Hegelian dialectic, which calls the world into being in one full panlogistic and monistic sweep. He contrasted his understanding of evolutionary development to Hegel’s by allowing for the co-existence of equal orientations “toward the absolute goal of the human spirit,” which subsequently come together “to form a philosophy of history.”³⁵ That all epochs, or historical phenomena, might be equidistant from God, in Ranke’s words, is incompatible with the sequentially necessary and hierarchial phases of Hegel’s brand of development. Troeltsch, then, did not deny the absolute operating teleologically in history. He maintained, however, that it could only be construed by the “criterion that takes shape within a concrete situation.”³⁶ The truth of the relationship between the relative and the absolute beyond history Troeltsch found in Goethe’s words: “Admission denied to the land of ideas?/But I guess I know its strand./One who cannot gain the isle/May anchor off the land.”

*Absolute
operates
through
concrete
situations.*

Historicism and Historiography

Troeltsch’s final words on Hegel are contained in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, in which he (1) articulates his own logic of history, and (2) evaluates theories of history according to the fundamental historical criterion formulated in his earlier work—the idea of development. Troeltsch, in this work, reveals an ambition that went unfulfilled, i.e., to complement a formal logic of history with a material philosophy of history. His formal logic of history, however, entails an activism that led him to acknow-

³³ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

ledge the Marxian advance over Hegel's philosophy, i.e., the materialization of the historical dialectic.³⁷

Although there is an apparent praxis attached to Troeltsch's logic of history, it does not embrace a detailed value system. The extent to which Troeltsch's logic embraces practice is revealed in the epistemological premise of history for Troeltsch, i.e., the validity of the ought stemming from Kant's hermeneutical subject. In the concluding sections to this essay I should like to review Troeltsch's final assessment of Hegel and to show how his impatience with Hegel reflects a larger frustration with practically all theoretical approaches to history. Troeltsch's dissatisfaction with the historical theories of his time, I believe, stems from his ambition to absolutize the "historical seeing" which he constructed on the exemplar of the existentially rooted practice of the historian.

*Hegel's
historicity not
individuated
by human
presence.*

In *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* there is a fine, almost invisible line drawn between historical methodology and the more ontological aspect of historical insight and narrative. This convergence led Otto Hintze, for example, to charge Troeltsch with conflating these two distinct dimensions of historical speculation.³⁸ Paul Tillich, on the other hand, sensed the reciprocity of these two facets of history in Troeltsch's book, when he argued that Troeltsch advocated more than the benefits of adopting a certain sense of history—he wished to enunciate what it means for consciousness to stand in history.³⁹ This assessment suggests that Troeltsch promoted more than a particular sense of history, if we are to imagine the repercussions of what it means for consciousness to be seated in history. Hegel had certainly promoted this theme, but the historicity that he espoused was not individuated by human presence; it remained the developmental dynamic of absolute consciousness becoming aware of itself.

Tillich's assessment, it seems, links Troeltsch's historical speculation to the categorial significance of history in Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*.⁴⁰ Historical evidence for this connection

³⁷ See Donald Miller's review of Troeltsch's critique of Marx in "Ernst Troeltsch: Bibliographic Focus," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, I (1961), 117-121.

³⁸ Hintze's review, "Troeltsch und die Problem des Historismus," appeared in the *Historische Zeitschrift*, volume 135, (1927), 188-232.

³⁹ Tillich's review appeared in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, XLIX (1924), 25-30.

⁴⁰ *Sein und Zeit*, Gesamtausgabe; Bd. 2 (Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1977).

appears in Heidegger's original rumination on time in the historical sciences—"Der Zeitbegriff in der Geschichtswissenschaften."⁴¹

Individual Totality

Among the discernible categories in Troeltsch's formal logic of history, the concept of individual totality, according to Troeltsch, is the only way into history. This category incorporates: (1) the logically formed aggregate for historical investigation, (2) the individuating evaluative structure that spawns unique and ever new views of said totalities, and (3) the metaphysical turn in history which reveals the creative core of reality. Most importantly, the concept of individual totality entails the reciprocal conditioning of the individual and collective elements in history that separate Troeltsch's logic of history from Hegel's dialectic.

