
22 Hegel

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■ Chapter guide

Hegel is a very difficult author, whose work is marked by both a high density of unfamiliar terminology and jargon and a theoretical structure and strategy that is not easy for the casual or first-time reader to appreciate. The chapter aims to give readers a few of the tools they will need in approaching Hegel's political thought. With this in mind, it offers an overview of some of the central themes and theses of Hegel's most important work of political philosophy, the *Philosophy of Right* (1821). The chapter also discusses several basic elements in his thought: his concept of freedom, and his ideas of spirit and dialectic.

A further aim of the chapter is to develop a specific interpretation of some of the main arguments of the *Philosophy of Right*, focusing in particular on his crucial and controversial claim that freedom is most fully realized in the state. In doing so, the chapter proposes a distinctive account of Hegel's thought, one in which the problem of consolidating the promise and principles of the French Revolution emerges as central to Hegel's political theory.

■ Biography

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born on 27 August 1770 in the German city of Stuttgart. Both his parents came from Protestant, middle-class backgrounds, and his father served as a civil servant in the state of Württemberg. An exceptionally precocious child, Hegel had studied the works of many contemporary and classical authors by the time he became a student at the Protestant seminary in Tübingen in 1788. His classmates and close friends in Tübingen included Friedrich Hölderlin and Friedrich Schelling, both of whom would go on to make major contributions to German intellectual life. During the Tübingen years Hegel and his friends were introduced to the ideas of Kant and Fichte, and observed—initially with great enthusiasm—the unfolding events of the French Revolution.

By 1793 Hegel had decided to pursue a career in philosophy rather than the Protestant ministry. For the next fourteen years he held a variety of teaching positions, starting off as a private tutor for well-to-do families in Berne and Frankfurt, and eventually gaining an appointment to the position of lecturer (but not yet professor) at the University of Jena. During this period Hegel wrote a series of essays and lectures on theological, historical, ethical, political, and eventually metaphysical themes and subjects. The culmination of this early phase of his career was the publication in 1807 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In this ambitious, extraordinarily original, but in places dense and impenetrable, masterpiece Hegel introduced many of the central themes of his mature philosophical system, including spirit, dialectic, history, and freedom.

Although the *Phenomenology* brought Hegel considerable fame and reputation, it was not until 1816 that he secured his first full university position as a professor at Heidelberg. Shortly thereafter, in 1818, he moved to Berlin to take up a prestigious and influential professorship in philosophy, which he held until his death in 1831. By the 1820s Hegel had become one of Germany's best-known intellectuals. His books were widely read and discussed, and his lectures attracted students from around Europe.

After lecturing on political philosophy for several years, Hegel published the *Philosophy of Right* in 1821, as a book intended to accompany the lectures. Throughout his tenure in Berlin the political situation in Prussia was tense and delicate. Many of his core political beliefs were developed during a period of reform and liberalism in Prussia that began in 1807. But shortly after his arrival in Berlin the reforms came abruptly to an end and the ascendant, reactionary regime imposed censorship on academic publications and a witch-hunt for 'demagogues' from the universities. In this environment Hegel was forced to tone down some of his reformist sympathies and even (in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*) to flatter the authorities in various ways. He has been regarded by some as the 'state philosopher' of Prussian authoritarianism, but this is not really accurate. Hegel was concerned to keep his position, and could be timid and cautious by disposition, and so did not wish to antagonize the authorities unnecessarily. But he found subtle ways to communicate his reformist leanings, and even expressed his ongoing commitment to the ideals of the French Revolution with an annual toast, among friends, on Bastille Day.

Hegel is both one of the most influential and one of the most difficult political theorists in the history of Western thought. His difficulty no doubt accounts for the very wide range of different ways in which his political theory has been received. It also means that his name is invoked more often than his work is carefully studied. Even professional political theorists sometimes seem unembarrassed by the confession that they can make little sense out of Hegel's writings and see little point in trying.

My first and most important aim in this chapter will be to give readers a few of the tools needed to tackle Hegel's political thought for themselves. With this in mind, I offer an overview of some of the central themes and theses of Hegel's most important work of political philosophy, the *Philosophy of Right*. I also discuss several basic elements in his thought: his concept of freedom, and his ideas of spirit and dialectic.

A second aim is to develop a specific interpretation of some of the main arguments of the *Philosophy of Right*, focusing in particular on his crucial and controversial claim that freedom is most fully realized in the state. In doing so, I try to offer a distinctive account of Hegel's thought, one in which the problem of consolidating the promise and principles of the French Revolution emerges as central to Hegel's political theory.

■ Key texts

Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy (1805–30; first pub. 1833–6)

Phenomenology of Spirit (1807)

Elements of the Philosophy of Right (1821)

Lectures on the Philosophy of History (1822–31; first pub. 1840)

■ Main texts used

Elements of the Philosophy of Right, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, trans. Elizabeth Haldane, 3 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

The Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956).

■ Key ideas

Dialectic: the characteristic, logical structure of everything in reality and the method by which we come to a full, scientific knowledge of reality. To say that everything in reality—including the social and political world—has a dialectical structure is to say that all phenomena are constituted by both contradiction and the resolution of contradiction. The thesis that reality is best understood dialectically amounts to the claim—central to Hegel's philosophy—that the best way to understand some particular phenomenon is by working through the sequence of contradictions and resolutions that make that phenomenon what it is. **Freedom:** the *will* is free when its ends are 'its own', so that it is self-determining. The *will* is self-determining, in turn, when two conditions are satisfied: one 'subjective', the other 'objective'. The subjective condition requires that the *will* reflect on its ends and endorse them on the basis of its given desires and goals. The objective condition requires that the *will* pursue ends and goals that are rational. So the *will* is self-determining and free if and only if it pursues ends that are its own, both (1) in the subjective sense that they are grounded in its reflectively endorsed desires and evaluations, and (2) in the objective sense that they are grounded in its own true goals and purposes as a rational being. **History:** a series of stages in the development of *spirit*. The process in which individuals, cultures, and God develop and extend their powers of intellect and *will*. **Spirit:** a term used by Hegel to designate three levels of reality that are central to his philosophy: (1) the individual human being, who possesses a mind and is capable of agency; (2) a human group that possesses a culture; (3) God. Spirit develops itself in a series of 'stages'. In the early stages the individual's powers of intellect and *will* are only partially realized, a culture that encourages the exercise of intellect and *will* is only partially articulated, and God has only partly realized himself in the world. In the later stages the individual's powers of agency are fully extended, in a public culture that is fully supportive of intellect and *will*, and God achieves a fully realized self-consciousness through the vehicle of the human world. **Will:** the practical, active part of the *spirit* or mind. That which exerts agency and enjoys *freedom* in Hegel's philosophy.

