

HAS HISTORY SHOWN US WE NEED TO MOVE BEYOND HEGEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY?

by Terry Pinkard*

Abstract. *Hegel's philosophy of history seems in many ways too outdated and committed to impossible presuppositions to be viable for us. However, if we take Geist to be more or less equivalent to self-conscious life, and we look at Geist as a species-term, we can begin to see how one might stay within the Hegelian system and still have something to say to the twenty-first century. In particular, if we take up Thomas Khurana's arguments about Kantian and Hegelian freedom as a kind of life giving formation to itself, one is equipped with a way of updating Hegel that remains consistent with his other views. In particular, Hegelian freedom is that of having no authority governing one's thoughts and actions external to oneself. That, however, looks as if it might be empty and therefore useless for action-guiding. In his Logic, Hegel says that all dialectical development sees itself as laying down provisory fixed points (what he calls «tied knots») to give content to what is otherwise an indeterminate movement. The tying and untying of these «knots» is dialectical both in thought and in history. We can also turn to two of Hegel's closest philosophical allies, E. Gans and F.W. Carové, to get an idea about how to take this further.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Freedom; Self-Formation; Knots in the Web*

1. Hegel? Why Hegel?

If we think of what Hegel's philosophy of history has to say to the 21st century, we first have to come to terms with all the things that might be said against it. In the eyes of many, Hegel did create a kind of awe-inspiring narrative that viewed history as the progress of the consciousness of freedom entitling us to think that history had an end at which it was aiming or developing toward and that it was

* Georgetown University

doing so not in terms of any contingent empirical laws but as a matter of the unflinching necessity of logic itself. World history was a totality that could be comprehended. But there was a problem: Seeing history as if it were a logic of ideas – if you think X, you will as a matter of logic be led to Y – simply falsifies history. History is simply not a logic of ideas. It involves material conditions and lots of other contingencies – volcanic eruptions, Europe's little ice age, the invention of coal powered steam engines, etc. – and, although ideas certainly play a part, it's only a part, and many of them may be only the froth at the surface of waves rather than the deeper currents driving the waves themselves (to use Braudel's famous metaphor).

Then, of course, there is Hegel's treatment of all non-European cultures. For him, some of them are simply stalled, perhaps forever, in failing to develop the logic of «the concept» (such as China and India), and he reserved special vehemence for Africans. For Hegel, Africans weren't merely stalled (as supposedly the Chinese were) but were somehow caught forever in something like an extended, unsurmountable 'Lord of the Flies' childhood, unable to fully control themselves or fully plan for the future. Hegel's concept of progress of the consciousness of freedom thus seemed to condemn whole swaths of the globe to a kind of perpetual inferiority in a vain attempt to 'catch up' to the West. They were all hopelessly backward and seemed fated to be unable to catch up with Europe and all its vaunted progressive glory. Since Hegel's own day, the suspicion started to grow and expand that his view not accidentally amounted to little more than a hosanna for the status quo and especially for an ethnic status quo.

Finally, there is just the sheer unbelievability of the idea that history is necessarily heading for a happy ending. The twentieth century and its horrors offered itself as an argument against that – even given the uproariously delusional celebration of the 'end of history' around 1989 – and the twenty first century so far hasn't exactly crafted any basis for a renewal of optimism about progress in history. If philosophy is indeed its own time grasped in thought, as Hegel said in his 1820 *Philosophy of Right*, then both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries seemed not without warrant to demand of Hegelians that they recast a large portion of his system. As John Dewey remarked with dripping irony in 1916 about Hegel's

conception of world historical individuals: «One can only regret that he died before his contemplative piety could behold Bismarck»¹.

One common thread of replies to these worries involves some version of updating Hegel which usually simply amounts to denying that some objectionable thesis Hegel obviously holds really is consistent with what Hegel supposedly more basically holds, and once that is done, Hegel ends up agreeing with some version or another of what the person updating Hegel currently holds. (All the rejections of Hegel's views on women that abound in the literature would be an example. It's an easy case since Hegel's views on women really are ridiculous by current standards.) That kind of mere consistency with our own views, though, is hardly a substantive criterion for deciding what to hold onto in Hegel's thought.