Troeltsch went beyond all his previous intellectual influences in his logic of history. The concept of individual totality marked an advance over the Rickert-Windelband distinction of the nomothetic and the idiographic sciences, in which history was designated as concern for the unique and once-happening. Troeltsch had decidedly abandoned the Hegelian belief in a universal law hovering over the course of history. In eliminating these two themes as the basis of history, Troeltsch defined history as a "unifying life process," wherein the productive powers of the living past (the historical unconscious in Troeltsch's terms) are continually appropriated from the present in an effort to give it new meaning for future formations. Troeltsch agreed, then, with Heidegger's later assessment of history as "possibilities that have been factually existent."⁴²

Troeltsch's innovation of the class of historical objects, which he identified as individual totalities, transformed the traditional opposition between the individual and the general in history. He had earlier questioned the past as the sole object of history, and his sharper articulation of the logic of history makes this clear. The past, in a phrase, is never really over, since past events are fused together in a unity of becoming (DH, 54). Consequently, strict

⁴¹ This essay was Heidegger's qualifying lecture for the Philosophy faculty at the University of Freiburg in 1915. In it Heidegger relies upon a study of Augustine by Troeltsch for a clarification of the concept of time intrinsic to the historical world.

⁴² *Sein und Zeit*, 395.

*Past
continuum
not blindly
absorbed.*

natural causality is suspended, but this continuous connection is spontaneously delineated by an indissoluble moment of originality which possesses the power of transforming the whole (DH, 48). That history is composed of aggregates or totalities that are forever involved in a process of becoming is supported by the causality inherent to the historical world. This form of causality ensures that the past continuum is not blindly absorbed, as if propelled by an inner necessity, but that a to-and-fro struggle between the particular and general ensues which is reconciled by the creative originality of the historical observer. Gadamer would later identify this particular movement, understood as fundamental to any hermeneutic enterprise, as the structure typical of historical existence. In *Wahrheit und Methode* Gadamer first analyzes this structure in relation to aesthetic being and the concept of play, but leaves no doubt that these two modes of existence are transformed into historical structures that only receive their meaning from repeated acts of interpretation. They are structures that are never complete, so to speak, but are always involved in a process of self-completion. The moment of originality that Troeltsch regarded as essential to the formation of historical totalities also possesses the initiative to generate new conceptions of the said totalities; they too are involved in a process of self-completion similar to Gadamer's understanding of aesthetic being.

Creativity, Historical Judgment, and Time

The powers possessed by the moment of originality in Troeltsch's logic dictate a construction of historical wholes on the basis of a judgment that is always conditioned by the situation of the historical observer. The historical spectator's "own situation," as Troeltsch put it, makes historical judgment different from the ordinary relationship between a subject and a predicate. The special tension that unites the particular and the general in Troeltsch's logic reflects the virtue of the hermeneutic circle. The transforming character of historical judgment, then, is more intimately related to creation and action than it is to the lifeless relationship of a subject and predicate. Troeltsch anticipated the productive hermeneutic stance of the interpreter for which Gadamer has argued; his logic carries the weight of invention, the reality of which is realized in the production of historical (individual) totalities and the emergence of the new.

Troeltsch metaphorically referred to time as a stream in which nothing is isolated or self-contained (DH, 56). This expression implies the equiprimordiality of the facets of time, since there is an unmediated flow between the past and the future. Like Heidegger's *Augenblick*, which incorporates possibilities in anticipatory resoluteness, Troeltsch's "present" simultaneously carries the past and the future in a productive manner (DH, 57). History, then, is surely not something that happens once; it is a living organic fusion in which the past and the present may be creatively united at every moment (DH, 58). This effective historical process, which has enlivened German historical scholarship and the hermeneutical sciences at least since the mid-nineteenth century, has been reincarnated in Gadamer's concepts of *Horizontverschmelzung* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

Past and present may be creatively united at every moment.

Material Philosophy of History

Troeltsch's logic of history aimed at liberating history from the compulsion of naturalistic causality and the abstraction of universal laws. To transcend the naturalization of history, what he called "bad historicism," meant that history could no longer be construed as a series of abstract necessities. Furthermore, there can be no isolated history of development or the development of a single totality, since each epoch or interpretative stance must view the whole as incorporating its own position, "unless, like Hegel, one can assume the main result of the whole" (DH, 73). Repeated interpretations and constructions are possible, but irrespective of the starting point, material philosophy of history arises and the universal-historical process becomes conceivable only from the standpoint of the observer (DH, 73).