Introduction

The Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* sets out the main aim of the book and some of Hegel's views about reason, actuality, and philosophy. The task of philosophy, according to Hegel, is to identify and display the reason contained in the actual institutions and practices of the social world. In successfully accomplishing this task, the philosopher can help his readers and followers to achieve a state of reconciliation with the world in which they live. Hegel is notoriously confident that philosophy *will* be able to find reason in the institutions of the social world he inhabits. 'What is rational is actual', he announces, 'and what is actual is rational' (p. 20).¹ Hegel witheringly dismisses philosophers who devote their energies to imagining a world as it ought to be rather than looking for reason in the here and now. The gaze of philosophy, he maintains, is always backwards-looking: 'The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk' (p. 23).

The systematic development of the book's argument begins in the Introduction. The Introduction announces, as central to the argument, the theme of freedom, and indicates the method and structure of what is to follow. As the title already suggests, the *Philosophy of Right* will be about the idea of 'right'. By this Hegel means not just 'rights' in the narrow sense in which the term is often understood (as in 'legal rights' or 'human rights'), but the entire normative domain: that part of reality that relates to duties, obligations, prohibitions, permissions, principles, virtues, and so on. Right, in turn, is always, for Hegel, about freedom (§29). To show that something involves right—to show, for instance, that it is the ground of a duty or the basis for some virtue—is always to show that it is a condition or expression of freedom. The main task of the *Philosophy of Right* is to demonstrate that the 'system of right' represents a 'realm of actualised freedom' (§4). In this way, Hegel thinks he can encourage a sense of reconciliation with the various demands of that system and the institutions and practices that make those demands.

Hegel divides this task into two parts. The first part, tackled in the Introduction itself, consists of an investigation into what freedom is: an exposition of what Hegel sometimes terms the 'concept of freedom'. The second part, to which the main body of the *Philosophy of Right* is devoted, explores the objective conditions under which freedom is fully actualized. Here Hegel seeks to show that various institutions and practices, together with the norms and values that hold them together, must be in place if freedom is to be realized in a community of people. Confusingly, this second part of the task also involves an exposition of what freedom is. Hegel holds that the true nature of freedom is best discovered in the very process of working out the institutions and practices that give actuality to freedom. As with any concept in Hegel's philosophy, the concept of freedom only fully reveals itself to the philosopher through a dynamic interrelationship with the various modes of reality in which it achieves existence.

After the Introduction the remainder of the *Philosophy of Right* is divided into three sections, entitled 'Abstract Right', 'Morality', and 'Ethical Life'. Each section is constructed around a distinct understanding of the free agent: the 'person' is the agent of Abstract Right; the 'subject' the agent of Morality; and the 'member' the agent of Ethical Life. With the transition from one understanding of the agent to the next the previous one is never discarded. Thus, the subject of Morality is also a person, and the member of Ethical Life is a bearer of both personality and subjectivity. Each section consists, not only in an explication of

a particular understanding of free agency, but also in an account of the different institutions and practices which give existence to freedom so understood.

Freedom

Freedom, as Hegel understands it, is a variant of what Isaiah Berlin has termed 'positive freedom'.² It does not consist in the *absence* of obstacles or impediments—this is what Berlin means by 'negative freedom'—but in the *presence* of a certain kind of relationship or connection between the agent and his activity. I am free in this positive sense when I am shaping and controlling my own life—when, to use the language Hegel favours, I am *self-determining*.

Positive liberty occupies an important place in our moral and political outlook. It is valuable for individuals to be self-determining, and one goal of political activity—although not necessarily the only goal—is to establish and protect the social conditions of self-determination. At the same time it is easy to be sceptical about Hegel's interpretation of self-determination and about a politics grounded in Hegelian freedom.

Freedom, according to Hegel, consists in 'being with oneself in an other' (§7A). I cannot become free by avoiding otherness, by refusing to commit myself to any activity or relationship with others. But even if I do engage with otherness in some way, it does not follow that I am necessarily free. I must be 'with myself' in the action or relationship in which I engage: it must be an expression of my self-determination. For this state of being with myself to be achieved, Hegel thinks that two distinct conditions must be satisfied. I must be both (i) subjectively free, and (ii) objectively free with respect to my end (§258). When these conditions are both satisfied, then I am with myself in my end or 'concretely' (subjectively + objectively) free.

Hegel's idea of subjective freedom tracks to a considerable degree an intuitive understanding of freedom. An individual enjoys subjective freedom, according to Hegel, when he reflects on his ends (rather than blindly acting on authority or trust, or unquestioningly following the conventions and traditions of his community) and when he can endorse those ends on the basis of his own particular desires and ambitions. The idea of objective freedom, by contrast, is rather less familiar. An agent is objectively free when he has the ends and motives that reason prescribes. Putting these different elements together, Hegel thinks that an agent is self-determining and free if and only if his ends are his own both in the subjective sense that they are grounded in his reflectively endorsed desires and evaluations and in the objective sense that they are grounded in his own true goals and purposes as a rational being.

Most of the controversy over Hegel's conception of freedom can be traced back to his claim that freedom has an objective dimension. Freedom as it is ordinarily understood is not tied to any specific ends but is open-ended: its content is not restricted or predetermined by anything but the agent's own empirically given goals and ambitions. Hegel's insistence that freedom has an objective dimension, by contrast, implies that an agent is only fully free when he has specific ends and adopts certain codes of conduct.

Hegel's conception of freedom not only competes with a common-sense conception, but also seems to rely on a problematic picture of the human self as divided into several parts—what Berlin calls the 'empirical' self and the 'real' self.³ According to Hegel, merely acting on my own empirically given desires and motives, whatever they might be, is not enough for

self-determination. I am only *self-determining* (both subjectively and objectively free) if my desires and motives coincide with those that are prescribed by reason. In the light of this claim it has seemed to Berlin and others that Hegel is creating an artificial and highly dubious division between the actual or empirical self and the 'real' self of reason. And why, these critics ask, should we accept this bipartite picture of the self? Supposing for the sake of argument that the picture is accepted, why think that reason is a more authentic part of the self than empirically given desires and ambitions?

Another apparent problem with Hegel's view—again emphasized by Berlin—is the ideological danger implicit in understanding freedom as having an objective dimension. The claim that full freedom requires the adoption of certain specific ends leads inevitably, it is argued, to the grossly illiberal view that it is possible to force someone to be free. If the wise and virtuous were better able to identify the prescriptions of reason than ordinary people, then what would stop them from forcing, coercing, or manipulating those people into adopting the right ends in order to make them free? The concept of freedom can normally be deployed rhetorically *against* such efforts, but Hegel's view seems, perversely, to have the opposite implication. Hegel's claim that full freedom is achieved only in the context of the state simply reinforces this worry about his position.