What I am proposing here is that the key to answering the question 'Why Hegel?' lies in the way he himself speaks of his great and disputed term *Geist*. In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel says, in distinguishing «soul» from «spirit»: «spirit is the being-for-itself of conscious and self-conscious life with all the feelings, ideas, and aims of this conscious existent»². If, following Hegel's own lead, we take *Geist* to be equivalent to self-conscious life, then the issue for Hegel would be to see if there really is anything that self-conscious life as a whole is collectively trying to achieve and whether, from Hegel's point of view, there is any logic of any sort to the development of self-conscious life over time³. In all of this, *Geist* has a special problem: Itself.

¹ J. Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, in Id., *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 8, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1979, p. 194.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in 20 Bänden* (henceforth cited as TW, followed by the number of the respective volume), ed. by K.M. Michel, E. Moldenhauer, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, vol. 14, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, p. 367; trans. by T.M. Knox, *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 714 (translation altered and italicizing added by me).

³ To see *Geist* as equivalent to self-conscious life (taken as denoting a species) might seem to be taking simply a straightforwardly deflationary turn in Hegel interpretation. However, to see it as deflationary means that the normal or perhaps more obvious way of taking *Geist* (for example, as God) is the standard and one that is 'deflating' that 'high' (but itself otherwise not 'inflated') standard. So is there any

As self-conscious, it seeks a comprehension of itself (through art, religion and philosophy), and from the standpoint of the philosophy of history, this is the problem that envelops all its other problems. *Geist* is, to use a Heideggerian formulation, the being for whom its

more justification for doing so? Well, Hegel does speak in the *Phenomenology* of self-conscious life as a «genus» (*Gattung*) that is aware of itself *as* a genus, indicating that he thinks of the genus of «self-conscious life» not as an additive matter (of «life» plus «self-consciousness» added onto it) but as a wholly new species itself (and thus warranting a new name: *Geist*). The distinction between additive and non-additive ways of thinking of rational life has been made by Matthew Boyle in his very influential paper, M. Boyle, *Additive Theories of Rationality: A Critique*, «European Journal of Philosophy», XXIV (3), 2016, pp. 527-555. Hegel's paragraph is worth citing in full: «But this other life for which the genus as such is and which is the genus for itself, namely, self-consciousness, initially is, to itself, only as this simple essence and, to itself, is an object as the pure I. In its experience, which is now up for examination, this abstract object will, to itself, become enriched and will contain the development that we have seen in life». G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, TW 3, p. 143; trans. by T. Pinkard, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018, § 173, p. 106. Four paragraphs later, Hegel identifies this as *Geist*: «The concept of spirit is thereby present and available for us [...] The I that is we and the we that is I». Ivi, p. 145; trans. § 177, p. 108. In the *Philosophy of Right*, there is of course also Hegel's invocation of a «shape of life» to account for this unity of «I» and «we» (a *Gestalt des Lebens*, which could also be rendered as a «form of life»). And as for rendering *Geist* (especially the *Weltgeist*, the subject of history) as God, Hegel notes «This universal spirit or world spirit is not the same thing as God. It is the rationality of the spirit in its worldly existence. Its movement is such that it makes itself what it is, i.e. what its concept is. This movement is rational, and in accord with the divine spirit. God is the spirit in his community; he lives and really exists in it. The world spirit is the system of this process whereby the spirit produces for itself the true concept of its own nature». G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte, Band 1: Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, Hamburg, F. Meiner, 1994 (henceforth cited as ViG), p. 262; trans. by H.B. Nisbet, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, Reason in History, Additions of 1826-7*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1975 (henceforth cited as LPWH), pp. 212-213.

being is an issue. Philosophically seen, history in all its multifariousness is to be viewed as the developing background of a comprehension of *that* problem. Seeing *Geist* in this way also puts us in a position to come to an important conclusion about at least one of the key conceptions Hegel took from Kant and also where he departed from the Kantian viewpoint so that we can understand the implications of Hegel's statement in his *Logic* that «It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the Critique of Reason that the unity which constitutes the essence of the concept is recognized as the original synthetic unity of apperception, the unity of the 'I think' or of self-consciousness»⁴.

