Introduction

To begin, it is worth considering a paradigmatic version of what the philosophy of history looks like when it is too objective or, to put it in other words, when it considers the nature of history as something which is only an object of our understanding and our knowledge without acknowledging the importance of individual existence in the shaping of the historical phenomenon.

Hegel’s philosophy of history depicts history as the product of Spirit’s self-realisation through reason. Both ‘Spirit’ and ‘reason’ transcend human subjectivity. Hegel also claims that human subjects do not create history. History instead is created by organised communities like states and nations.

Hegel’s philosophy of history thus is an ‘objective’ one in the sense that it does not consider human subjects to be the actual historical subjects. It is also ‘objective’ because Hegel claims that the only thing that human beings can succeed in their effort to realise and understand history is objective knowledge of their past history. This knowledge is ‘objective’ because, for Hegel, it can be validated without the interference of any individual (and thus subjective) interpretation. The meaning and the aim of history is always there for us to discover it, and we can do so only if we follow Hegel’s method. Historical research thus can arrive at an absolutely certain (and thus objective) knowledge of the ‘what’, the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of our past history.

It is then quite obvious that Hegel in his philosophy of history tries to transcend human subjectivity in terms of: (a) making history and (b) knowing history. Hegel’s philosophical effort then can be an excellent example of an ‘objective’ approach to history and the historical. In a
way, we can claim that Hegel tries to create a subjectively undisputed method to know history in a manner similar to how our sciences (like physics and chemistry for example) try to acquire ‘objective’ knowledge, that is, knowledge that does not depend on individual interpretations but depends instead on objective facts.

The purpose of this chapter will be to point out two basic Hegelian claims in regard to (a) who is the actual historical agent and (b) which must be the actual object of our historical research. I will argue that Hegel makes a metaphysical claim that Spirit through reason and not human individuals creates history and an epistemological claim that we, human beings, can and should know our past history.

I will argue accordingly that the Hegelian philosophy of history fails to do justice to the subjective individual contribution to history and as such fails to provide us with a complete picture of the nature of history. I will try to indicate Hegel’s lack of any interest in the idea that the individual human is a crucial historical agent.

My argument in this chapter runs as follows: (a) Hegel understands history only as something which already is past (and thus for him completed), (b) history for him can be approached only through our cognitive powers and (c) individual human beings are not important factors in the constitution of history; Spirit is the crucial historical agent, and besides Spirit only nation-states can play any (important) role in history.

My method will consist of: (a) a close examination of Hegel’s original texts, focusing mainly on his *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (hereafter *IPH*), but analysing also parts of his *Lectures on the Philosophy of the World History*, his *Philosophy of Right*, and his *Phenomenology of Spirit*; (b) an effort to define certain Hegelian terms such as ‘Spirit’, ‘Reason’ and ‘Understanding’ in order to point out the exact philosophical argumentation of Hegel.

The chapter will be structured as follows:

1. A basic approach to Hegel’s ambiguous use of ‘reason’ and ‘rational’. My point is that Hegel cannot be approached considering his philosophy of history without having first a definite grasp on some key concepts he uses, such as ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’.
2. I will give a detailed analysis of what Hegel considers to be ‘the wrong way to do history’. My point is that if we aspire to fully understanding his philosophy of history we must be aware of Hegel’s criticism against other ways of doing history. What emerges from this discussion is the overarching motif that Hegel, even in his critiques