Of course Hegel is hardly the first philosopher to oppose freedom and desire or to identify freedom with reason and with specific codes of conduct. Rousseau famously proclaims that 'to be driven by appetite alone is slavery',⁴ and Kant argues that autonomy is a property of an agent's will only to the extent that the will is able to abstract completely from all of its empirically given determinations and find a basis for action in the ends and duties to which it is committed just in virtue of its freedom and rationality.⁵ What is puzzling, however, given the apparent similarity of his own view, is how forcefully Hegel objects to the accounts of both Rousseau and Kant. Rousseau is rebuked for failing to get beyond a mere aggregate of particular wills to a truly general will, and Kant's own solution to the problem of freedom—the Categorical Imperative—is dismissed as an 'empty formalism' and an 'empty rhetoric of duty for duty's sake' (§135). In light of these criticisms of his predecessors, it is far from clear how Hegel himself proposes to generate content for freedom.

One of Hegel's key claims about freedom is that it involves both abstraction and particular content (§§5–7). The free will, he says, is the unity of two elements: an element of 'pure indeterminacy' or 'absolute abstraction' and an element of 'determination' or 'particularization'. A closer look at what he has in mind here can help shed some light on how he might respond to some of the criticisms and puzzles sketched above.

The claim that abstraction is essential to freedom is, in effect, a claim about the kind of practical reasoning and deliberation that is appropriate for a free agent. The claim is that I am not free if I simply accept some externally given command or impulse as a decisive reason-for-action that I could subject to the critical scrutiny of my own thought and reason. To be free, I must *stand back* from the given command or impulse and reflect on whether it constitutes a sufficient reason to act in some particular way. Hegel associates this idea of standing back with the Protestant Reformation, which he thinks was a great advance in freedom. He credits Luther with challenging the doctrine that a person could obtain salvation by unquestioningly obeying the instructions and prescriptions of the Church. For Luther, true spirituality is a matter, not just of the individual's outer actions and performances, but also of his inner faith and understanding.⁶ In the same way that freedom is opposed to unreflective acceptance of

authority, it is also, Hegel thinks, opposed to uncritical reliance on one's desires and inclinations as a guide to action. An unquestioning acceptance of the promptings of the social and natural environment that generates one's desires and inclinations is, on this view, no more a mark of freedom than is an uncritical obedience to authority.

At the same time freedom is not just about abstraction; it also involves having some particular end and motive. As was noted earlier, Hegel denies that freedom is achieved by simply refusing to act at all (indeed he seems to suggest that a refusal to act at all is itself a kind of action). But this presents a difficulty, albeit a fruitful, one in Hegel's view. For how could a will be *both* totally abstracted from every given desire and purpose *and* have particular content? Imagine, for instance, asking some agent why he acted as he did and his answering with an appeal to some desire or authority. We then ask him why he takes that desire or authority to be a good reason-for-action and he responds by citing some further desire or authority. And so on. Eventually, the agent may simply put a stop to this chain of reason-giving by insisting that some desire or authority constitutes his bedrock reason-for-action. If he does this, however, then he would be violating freedom's abstraction requirement: he would simply be accepting some externally generated prompting that he could subject to his own thought and reason. On the other hand, if he does not stop his deliberations in some way, then his reasoning would extend *ad infinitum*. Either way, it seems there is a contradiction between the two elements of freedom, one which casts doubt on whether anyone could actually achieve freedom in the full Hegelian sense.

For Hegel, the key to understanding freedom is finding a resolution to this contradiction. Unfortunately, the details of Hegel's solution are not as clear as they might be, but the general thrust of his position is not difficult to grasp. His key claim is that, when an agent abstracts away from all his contingently given desires and goals, he will eventually arrive at a set of rational norms and duties that he finds himself committed to just in virtue of being a free agent. Being committed to these norms and duties is part of what it is to be a free agent and thus they do not themselves call for further abstraction. It is because abstraction leads back to these rational norms and duties (and no further) that Hegel thinks that freedom has an objective dimension—that full freedom involves commitment to the ends and motives that reason prescribes. The agent who rejects these ends prescribed by reason is, so Hegel thinks, ultimately not deciding for himself but is letting whatever external processes determine his particular desires and goals decide for him. If he does follow the ends prescribed by reason, on the other hand, then his activity is an expression of norms and duties he is committed to just in virtue of being a free agent.

Once Hegel's conception of freedom is fleshed out in this way, it is possible to see how he might reply to the criticisms sketched earlier. To the objection that his view conflicts with the common-sense understanding of freedom, Hegel can point to at least one intuitive feature of his own account: the idea that freedom is opposed to authority and so involves abstraction. It is the abstraction requirement, pushed to its logical conclusion, that generates the idea that freedom has an objective dimension. He can refer to the same abstraction requirement in responding to the charge that his view rests on an untenable bipartite picture of the self. Freedom is not a matter of the right *part* of the self ruling but of *the* self deliberating about its ends and motives in the right kind of way: freedom means that the self does not unquestioningly act on the promptings of desire or authority where it could subject those promptings to the scrutiny of its own thought and reason. The idea of an opposition between freedom and

authority also suggests how he might respond to the worry that his theory licenses forcing people to be free. Just as spirituality for Luther requires inner reconciliation with God, and not just outward performances, the same, Hegel thinks, is true of freedom. Concrete freedom requires, not just performing the actions prescribed by reason, but also having the right motives and perceiving that those actions are reasonable: it requires not only objective freedom but also subjective freedom.

The most difficult issue, and the one that brings us back to Hegel's disagreements with Rousseau and Kant, concerns reason. Why think that abstraction eventually leads to some set of rational norms and duties? And, supposing that it does lead there, what is the content of these norms and duties? Hegel criticizes Kant for failing to answer the first of these questions—Kantian freedom, he says, is just 'the negative of everything else'⁷—and for giving an answer to the second of these questions—the famous Categorical Imperative—that is itself an 'empty formalism'. But these charges just raise the bar as far as Hegel's own view is concerned. Why should we think that Hegel's view of freedom and reason has a positive and non-empty content?

Hegel's position on these issues is very hard to make out, and not surprisingly a number of different interpretations have been proposed. According to one influential interpretation, most elegantly developed by Charles Taylor, it is at this point in the argument that Hegel falls back on a metaphysical theory of spirit to generate content for freedom.⁸ For Taylor, the key to Hegel's alternative to Kant is the idea that the main agent of, and provider of content for, freedom and reason is *spirit*, where this refers not just to the individual human being but also, ultimately, to God. On a different reading, Hegel's alternative to Kant involves an appeal to an essentially historical idea of reason: the content of freedom and rationality is not determined by some transcendental, universal formula but is settled by the practices and understandings of a concrete community that is the product of the progressive unfolding of history.⁹

Although there are certainly important metaphysical and historicist themes running throughout Hegel's work (as we shall see shortly), it is arguably not obvious how either of these interpretations solves the problem of reason in a way that is consistent with the structure or key formulations of the *Philosophy of Right*.¹⁰ Instead, let me suggest a third possible interpretation, which, although consistent with recognizing important metaphysical and historical themes in Hegel's thought, does not make them central to his account of the rational content of freedom.