2. *Self-formation: Freedom as Showing Itself*

For Hegel, «mediation» is the name of the game, so the philosophical problem of a self-comprehension of self-conscious life for what it is cannot be determined without a more detailed look at the details of history – of changes in forms of government, the development of technology, the distinction or lack thereof between the public and the private, and so on. This includes elements of human nature itself: our aggressiveness, our more natural sympathies for those of our own kind, and so on. We are not rational angels, nor could we ever be such. However, what we make of this, and in particular what statuses we inhabit in a social world are up to us. Even if the desire for social status or the need for recognition of some kind of status are (whatever it might mean) wired into us, what we make of that status is not itself wired into us, and the status of status can range from tribal egalitarianism, anarchism, or to humble and full submission to a sovereign (among the many possibilities).

What distinguishes Hegel's answer to those worries is not just another hypothesis about what really drives humans. It is his theory of self-conscious life – *Geist* – as both a species and an individual concept. His theory of self-conscious life, which he first develops in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then later in his *Science of Logic*, his

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik II*, TW 6, p 254; trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 515.

Encyclopedia and above all in his lectures, finds its key to be that of freedom. Hegel builds his conception of freedom out of both Greek sources – particularly drawn from Thucydides and Aristotle –and from Kant’s own conception of freedom. What Hegel takes from Kant is the Kantian idea of giving a rational form to oneself in one’s actions (which in Kant’s case means subjecting our maxims of action to a test of universalist rationality – Kant’s categorical imperative). Creatures who otherwise are efficient and intelligent means-ends thinkers become agents (or «subjects» in the language of German idealism) who are bound by more than the conditional imperatives arising out of means-end reasoning by constituting a full rational form to themselves. Or, as we might put it, these organisms become agents when they manifest a (universally) rational form to their lives.

On this view, abstractly put, the Kantian conception of freedom consists in giving a «law» to oneself of which one can regard oneself as the author. As Thomas Khurana has argued, the decisive question for Kant with regard to this kind of form-giving is not simply whether a maxim is or could be a universal law – as Kant is often taken to be saying – but whether we *can will it* to become universal law, that is, by way of «a form of practical knowledge that knows something to be good by virtue of willing it in a particular manner»⁵. This is not to say that the moral law is a question of our arbitrary positing, but, on the contrary, that it is the law of our self-constitution as subjects of will. As Khurana puts it, «Autonomy means [...] not self-legislation but a lawfulness-of-one’s own [*Eigengesetzlichkeit*]», or, as Aristotle would have put it, being a law unto oneself, and in doing that, we «actualize ourselves» as the rational agents we potentially are⁶.

Kant nonetheless had to hold nature and freedom to be at odds with one another, and although Kant could have played around with his own idea in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, namely, that life itself as self-organizing could be the mediating term between our organic nature and the form we give ourselves in our practical lives

⁵ T. Khurana, *Das Leben der Freiheit: Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2017, p. 58.

⁶ See *ivi*, p. 83.

through reason, he did not. Kant failed to take up what Khurana calls our «self-constitution» (or *Selbsthervorbringung*, a kind of bringing-forth of oneself) which is already implicit in the Kantian idea of giving form to oneself⁷. However, in the Kantian framework, neither all the king's horses nor all the king's men can put nature and freedom back together again, and Kant thus did not make that move even though his own work suggested it (and the later idealists took him up on it)⁸.

3. *Giving Form to Oneself: From Logic back to Phenomenology*

Hegel picked up the concept of giving form to oneself but broadened it out to an idea of giving a form to oneself in terms of some more general and comprehensive conception of oneself and the world. He did this in two different ways. In his *Logic*, he argued that a consistent way of making sense of the necessary form of the world involves both individual things with determinate properties that distinguish them from other things and quantitative measures for those things (how many of them are there and so on), which he calls the logic of Being⁹. That logic itself does not make full sense until there is also a logic of Essence, that is, a logic of explanation by appeal to an underlying ground behind the appearance that explains why the world of individuals things takes the shape it does. That in turn culminated in what Hegel called the Absolute, the form of the

⁷ See *ivi*, p. 336.

⁸ Instead, Kant displaced that idea into aesthetic experience, in which as he put it, we are related to «something in the subject itself and outside of it, which is neither nature nor freedom, but which is connected with the ground of the latter, namely the supersensible, in which the theoretical faculty is combined with the practical, in a mutual and unknown way, to form a unity» I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilstkraft*, Hamburg, F. Meiner, 2001, p. 256; trans. by P. Guyer, *Critique of the power of judgment*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Pres, 2000, p. 227.