Hegel's philosophy of history, Troeltsch declared, is a "running ahead of the facts." (DH, 75) His approach ignored the limitations of cultural forces that encircle the historical spectator in a connection of consequence and effect (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) (DH, 75). The evaluative structure underlying this historical connection amounts to a coherent teleology in which historical observers imagine themselves both as the result of the past and as the power that collects and continues it. This is no common teleology, Troeltsch warned, but a "unifying life process" in which the past and the present become mutually explicating (DH, 76). This seeming antinomy, that the past is explained from the present and the

present illumined from the past, is overcome, according to Troeltsch, in the unity of the heterogeneous. This outcome of a material presence, as Troeltsch put it, signified that material philosophy of history, i.e., further development on the basis of historically understood presence, grows organically out of the logic of history. This confirmed Troeltsch's conviction that philosophy of history merges with ethics, which in turn explains his rendering of the *Geisteswissenschaften* as the historical-ethical sciences (DH, 79).

Rationalism and History

Troeltsch disputed all efforts to rationalize history. He argued with the Marburg neo-Kantians' mathematicization of history and that of Hermann Cohen in particular. He even challenged Rickert and Windelband's interpretation of history as the once-happening. Neither neo-Kantian school adequately appreciated the special nature of time intrinsic to historical development, and their rationalism, Troeltsch said, was no less doctrinaire than any ecclesiastical dogmatism.

Hegel's rationalism had been mobilized to accommodate history, but its movement was really the self-explication of thought. Hegel's chief failure, in subjecting historical life to a uniform general idea, was to ignore the problem of the individual and the purposeful formation of the future (DH, 132). Troeltsch's criticism of Hegel, in this regard, was quite typical: the "cunning of reason" reduced the decisiveness of subjectivity to an abstraction. The "cunning of reason" eliminates the problem of "present cultural synthesis," and standards can only be achieved after the absolute is revealed in its fullness. Such a standard, timeless since it occurs after history's completion, makes history understandable only on the terms of a perfected consciousness. Troeltsch perceived the irony that, for Hegel, time had to be finished if any standard was to be gained from the temporal (DH, 133).

Troeltsch's ambition, in criticizing all efforts to naturalize history, stems from his conviction that history not only contains material for the creation of standards, but possesses an "inner and own law" generating values. Standards seen as produced by a reason floating above history subsume value under the substance of the ideal. This means that the fundamental historical problem—i.e., the working out of standards from within the individuality of the historical—is eliminated. In Troeltsch's logic, historical in-

dividuality incorporates the individual and the concept of totality. Hence all standards must be rejected that are incompatible with the individual character of historical formations, which really belong to the “moment of production” (DH, 166). Troeltsch’s formula for such historically grounded standards entails “spontaneity, apriority, self-assuredness; without timelessness, general validity and absoluteness” (DH, 166).

Troeltsch identified the reason capable of grasping the “inner and own law” intrinsic to historical formations as *momentane Vernunft*. In contrast to the *List der Vernunft* (cunning reason), this spontaneous form of reason arises out of the “own connection of life” (*eigenen Lebenszusammenhang*) (DH, 169). Such reason resembles Hegel’s, for Troeltsch found it capable of probing the depths of historical totality and grasping from within “an inner vital movement of the universe or of the Godhead” (DH, 168). Though the power of continuing the movement of history joins Troeltsch’s reason to Hegel’s, the fact that Troeltsch’s brand of historical reason is always determined by the stand from which it arises and has a lively connection with the future makes it equally a form of criticism. “Criticism and creation are essentially connected” in the moment of historical formation. The reciprocity of criticism and creation in the link between the present, which embodies a critique, and future formation, then, is also a matter of self-clarification and self-formation (DH, 169).

Criticism and creation connected in moment of historical formation.