Hegel insists that the will that abstracts from all of its contingently given desires and purposes does remain committed to one end: the end of establishing and maintaining its own freedom. 'The will in its truth', he says, 'is such that what it wills, i.e. its content, is identical with the will itself, so that freedom is willed by freedom' (§21A). This claim is repeated in a number of places and suggests a standard of reason that Hegel appeals to in generating content for freedom. If an end in some way contributes to the establishment and maintenance of the conditions of the agent's own freedom, then, in committing himself to that end, the agent can think of himself as willing his own freedom and therefore as fully free. As we shall see later in this chapter, understanding Hegel's account of freedom in this way helps to make sense of why he identifies the state as the highest locus of freedom. It is in the state that the individual dedicates himself to the good of the community as a whole and thereby to one of the essential conditions of his own freedom.

Of course, it might still be wondered how the end of establishing and maintaining one's

own freedom resolves the conflicting requirements of abstraction and particularization in Hegelian freedom. Why shouldn't the free agent also abstract from *this* end? Hegel's answer is that one could not be a free agent without being committed to this end; or, to put this differently, being committed to this end is the basis of free agency and thus no limitation on it. Unless an agent had a commitment to becoming and remaining free, he would never engage in the kind of radical reflection and abstraction that sets up the problem of identifying content for freedom in the first place.

Hegel was greatly impressed by the Protestant Reformation and the principle of subjectivity which he took to be at its core. He thought that the French Revolution represented the extension into the social and political realm of this same principle, and he admired Rousseau and Kant for giving philosophical expression to the principle. At the same time, he worried that, on its own, subjectivity could be a terribly destructive force: it could negate and undermine authorities, traditions, structures, and so on, and leave nothing in their place. He even suggested that the Terror was a logical outcome of the French Revolution (§5, 258). However, the solution, in Hegel's view, is not to reject subjectivity or even to find ways to limit it. Rather, it is to perceive that subjectivity is itself ultimately an individual, social, and historical achievement which depends on individuals being committed to particular ends and duties. These conditions of subjectivity are what provide the content of objective freedom. The standard of reason to which the objective dimension of freedom refers is ultimately the one that is implicit in subjectivity itself. When individuals are committed to this standard, they enjoy both objective and subjective freedom and so are fully free in Hegel's account.

Spirit and dialectic

An understanding of Hegel's conception of freedom is one prerequisite for following the main argument of the *Philosophy of Right*. Another is an appreciation of the structure and method of the book. As was noted earlier, the main text of the *Philosophy of Right* is divided into three sections, each of which presents a distinct conception of agency and a corresponding set of institutions and practices. It is in the process of working through this sequence of models that the conception of freedom I have been examining gets fleshed out. More generally, the development of this sequence constitutes Hegel's attempt to reconcile his readers to the modern social world by showing it to be a 'realm of actualized freedom'. A central problem in approaching Hegel's political philosophy is to get a handle on the character and argumentative force of this developmental or sequential way of proceeding.

Addressing this issue requires that we confront two difficult but key elements of Hegel's philosophical outlook: (1) his concept of *spirit*, and (2) his idea of *dialectic*. Towards the end of the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel refers to the elements in the sequence to be developed in the book as 'stages of spirit' (§30), and it is clear from Hegel's other philosophical works that spirit is a crucial, if not *the* crucial, concept in his whole philosophical system. Hegel also says in the Introduction that the method whereby the different stages of spirit are to be developed is what he calls 'dialectic' (§31). Anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with Hegel's thought will be aware that dialectic (or, as Hegel sometimes calls it, 'speculative logic') occupies a central place in Hegelian philosophy. To understand the method and

structure of the *Philosophy of Right*, then, we need to come to terms with the suggestion that the book develops in a dialectical fashion a series of determinations of spirit.

Hegel does not explain his concept of spirit, or *Geist*, in the *Philosophy of Right* but does discuss it in a number of other places. One of the clearest and most accessible expositions can be found in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.¹¹ In those lectures Hegel makes it clear that spirit can assume three quite different kinds of shapes. He refers to: (1) spirit when it 'assumes the shape of a human individual'; (2) to the spirit of a group, especially a people or nation (*Volksgeist*); and (3) the 'world spirit', which he closely associates with 'absolute spirit' and with God.

To talk of individual human beings as bearers of spirit is, most basically, to call attention to the individual human mind. Indeed the word *Geist*, which I am translating here as 'spirit', is occasionally (and somewhat misleadingly) translated as 'mind'. Individuals are spiritual in this initial sense of having minds in so far as they possess self-consciousness, thought, and agency. Thinking of spirit in this way helps to make sense of Hegel's assertion that the will is one part of spirit: to possess a will is to be an agent, someone who can translate thought into action (§4).

The idea of spirit in the group sense is rather more difficult, since Hegel does not literally think that groups can have minds. A group can, however, be sensibly thought of as the bearer of a culture: it is a locus of ideas, perspectives, traditions, and intellectual problems and controversies, and a corresponding set of institutions and practices. We have something like this idea of spirit in mind when we talk of the 'spirit of the age'. A group can also be thought of as achieving a kind of freedom and self-consciousness, so long as we remain clear that it does so through the vehicle of its members. A group enjoys freedom and self-consciousness through its public institutions and practices of deliberation, intellectual inquiry, artistic achievement, and religious worship, and, more basically, through the vocabularies and modes of discourse in which these institutions and practices express themselves. A group also achieves freedom and self-consciousness by encouraging these qualities of agency in its members and making and protecting spaces in which its members can exercise them.

Most difficult of all is Hegel's idea of a world spirit. The key idea here, as far as Hegel's social and political thought is concerned, is that a collective practice of freedom is only possible in virtue of a particular historical inheritance. A public culture of freedom does not create itself *ex nihilo* but is always, at least in part, the product of a historical process of development that draws, in a progressive fashion, on previous cultures and ways of living. If we think of this growth and progression, from one *Volksgeist* to the next, as the development of a single agency (rather like an individual who develops from infancy to adulthood), then we have something like Hegel's concept of world spirit. Again it is important to avoid the temptation of thinking that such a world spirit literally has agency or consciousness: its progress and flourishing is always achieved through the vehicle of particular collective practices of freedom, which themselves are made up of ordinary, reflective human agents. As noted earlier, Hegel identifies this world spirit with God. The story of the world spirit's development, through increasingly sophisticated practices of freedom, is the story of God's progress towards freedom, self-consciousness, and self-completion, through the vehicle of human individuals and their cultures.

Although Hegel's use of the term 'spirit' to refer to three apparently quite different levels of reality—the individual, the social, and the divine in history—can be rather confusing, it is essential to his philosophical outlook that spirit has this multivalent character. In part this is

because he identifies spirit with freedom and self-consciousness and wants to draw attention to three different levels at which freedom and self-consciousness might be realized. In addition, however, he thinks that there are certain significant connections between the different shapes of spirit, connections that are so important that it becomes hard to talk of one level of spirit without, at the same time, talking of the others.