⁹ It is a subtlety but Hegel distinguishes quantitative accounts («How many of them?») from quantitative measures such as «How big does a stream have to get before it is labeled as a river?».

world taking on a Spinozist shape. The form of the world of individual things gets concatenated into certain kinds of shapes of the world as a whole, and the underlying structures of explanation explain why the world takes the shapes it does. The world of individual things ('Being') is immediate to us, is the world as we find it, and the world as explained by the essential underlying structures ('Essence') is a reflected world, that is, the world as we think it must be. The account of this world, which taken as a whole, would be actuality as the 'Absolute' which, as Spinoza had argued, is an intelligible world, but which cannot in its own terms account for its own intelligibility. This actuality as the Absolute is the substance of the world which represents itself as the unity of the world as we find it and the world which appears to reflection when both are taken together as the whole¹⁰. The unity of the world and the reflected world is all that is the case, i.e., is absolute. Taken as such, the substance of the world is like the light of nature¹¹ – it illuminates everything else but itself. Instead, it can only «manifest itself» or «show itself» in its capacity to illuminate the things of the world¹². It does not and cannot illuminate itself. As such, it remains apart from all

¹⁰ It is another issue entirely, but Hegel distinguishes what he calls «external reflection» from reflection proper. External reflection starts with a given (e.g., «the light doesn't come on when I flick the switch») and by reflection makes an inference to the best explanation («The power has gone out»). Reflection proper (fitting with the program of the *Logic*) starts with something arrived at and moves to what is logically required for that to be what it is. That something must have a cause would be a matter of reflection proper. That this in particular is the cause (e.g., «The wiring overheated, which caused the fire») would be a matter of external reflection. He carefully draws that distinction in TW 6, pp. 31-32; trans. pp. 350-351.

¹¹ «As the *light* of nature is not something, nor is it a thing, but rather its Being is only its appearing [*Scheinen*], so the manifestation is the absolute self-equal actuality». Ivi, p. 218; trans. p. 489.

¹² «The blind transition of necessity is rather the Absolute's own explication [*Auslegung*], the movement of the same in itself, which rather in its relinquishing shows itself [*sich selbst zeigt*]». Ivi, p. 217; trans. p. 588 (translation altered).

discursive form and is thus discursively empty¹³. The substance of the world, Hegel says, «shows itself» in a way that it cannot say but can nonetheless manifest. It itself is the form of the world, of the 'absolute' as logic.

The conception of the 'Absolute' as showing itself – as the light of nature that cannot illuminate itself – turns out to fall short of making full sense. Left to their own, the first two books of the *Logic* (Being and Essence, which as Hegel says «takes the place rather of the former metaphysics which was supposed to be the scientific edifice of the world as constructed by thoughts alone»¹⁴) turn out to break down in terms of making sense, and it is this contradiction that pushes the discussion into the 'Concept'. The world as a self-enclosed system of reciprocal causation is absolute, all that is the case, is at one with the self-conscious thought of that world. The claims about the world and the self-conscious thoughts about what one is doing in making those claims are, to borrow an idea from Richard Moran, «transparent» to each other¹⁵, that is, different but the same, the «difference that is no difference» (as Hegel characterizes self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology*)¹⁶. What is *showing* the sense of

¹³ «To this extent, the determination of what the Absolute is turns out to be negative, and the Absolute itself appears only as the negation of all predicates and as emptiness». Ivi, p. 187; trans. p. 466 (translation altered).

¹⁴ TW 5, p. 61; trans. p. 42.

¹⁵ R. Moran, *Authority and estrangement: an essay on self-knowledge*, Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 61. This idea of transparency as applied to self-consciousness is given a thorough treatment (although in a more robustly Sartrean spirit) in M. Boyle, *Transparency and reflection: a study of self-knowledge and the nature of mind*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2024.