Troeltsch, along with Kierkegaard, argued against the pantheistic absorption of the individual, while arguing in favor of the incorporation of the “momentaneous” and individual decisiveness into a general law of being. Only on the terms of this existential formula, he agreed with Kierkegaard, can we gain the future out of the past. In keeping with Kierkegaard’s apotheosis of the finite, Troeltsch’s individualization of historical development is not accomplished in an “aesthetic-pantheistic concretion”; it is only through “existential leap and risk” that the divine can be grasped (DH, 178). It is a product of action and self-formation, wherein all standards spontaneously gain objectivity through production (not deduction).⁴³

⁴³ Troeltsch’s reading of Kierkegaard goes back to his youth. In a *Lebenslauf* at 26, he lists several intellectual influences, among them Dilthey and Kierkegaard. Apparently, Troeltsch relied on H. Reuter’s work, *Kierkegaards religionsphilosophische Gedanken in Verhältnis zu Hegels religionsphilosophischen System*

Hegel's Historical Monism

Troeltsch's historicist outlook amended his earlier theological position and deviated from traditional efforts to reproduce or represent a transhistorical realm. Consequently, his historicism is compatible with Heidegger's ontological historicism and some forms of contemporary pragmatic historicism in that its logic incorporates the full breadth of an imaginative faculty that aims at creation of historical reality rather than the reconstruction of the past. There is no pretense of a transhistorical realm or logic governing historical reality, and his life-long dispute with Hegel verifies this. Troeltsch acknowledged, in the spirit of Vico, that the historical world is the most logically penetrable. Hegel assumed this position as well, but quickly inflated history's natural intelligibility into a grandiose picture of the whole-world-process. This result, according to Troeltsch, ignores imminent changes and historical development that acknowledges the significance of practical action. Equally, it dismisses the potential to resolve intellectual conflict through dialogue, since conflict is glossed over in the logical unity of contrasts. There is no hermeneutic enterprise in Hegel's world, since he canonizes the subsisting. The *application* of Hegel's method means that "the time of understanding has displaced the moment of productive action" (DH, 255). Troeltsch would argue, then, that philosophy of history does not come too late to understand the world (and teach what it ought to be).

Troeltsch was indeed opposed to Hegel's "lesson of the concept" and logicization of history. His intellectual passion for the interpretative posture of historical consciousness was incompatible with Hegel's process of mind understanding and producing itself in a unity of logical contrasts. Hegel's doctrine of self-opposition and self-mediation, as Troeltsch put it, effaced the complexity of historical life in a "violent monistical tendency" (DH, 274).

The compulsion of continuity and logical necessity in Hegel's system reduced value and the concrete individual to an illusion. According to Troeltsch, this Spinozistic mode of thought equates

(1914) for his understanding of Kierkegaard in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (See footnote 92, page 214 in this volume). I am indebted to Professor Horst Renz, who presented me with vital materials from the Troeltsch Archives in Augsburg, Germany.

the beginning and the end (of history), which in turn eliminates the real possibility of aim and purpose (DH, 275).

The reconciliation of contrasts in Hegel's dialectic is really only a change in form, since the content of history is actually reason. Without aim and purpose, then, "Human beings appear as puppets serving in a performance of which they themselves know nothing" (DH, 275).

Conclusion

Paul Tillich, in *The Interpretation of History*, illuminated the tradition in Western philosophy that has developed alongside the predominant scientifically oriented thinking that is identified with the demands of the Logos. Guided by the contingencies of existence, the more poetic and mystical philosophical tradition associated with the spirit of the *Kairos*, he argued, accommodates the expression of the universal in philosophy in the form of "temporal universals" that conform to the practical demands (seasonal as the word *Kairos* implies) of human existence. Universality, then, would not be derived from a pre-existing order or content fixed either by nature or God; it would conform to what John Dewey called a "range of applicability" whose capability would be to order apparently isolated events into a system. The arrangement into a system would demonstrate that certain historical events are alive and infused with the kind of change typical of growth. The concept of universality, according to Troeltsch's historicism, illuminates the temporally typical, bridging the gap between history, which is concerned with the particular, and philosophy, which embraces the general.

By no means did Troeltsch abandon Hegel's concept of historical totality, but he did reduce the scope of historical totality in order to account for the process of individual development from which history is always construed. Universal history, which originates and ends in absolute consciousness, in this view, is displaced by the spontaneity of historical seeing that in each case incorporates the structures implicit in the act of such apperception. Troeltsch, then, saw, like Gadamer and Heidegger, that historical existence is the hermeneutic situation. Consequently, the best way to predict the future is to invent it.