The most theoretically interesting and significant of these connections holds between spirit in the individual and collective senses. According to Hegel, spirit in the collective sense provides a social context that conditions the development and outlook of the individual spirit. Hegel's thesis is that an individual can develop the capacities, attitudes, self-understandings, and so on that make him 'spiritual' only in the context of a collective practice of freedom. It is this paradox—that the free individual is the product of a particular sort of social environment—that is overlooked, in Hegel's view, by social contract thinkers. In insisting that all political legitimacy is grounded in individual consent, contractarians ignore the role played by social and political settings in constituting free individuals in the first place.¹²

This thesis, in turn, is backed up by an argument about the importance of *recognition* to the development and outlook of the free individual—a theme that is exposed in the famous account of the 'struggle for recognition' given in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹³ In Hegel's view it is only possible to develop and sustain the *sense* of oneself as free that is crucial to *being* free through a practice of mutual recognition involving other free individuals. It is only in the context of a public culture of freedom, one in which certain ideas, practices, and self-understandings prevail, and certain pathways of mutual recognition are established, that the capacities and attitudes involved in individual free agency are fostered and nourished. Hegel has this thesis in mind in the *Phenomenology* when he offers the often-quoted definition of spirit as an "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I".¹⁴

In thinking about the role of spirit in Hegel's social and political thought we should always keep its multivalent character in mind. At one level the *Philosophy of Right* develops a sequence of shapes of spirit in the sense that it presents a series of different conceptions of agency. At another, its different shapes of spirit each involve a distinctive picture of a collective practice of freedom, a practice in which individual agency is developed and sustained. And at a third level the modern social world developed in the *Philosophy of Right* is tinged with the divine. It develops an account of the conditions under which God achieves completion and self-realization in history through the medium of a collective practice of freedom and the free individuals that participate in that practice.

Like the concept of spirit, the idea of dialectic is not systematically discussed in the *Philosophy of Right* itself but is assumed to be familiar to readers from Hegel's other works. The details of Hegel's dialectical logic, as expounded in his books on logic, are dense, jargon-laden, and extremely difficult, but the basic idea is reasonably clear and that is all we need in approaching the *Philosophy of Right*.

Hegelian dialectic involves both an ontological thesis about the nature of reality and an epistemological thesis about how reality is best understood. Both theses rely on ideas of contradiction and resolution of contradiction. The ontological thesis holds that a given piece of reality is always constituted by both contradiction and the resolution of contradiction. The epistemological thesis affirms that the best way to understand some piece of reality is by working through the sequence of contradictions and resolutions that make that reality what it is.

To say that some area of life is afflicted by contradiction is, for Hegel, to say that the very

success of that reality at fulfilling the purpose to which it is dedicated will eventually bring about its own demise. Marx's prediction that the capitalist would sell the rope with which he is eventually hanged (and his more general view that the very success of capitalism at developing the forces of production would eventually bring about the conditions of its own destruction) is perhaps the most vivid illustration of this Hegelian idea. The resolution of contradiction (the German word is *Aufhebung*) involves both the cancellation of the contradiction and the preservation of what is essential about the reality that is afflicted by the contradiction. Again Marx clearly illustrates this notion of *Aufhebung* with his suggestion that communism would resolve the contradictions of capitalism. According to Marx, communism would cancel what is contradictory about capitalism (its polarization of humanity into two warring classes, its failure to promote the human development of the majority, proletarian class, etc.) while at the same time preserving what is essential about it (for instance, its marshalling of tremendous human ingenuity and productivity).

Hegelian dialectic always begins from some extremely minimal and abstract characterization of the reality that is being considered and works towards richer and more complexly articulated characterizations. The initial, abstract picture of reality is shown to be self-defeating and incapable of subsisting on its own. This picture is then enriched or transformed by the introduction of some additional element which seeks to cancel the contradiction undermining the initial picture while preserving what is essential about it. The new, richer characterization is then shown to be self-undermining and a further element is introduced, and so on. Eventually, a complex and highly differentiated final characterization is arrived at, one which resolves the various contradictions out of which it is generated but which is itself reasonably self-sufficient. This final determination has the character that it has in virtue of being the result of a specific process of negation and resolution. And the best way to understand it is by reconstructing the sequence of stages from which it results.

The sequence of stages of spirit developed in the *Philosophy of Right* proceeds in exactly this dialectical fashion. It starts by specifying an extremely minimal and abstract model of what a collective practice of freedom must be like. The model is minimal in the sense that it assumes only a very basic conception of free agency and a very limited institutional and normative articulation of this conception. The argument then proceeds to show how the features of this initial picture are indispensable for a collective practice of freedom but also, on their own, self-undermining, unless a new element is introduced with a new set of features. Since the features of the initial picture are indispensable for a successful collective practice of freedom, and they turn out to depend on the richer, more complexly articulated features of the new picture for their possibility, these further features can be regarded as indispensable as well. The argument then examines whether the newly characterized collective practice of freedom would, on its own, be self-sufficient, and so on.

The result, if Hegel can pull it off, is a rich and highly differentiated picture of the necessary structure and content of a social world of freedom—one that he thinks would correspond in its essentials with the modern European social world in which he lives. If we are willing to affirm the first, simple model as a necessary part of any successful practice of freedom, then we have reason to affirm and feel reconciled with our own social world as well.

Overall, then, two features of the structure and method of the *Philosophy of Right* are essential to the argument Hegel seeks to make. The book presents a series of shapes of spirit, and it does so in a dialectical fashion. The focus on spirit forces us to keep three distinct balls in the

air at once. It requires that we see the argument of the *Philosophy of Right* as, at once, an analysis of individual agency, of the collective practices of freedom which make possible individual agency, and of the institutional and practical settings in which God achieves self-realization in history through the human world. The use of dialectic means that we have to appreciate the developmental character of Hegel's argument. The argument starts out from a basic and minimal picture of individual agency, collective practice, and God's presence in the human world, and fills out a richer and more concrete picture by showing how further determinations are conditions of the possibility of the initial one.

From property to state

The central assumption of part 1 of the *Philosophy of Right*, entitled 'Abstract Right', is that the agents, or wills, who make up the social world are *persons*. This assumption distinguishes the social world of abstract right from the worlds of morality and ethical life, where agents are assumed not only to be persons but also subjects and members respectively.

Personality, in Hegel's vocabulary, represents the most abstract, immediate, and minimal possible conception of free agency. To be a person is to recognize both that one is confronted by a set of givens—a given natural and social environment—and that one is independent of those givens, that they do not fully determine one's being or activity. It is, in effect, to think of oneself as a maker of choices, capable of imposing one's own will on a given situation.