¹⁶ TW 3, p. 199; trans. p. 153. This should also put to rest the idea that stressing *self-conscious* life in Hegel's work makes Hegel too Kantian, as if Hegel were saying that we impose thought-categories on reality. Hegel's point is that the world-directedness of judgments (such as 'the cat is on the mat') and our belief that the cat is on the mat are distinguishable but not separable from each other in any account of knowing or acting. Moreover, this transparency or «difference that is no difference» is transformative of agency. Hegel is very clear that although the 'form' of self-consciousness is empty, nonetheless as he puts it «this form makes a huge

the world is not another link in the causal chain but the manifestation of sense-making itself, and that transforms itself into a different kind of account: That of the «subjective logic» as Hegel calls it, to which he gives the singular name, «the Concept». It is the Hegelian successor to the Kantian pure apperception, and it emerges not in addition to Being and Essence but emerges out of Being and Essence. «The determinateness of spirit», Hegel says, «is therefore that of manifestation [...] so that it does not reveal something, but its determinateness and content is this revealing itself»¹⁷. The light of nature shining the light of intelligibility is us, and the non-discursive ‘absolute’ gives way to the fully discursive theory of the syllogism (i.e., inference) and the way in which the abstract concepts of ‘Being’ and ‘Essence’ modify themselves in thinking of the holistic way that they are put to use in contexts of judgment.

Hegel identifies freedom as residing in this capacity on *Geist*’s part to distinguish itself from itself in manifesting the sense of the world around itself. In this way, *Geist* is like a linguistic practice: The practice is not an independent abstract structure on its own but shows itself in the participation of distinct agents who exhibit in their acts the practice itself. Put more colloquially: English exists only in the activities of speakers of English, but speakers of English exist only in light of the practice (the language) they are exhibiting. One is not causing the other, and the whole is not an additive collection of parts.

In the *Phenomenology*, the concept of freedom arises with the discussion of the necessity of self-consciousness, which first emerges at the end of the chapter on «consciousness». That chapter focused on consciousness of objects which pushed itself into an awareness of more than just an additive sum of different objects of consciousness but of the totality of the world – what Hegel calls «infinity»¹⁸ – that

difference. It is on this difference that all of the difference in world history rests». Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I*, TW 18, p. 40.

¹⁷ Id., *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III*, TW 10, § 383, p. 27.

¹⁸ See TW 3, p. 134; trans. p. 100: «While this concept of infinity is, to consciousness, the object, it is therefore consciousness of the difference as likewise immediately sublated; consciousness is *for itself*, it is a *distinguishing of what is not*

is, of the world as all that is the case, including within itself self-conscious thinkers who at first (within the standpoint of 'consciousness') seem to take the experienced world of objects and collections of objects as one thing, and the totality which explains the connections among all these different objects as another thing. The totality shows itself within the acts of a self-conscious being but as a reflected totality, as an object of 'thought' and not 'consciousness' (as in Hegel's later *Logic*, subjectivity as self-consciousness also is said to «show itself» in these acts of making sense of things).

Thus, in the *Phenomenology's* account, *Geist* is initially comprehended in terms of each individual exhibiting *Geist* in their individual activities. At first, that is comprehended immediately: As living organisms, agents act in terms of the whole they exhibit, which life itself in terms of the species to which they belong, and to the extent that this is immediately known – non-inferentially, so it would seem – there is no basic philosophical problem. Each person knows this, and each takes himself or herself to have the authority to speak for the whole: This is the way we do things, this is the way it is done. However, self-consciousness is the worm in the apple. As fully and immediately absorbed in its life, self-conscious agency faces no big philosophical issue with itself, but as self-conscious it cannot remain fully absorbed in its life – «consciousness therefore suffers this violence at its own hands and brings to ruin its own restricted satisfaction»¹⁹. Since consciousness can construct representations of possible states of affairs which, although possible, may not be actual, consciousness is itself negativity and is thus self-consciousness, a distinguishing itself from itself without there being any real distinction between the two moments. As a living creature, the human agent is bound up socially with others of his type. (He is a social animal.) As a self-conscious creature, not fully absorbed in life, and as a linguistic creature, the agent seeks a kind of self-sufficiency apart from his kind, to be his own person. But, as all readers of the *Phenomenology* know,

distinct, or it is self-consciousness». Hegel also remarks in two places in the *Phenomenology* that language is the existence of Spirit. Spirit does not exist except as being exhibited by the actors participating in it.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 74; trans. p. 54.

this eventuates in a failed enterprise of acquiring self-sufficiency by securing the servile recognition of another as his self-sufficiency, which fails because the vaunted recognition as self-sufficient makes the master dependent on the continued recognition by the consciousness enmeshed in servitude.