'Abstract Right' has two main aims relating to its assumption of personality—one positive, the other negative. The positive aim is to determine what institutional shape a collective practice of freedom must take, given the premiss that agents in that world are persons. Hegel's methodological assumption here is that, if we acknowledge the importance of personality, then the argument he makes should give us good reasons to feel reconciled to the institutions and practices in question. The second, negative aim of 'Abstract Right' is to show that a collective practice of freedom involving only persons, and the institutions and practices grounded in personality, would not be viable: unless agents possess subjectivity and membership in addition to personality, their practice of freedom would be self-undermining and even their personality would be at risk.

Hegel addresses the positive task by giving an account of the institutions of property and contract. His analysis of property revolves around two main assertions (§45). The first is that the person is an object to himself—he 'looks' at himself—in his property. The second claim is that it is this experience of being an object to himself that allows him to 'become an actual will'. It is through looking at himself in his property that he develops and reinforces the capacities and self-understandings that make up personality.

In his property, Hegel is arguing, a person can see evidence of his own agency and choices. He makes certain choices and, to the extent that his property is undisturbed by others, his property registers the effects of those choices in a way that is clearly discernible both to him and to others. In this way, he sees himself as someone who does not, and need not, take his situation as given, but who can impose his own will and agency onto his surroundings. This perception of his independence and agency, in turn, helps the individual to develop and sustain his personality itself—helps him to 'become an actual will'. The objective confirmation

from his surroundings encourages the sense of himself as free that is integral to being free. This sense is further encouraged by the recognition of others—mediated by the institution of contract—made possible by the person's self-presentation through his property. Overall, then, Hegel's position is that it is important for individuals to have property because it is important that they develop and sustain their personalities. Property helps to do this because it gives the individual and others a concrete perception of the individual's independence, a perception that confirms (directly and through the recognition of others) the sense of himself as independent that is an essential part of being a person.

This argument for property is, as far as I know, unique in the history of political thought. It does not rely on the controversial ideas of labour-mixing or desert that are familiar from Locke, nor does it appeal to considerations of need or utility. Instead the argument posits a *developmental* connection between property and freedom: having at least some minimal amount of property is crucial for developing and maintaining the capacities involved in free agency. Ironically, Hegel's argument probably finds its greatest echo, not in subsequent theories of property, but in Marx's alienation-based critique of capitalist property relations. For Marx, workers are alienated under capitalism because their predominant mode of interaction with the material world is not one in which their capacities for free personality are given any objective confirmation.

Although the institutions of property and contract are necessary conditions of the development of free agency, Hegel thinks that they represent just one particularly 'abstract' stage in that development. The full actualization of freedom, he maintains, calls for a 'richer', 'more concrete', 'more truly universal' set of institutions and practices, including the family, civil society, and the state. From the previous section we have some idea of what is involved with this development from abstract to concrete. The abstract stages—however necessary they may be—lack self-sufficiency. They are subject to dialectical reversals and internal contradictions, and must be redeemed and made viable by the introduction of new, more concrete determinations.

Why might a collective practice of freedom lack self-sufficiency in this sense? One reason is that an institutional structure operates effectively only if the established rules of conduct that partly constitute it are generally accepted and followed. If, for example, a system of private property is to be established and maintained that has the beneficial consequences for individual development anticipated by Hegel, then people must, in general, respect the property and person of others, keep their contracts, and so on. Following such rules of conduct, however, often means accepting burdens and sacrifices or at least forbearing from actions that are in one's immediate self-interest. One major reason why an institutional structure may lack self-sufficiency, this suggests, is if it fails to imbue people with the disposition to accept the burdens and sacrifices needed for its own maintenance and effective operation.

In the latter part of 'Abstract Right' Hegel argues that property and contract imbue people with motivations and dispositions that lead them to act in ways which actually undermine the institutions of property and contract (§81A). As we know, these institutions encourage agents to think of themselves as independent of their given situations and capable of making choices for themselves. The problem arises because a person as such could choose *any* particular course of action: the notion of personality is neutral with respect to the content of an agent's ends. This is a problem because, as we have seen, the effective operation and survival of the institutions of property and contract depend on agents having certain ends and not having

others: they must keep their contracts and not violate the property of others. If agents are only persons, and have no further incentives, or possess no deeper self-understanding, then it is contingent whether they will actually will the ends necessary for the survival of the institutions required to maintain their personality. In this sense, the very success of a social structure consisting of property and contract at turning agents into persons seems to guarantee its own demise.

This argument is one particular instantiation of a persistent theme in Hegel's social and political thought: the idea that a culture of independent personality and subjectivity has potentially destabilizing implications for the established institutions and practices of a society. In his lectures on history, for instance, Hegel argues that the Presocratic Greeks enjoyed a harmonious social existence in which they habitually fulfilled the tasks and functions that allowed their social order continuously to reproduce itself. It was only when the Sophists introduced the principle of critical reflection, and this principle gradually permeated Greek culture, that the maintenance of the social order was threatened. When individuals began to consult their own particular beliefs and convictions about what to do, rather than reflexively following the customs and conventions of their community, their willingness to accept the burdens and sacrifices needed to keep the community going could no longer be counted on. Hegel goes so far as to read Plato's *Republic* as a profound philosophical attempt to describe what his community would have to do (e.g. banning private property, occupational choice, and the family) in order to forestall the development of the principle of independent personality which threatens it with disintegration (§185).

Hegel's own project, however, is not the Platonic one of finding ways of stifling individuality and subjectivity. Quite to the contrary, his concern is to identify what features of the modern social world make a spirit of independent personality and subjectivity realizable in a stable and self-sustaining way. Indeed, one way of understanding the structure of the remainder of the *Philosophy of Right* is as an attempt to develop a solution to the contradiction set up by the institutions of property and contract. Property and contract are necessary conditions of the development of free agency, but on their own they are self-undermining and so some further elaboration of the institutional structure needed for freedom is required.

One institution introduced by Hegel to this end is punishment: punishment is supposed to orient individuals away from certain ends and towards others by expressing society's condemnation of wrongdoing. Hegel thinks that this is part of the solution to the contradiction he identifies in 'Abstract Right' but not the whole story: so long as agents possess only personality, and not some deeper self-understanding as well, punishment will remain indistinguishable from revenge, and destabilizing conflict will be impossible to avoid (§102).

With its idea of the subject, part II of the *Philosophy of Right*, 'Morality', proposes a quite different sort of corrective to the self-sufficiency problem introduced by property and contract. It suggests that the problem of stabilizing the institutional structure needed to develop free personality could be solved if agents possessed not just personality but also subjectivity (§§103–6). The subject wills ends that are distinctively his own. He has purposes, intentions, and a conscience, and he is a subject only to the extent that his activity is an expression of this inner dimension of his agency. As a bearer of purposes, we can hold the subject responsible. As someone with intentions, we can think of him as enjoying more or less welfare. And as a possessor of a conscience, the subject is related to an idea of the good, which he tries to bring about through his activity. In 'Morality' we have a picture of a social world in which agents

interact with each other not just as persons through the institutions of property, contract, and punishment, but also as subjects, who have their own distinctive ends and a corresponding framework of responsibility, welfare, and goodness. Hegel's thought is that, if the fundamental self-understanding and disposition of individuals is not just one of independent personality but also revolves around willing certain specific ends, then the contradiction afflicting 'Abstract Right' could be resolved.