In the struggle for recognition, the slave loses his own claim to independence, and although the master seems at first to have vouchsafed independence for himself, both master and slave find that each remain dependent on the other. In that recognition of mutual dependency, the failure to achieve complete self-sufficiency dialectically transforms itself into something else related to it that emerges as a response to the particular failures in the aim of securing independence. If in owning slaves, I alas cannot achieve full independence, nonetheless I can achieve something even better that the slave cannot have, namely, freedom. The master commands, the slave obeys, and this kind of sovereignty on the part of the master – I command but cannot be commanded by another – is the status of a freeman. In such sovereign freedom, I am, in Hegel's terms, *bei mir selbst*, at one with myself, alone with myself. The freeman, as Aristotle observes, is somebody not at the beck and call of another, that is, somebody who cannot be commanded by another²⁰. Freedom emerges as a concept in ancient Greece as the negation of servitude (most of all, as the negation of slavery), leading Hegel to conclude that «the democratic constitution alone was fitting for this spirit and this state»²¹. This is the assembly of freemen none of whom has intrinsically the authority to command others nor to be commanded by others, and in which any such individual with the authority to command (as for example, a general in the army²²) has to be granted by the assembly as a whole. It remains unstable since it consists in the mutual recognition of independent freemen that they have the right to command their slaves (and their wives and children) whereas none of the others has any right to

²⁰ See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *The basic works of Aristotle*, ed. by R. McKeon, New York, Random House, 1941, p. 1356.

²¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, TW 12, p. 306.

²² «Even if, for example, the people decide in favor of war, as they do in democracies, a general must still be put in charge to lead the army». Ivi, p. 62.

command them. It forms an unstable collection of petit sovereigns whose bond to each other has to rest on something else, which Hegel took to be the aesthetic condition of ancient Greece. Each spoke with the authority of the whole in each seeing himself as participants in a beautiful practice.

This was Hegel's own picture of self-formation as having no authority outside of oneself, and it was deeply social in character²³. The unity of the freemen in the ancient polis depended on each fulfilling the requirements of their place in that order (including the slaves understanding themselves to be bound to their servitude and of the women to their unchangeable social inferiority). Its contradictions within itself are only too obvious in retrospect, and so with no surprise for those born much later, it too ultimately failed in achieving what it took itself to be aiming at. Out of that came yet another conception of freedom as a kind of inward sovereignty: Not commanding others but commanding oneself as free from the authority of others. The ancient philosophical doctrines of stoicism and skepticism were the dialectical response to this. Whether in chains or on the throne, one could be free in thought, in oneself. Stoicism and skepticism also likewise failed, and the result was the idea that once there had been the promise of freedom as self-formation, that freedom as the unity of self-formation and communal formation remained the unachievable ideal, so that one was in fact caught in the seemingly endless position of being an unsatisfied, unhappy consciousness: Knowing the ideal while realizing its impossibility and adapting oneself as best one could to an alienated, unsatisfactory never ending present. The only success of the unhappy consciousness lay in its comprehension of its own necessary failure.

The dialectical result of the unhappy consciousness succeeding only in its knowing that it must fail, is, however, the sharpening of the concept of the ideal: It would be a social world in which fully self-conscious individuals, each knowing that each is free in

²³ Hegel notes something like this in his marginal comment to §57 in the *Philosophy of Right*: «Mensch muß sich selbst formieren. Ist geschichtlich, d. h. gehört in die Zeit, in die Geschichte vor Freiheit – da ist Geschichte». (Man must form himself. Is historical, i.e. belongs within time, to the history prior to freedom – it is there that history is.) Id., *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, TW 7, p. 124.

themselves and thus knowing that subordination to an external authority that cannot be squared with the consciousness of their own freedom, but which, for contingent reasons, may prove to be practically inescapable as a matter of *force majeure*. What would be required would instead be a system of associated life in which each was dependent on others in such a way that each could maintain their own independence and be their own person – such that individual independence would be secured by a specific kind of mutual dependence (on, for example, reciprocal dependence on the rule of law). In Hegel's ultra-condensed statement of it, it would be, that of being at one with oneself in not just any other but in 'this' other (either a particular person or particular community)²⁴. The unhappy consciousness thinks that in the real world, this is on the whole practically unachievable, and that is why the unhappy consciousness necessarily remains unhappy and necessarily unconsolated. It may from time to time deceive itself about various possibilities of such consolation, but the necessities bound up in its outlook bounce back to undo such false hopes.