As with punishment, however, Hegel holds that morality and subjectivity are part of the resolution to that contradiction but not the complete solution. There are two separate problems with the attempt to resolve the contradiction in the way suggested by 'Morality': one concerns the *content* of conscience, the other the *motivation* of individuals. The content problem is simply the problem of whether the ends and duties which individuals find they are committed to after searching their consciences really will be the ones that provide support for the institutional structure needed for the development and maintenance of personality and subjectivity (§§135–41). The motivation problem concerns whether individuals will be disposed to follow their consciences or whether they will prefer to pursue their own personal interests and satisfaction instead. Hegel claims that, on its own, morality is unable to provide either of these guarantees needed to lend self-sufficiency to the institutions he has introduced. In 'Morality', as in 'Abstract Right', it is entirely contingent whether individuals will have the specific ends and motives needed to secure the development of freedom.

Underlying this argument is the assumption that an individual's deepest convictions, values, and motivations are shaped by the social practices and institutions in which he participates. Thus we might expect that given the 'right' social environment individuals would find the 'right' ends in their consciences and the motivation to follow those ends. The problem, however, is that morality, as Hegel understands it, makes no assumptions at all about social practices and institutions (except for property and contract, which introduced the contradiction in the first place). Morality is in effect an attempt to resolve the contradiction arising in 'Abstract Right' in a non-institutional way but is for this very reason bound to fail. Unless certain institutions are in place, there is no reason to suppose that individuals searching their consciences and considering their motives will make decisions that work to stabilize the institutional structure that has been established by the argument so far.

Hegel's third conception of agency is discussed in 'Ethical Life', the lengthiest section of the *Philosophy of Right*. Here agents are conceived of, not merely as persons and subjects, but also as members of certain social institutions: the family, civil society, and the state. These institutions impose various duties on those who occupy the roles they define—the duties, for instance, of parents, of association members, of public officials, and of citizens. They also socialize their members into having the subjective dispositions to support and affirm these duties. 'Ethical Life' is a sphere of virtue, because ethical institutions impose duties on their members and imbue in them the inclination to perform those duties.

The accounts of civil society and the state are among Hegel's best-known contributions to political philosophy. In the discussion of civil society he identifies a realm of market relations, policing and regulatory institutions, and associational life that has profound implications for the social life of a community but which had hardly been acknowledged or theorized in traditional political philosophy. This realm, Hegel argues, has a logic and dynamic of its own that is importantly distinct from those of the isolated individual or family, on the one hand, and

the state, on the other. Hegel is particularly impressed by how market activity and associational life are spheres in which the agent consciously pursues his own satisfaction while, at the same time, unconsciously and indirectly serving the interests of others and realizing some of the conditions of his own freedom.

In contrast to civil society, the state, in Hegel's vocabulary, refers to the set of institutions and practices that are consciously and directly geared around the universal—around, that is, realizing for all citizens the higher good of freedom. The state is made up of sovereign, executive, and legislative powers that have the maintenance of the conditions of freedom for the whole community as the object of their deliberation and knowledge, and make, implement, and apply decisions on this basis. It is also a sphere in which the fundamental dispositions of individuals and officials are other-regarding ones, including civic virtue and patriotism.

Hegel's account of the state is remarkable in several respects. Most strikingly, and notoriously, he lavishes praise on the state, claiming that 'freedom enters into its highest right' (§258) in the state and even asserting that 'the state consists in the march of God in the world' (§258A). In Hegel's view, the state represents the apex of the system of right he has developed throughout the *Philosophy of Right*. It is crucial for the full actualization of freedom, not just that individuals belong to ethical institutions in general, but that they be good citizens of the rational state.

The other notable feature of Hegel's discussion of the state is his account of what exactly constitutes a *rational* state. The state, as Hegel presents it, is a constitutional monarchy with a powerful civil service and a bicameral legislature. Like Plato, Hegel's chief concern is to ensure that those with superior knowledge and virtue occupy key positions of power. He describes a civil service that is specially selected on the basis of merit and then thoroughly trained and socialized into a knowledge of, and commitment to, the universal. To prevent corruption, various institutional checks and balances are introduced. These include cross-cutting memberships of key bodies, as well as the monitoring of public officials from above by the appointed ministers of the monarch and from below by the legislature. Hegel argues against direct legislative elections on the grounds that they give too much free play to the untutored opinions of atomized individuals. But he does think that the views of ordinary people can be appropriately structured and channelled through participation in the communities and associations of civil society, and he argues that a lower house of the legislature should be made up of deputies elected by groups in civil society. These deputies can play an important role, not just in exposing official corruption, but in mediating between the demands and expectations of civil society, on the one hand, and the decisions and laws of the state, on the other.

According to Hegel, the full actualization of freedom can be achieved only if individuals are members of ethical institutions. Freedom is actualized in the ethical life because the institutions and practices of modern ethical life are an integral part of the minimum self-sufficient social setting in which agents can develop and reinforce the capacities for free agency. Ethical life is an indispensable part of such a setting because it is the only environment in which individuals can be reliably expected to acquire the other-regarding ends and dispositions that will encourage them to accept the burdens and sacrifices presupposed by a self-reproducing social order that is hospitable to personality and subjectivity. Hegel's response to the ancients' worries about the destabilizing effects of subjectivity is thus to argue that a social order *can* tolerate a high degree of independent personality and subjectivity but only if a crucial condition is

met. Its citizens must be members of ethical institutions that imbue them with goals, values, convictions, and so forth, such that, when they consult their own opinions and consciences about what to do, the answers they arrive at reinforce that order rather than ripping it apart, as happened, so Hegel thinks, in the ancient world and as recently as the French Revolution.

The claim that the Hegelian state is a necessary part of this structure amounts to the proposition that the ties of sentiment and affection that characterize the family, and those of mutual advantage and collegiality that are found in civil society, are not on their own sufficient to guarantee that people will accept the sacrifices and burdens needed to support a freedom-developing institutional structure. The model of the family is not generalizable because the bonds of affection and sentiment only extend as far as one's close relations and friends, whereas the maintenance of the required institutional structure requires some willingness to accept burdens and sacrifices on behalf of the countless strangers with whom one shares a community. Mutual advantage, the principle of civil society, can have a tremendous integrative effect within the context of an established market economy, but it is much less able to support the background norms, rules, and institutions that make such an economy possible in the first place. The ties of camaraderie and collegiality characteristic of associational life do come closer to stabilizing and unifying a social order hospitable to subjectivity, and so Hegel views it as a transitional institution between the market economy and the state. Still, Hegel thinks that associations are not, on their own, sufficient to stabilize a social order conducive to subjectivity. Because their ends remain 'limited and finite' (§256) and involve only 'particular common interests' (§288), there are forms of conflict and instability that they will not be able to address.

It is only when a social order seeking to accommodate and promote subjectivity includes as its central and overarching institution the Hegelian state that Hegel expects it to be stable and self-sufficient. The Hegelian state performs this function because its central institutions—the sovereign, executive, and legislative powers—effectively and reliably pursue the universal interest: the interest that all have in living in a stable and self-reproducing setting that develops, nourishes, and respects individual subjectivity. These institutions are *effective* in the sense that they have the capacity to stabilize and preserve a social order hospitable to subjectivity against a range of destabilizing shocks and deprivations of both an internal and external nature. The institutions of the Hegelian state are *reliable* in the sense that they do tend to exercise this capacity rather than abusing their power and authority by promoting their own particular interests.

So Hegel thinks that starting from a basic commitment to free personality one is led inevitably, and via a number of familiar ideas and institutions, to a reconciliation with the modern state. If one accepts the minimal idea that the social world should actualize individuals' powers of free personality, then one must also endorse the full set of institutions, practices, and modes of being free that Hegel introduces, because these further determinations are conditions of the possibility of the first.

With the reconstruction of Hegel's argument that I have just sketched, we get a clearer idea of why he associates freedom with specific codes of conduct and, indeed, with good citizenship in the rational state. More open-ended conceptions of freedom are not, on their own, self-sufficient. Unless individuals are oriented to specific duties and virtues—culminating in the virtues of the good citizen—a social order geared around freedom would not be stable and self-reproducing. When an individual realizes the virtues of the good citizen, he is working to

protect and preserve the social and political setting needed for his own freedom to be possible. He is willing his own freedom and, in this sense, enjoys objective as well as subjective freedom.

Hegel's significance

Within a few years of Hegel's death his legacy was already a matter of fierce dispute. For many, Hegel's essential commitment was to an accommodation of the status quo. His claims in the Preface about the rationality of the actual, and his disparaging comments about philosophers who imagine a world as it ought to be, encouraged readers to view the *Philosophy of Right* as a straightforward defence of existing European social life. Over time, and in the context of new political and historical events, this 'right-Hegelian' reading was stretched even further. Hegel was identified as a glorifier of the state, a spokesman for authoritarianism, and even a precursor to twentieth-century Fascism and totalitarianism.

From the start, however, there was also a 'left-Hegelian' reception of Hegel's thought. The left Hegelians emphasized his distinction between 'actuality' and 'existence' (it is only the former that is claimed to be rational, and not all existing social life qualifies as 'actual' in Hegel's sense) and pointed to the many details of the Hegelian state that were not in fact instantiated in the Prussian state of the 1820s. According to some left-Hegelian readings, Hegel was a cautious, liberal reformer, who sought to modernize the Prussia of his time by introducing into its political life as many of the French revolutionary principles as it could digest. In this tradition, numerous post-Second World War scholars have detailed the distortions and anachronisms involved in associating Hegel's name with authoritarian, let alone totalitarian, politics.

Beyond this debate over his place along the conservatism–reformism spectrum, Hegel's influence has shown itself in a number of other areas of social and political thought as well. Marx and Kierkegaard are only the most obvious examples of the generations of European intellectuals that have defined their own projects in opposition to Hegel's. Marx is clearly the most influential of Hegel's followers. Although Marx is strongly critical of Hegel's idealism (dismissing it at times as 'mysticism'), and of his inversion of civil society and state, he acknowledges important debts as well. He takes over Hegel's idea that history displays a rational, progressive character, and shares Hegel's commitment to understanding social reality using the tools of dialectic. As I suggested in the previous section, his early critique of alienation also seems to start from the Hegelian idea that the actualization of an individual's powers of freedom and agency depends on achieving certain forms of interaction with the material and human surroundings.

In contemporary political theory Hegel's name is probably most often associated with communitarianism. His critical engagement with Kant is seen as a forerunner of the contemporary communitarian critique of Rawlsian liberalism. He is credited with exposing the abstract, atomistic character of modern liberalism and with puncturing its universalist pretensions. Present-day communitarians take themselves to be reaching back to Hegel in arguing for a textured, context-oriented, anti-foundationalist political theory focused on the traditions and shared understandings of concrete communities.

Although there is probably a measure of truth in all of these different ways of engaging with Hegel's thought, arguably none of them does full justice to what he was trying to achieve. Least adequate of all is the suggestion that Hegel was some kind of proto-totalitarian glorifier of Prussian authoritarianism. The social and political arrangements laid out in the *Philosophy of Right* bear a much closer resemblance to the Prussia sought by pre-1820 reformers than to the existing Prussian state of the 1820s (let alone twentieth-century Fascism). At the philosophical level Hegel's outlook is even more at odds with the authoritarian tradition. For Hegel, a social order is only worthy of reconciliation if it actualizes freedom, and this means that such an order must respect and promote both subjective and objective freedom.

The communitarian reception of Hegel's thought also risks distorting an essential element in his political theory. Although Hegel does assign an important role to the shared norms and understandings of ethical life in guiding everyday practical reason, he does not simply leave it at that, as some communitarians suggest we should. Hegel also seeks to be shown—indeed it is a major task of the *Philosophy of Right*—that ethical life is an essential part of the actualization of freedom.

The picture of Hegel as a liberal reformer is an improvement on these assessments of his thought, but it fails to capture what is striking and distinctive about Hegel's political theory. As I have tried to bring out in this chapter, one of Hegel's major preoccupations is with the *fragility* of collective practices of freedom. Influenced by the civic humanist tradition in political thought, he is attuned to the vulnerability of those practices to the individualism, egoism, and indifference of those who participate in them. The constant danger is that the social and political settings that encourage freedom will disintegrate into anarchy and chaos or easily be supplanted by oppressive and authoritarian regimes.

For Hegel, however, there is no turning back to a pre-reflective state of social harmony. Once individuality and subjectivity have made their entrance in world history, their claims cannot be denied. The challenge is to discover what features of modern social life allow individuality and subjectivity to flourish in a stable and self-reproducing way. How can a social order realize the principles of the French Revolution without generating the Terror and Napoleon as well? In working through the tensions and ambiguities in Hegel's political outlook—between reformism and conservatism, between liberalism and communitarianism—it is helpful to bear in mind Hegel's preoccupation with this consolidation problem. In the wake of 1989 this is no less a problem for us than it was for the generation that witnessed 1789.

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NOTES

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all parenthetical page and paragraph references are to Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). An 'A' following a paragraph number indicates a reference to one of the 'additions' included in all editions of the *Philosophy of Right* since the 1830s.
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