The origin of the concept of freedom, as people like the sociologist Orlando Patterson have argued, is inextricably bound up with the horrendous fact of slavery, of condemning some to social death, the status of having no status, no authority, no place in the social order except for being subject to the commands of others. However, the concept of freedom remains in Hegel's telling so that once individuals and peoples have formed even an abstract idea of it, it comes to possess an «insatiable strength» since it is «spirit's own essence»

²⁴ «Then the third moment is that 'I' is with itself (*bei sich selbst sei*) in its limitation, in this other; as it determines itself, it nevertheless still remains with itself and does not cease to hold fast to the universal. This, then, is the concrete concept of freedom, whereas the two previous moments have been found to be thoroughly abstract and one-sided. But we already possess this freedom in the form of feeling, for example in friendship and love. Here, we are not one-sidedly within ourselves, but willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves» TW 7, p. 57; transl. by A.W. Wood, *Elements of the philosophy of right*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, \$7, p. 42.

itself²⁵. It is not present in all of history but having formed itself out of the horror of the slave states of antiquity (Greece and Rome) as being the very essence of what the slave loses in being or becoming enslaved, and as it became incorporated into the subjective lives of individuals, it turned into one of several driving forces of history, eventually becoming the whole point of history itself. Or so Hegel thought.

There is, however, a philosophical problem with this conception of freedom which also turns out to be a real problem in the movement of history itself. If freedom is giving form to oneself independently of any external authority – so that freedom is exercising an authority over oneself – then it also seems to be a completely empty concept. In many ways, this was Kant's great insight. We are not really free to the extent that we are bound to only means-ends reasoning. We remain subject to the contingencies of the world, and in all too many cases, we are not the best judges of what means are more suitable with what ends. In those cases, we must rely on others to guide us or even order us around. The secretary to a great lord of the manner must defer to the carriage maker in matters of carriage construction and cost. (In Kant's famous term, we remain heteronomous in such matters.) However, freeing ourselves from all such means-ends reasoning seems to free ourselves for nothing or for just pure freedom itself, and Kant's ethical theory was put forward to resolve that issue and show that we can indeed non-instrumentally give content to what otherwise looks like a fully empty project.

Hegel was skeptical about that. Kant thought that the required universalization of maxims logically entails treating all humanity as an end in itself since each person must regard himself as an end in itself, and thus in an ideal kingdom of ends, each would automatically grant the same status to others. However, in the non-ideal (or what we could call the real) world it does not follow that taking myself as an end in itself requires me to take you in the same way²⁶. In

²⁵ TW 10, § 482, p. 301.

²⁶ See chapter three, *On Giving Oneself the Law* in R.B. Pippin, *Hegel's practical philosophy: rational agency as ethical life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

that world, you very well might be merely a means to my ends even if you yourself object to it. Absent some other substantive principles, there is no contradiction in my acknowledging that you yourself fully reject such treatment of yourself and my simultaneous belief that you really are merely a means to my ends.

This of course might suggest that Hegel's own charge against Kant of emptiness simply rebounds against Hegel's own conception. Hegel acknowledges this in any number of places. Rather famously he says of such a conception in his *Philosophy of Right* that the «posited content may be given by nature or generated by the concept of spirit», indicating that the simple idea of spirit answering to no other authority than itself must be countered in some kind of second move by an appeal to something else to give it any direction or that the concept of spirit itself implies some kind of content²⁷.

One obvious way such content would be generated by the concept of spirit would be an appeal to traditions and practices, and Hegel has often been read that way. On that reading, what we ought to do is determined by an appeal to facts about what we have been doing all along, and the only freedom we could have would be following the factual guidelines laid down by our community's practices. Our consolation in that lies in the fact that our community has instituted those norms and guidelines itself, but nonetheless, in subscribing to them, we either remain heteronomous – I follow these in order to be or remain a full member of my community – or we might be thought necessarily to have some non-motivated pure choice to identify with them, or it is just a fact about us that we identify with those practices – a fact about who we are (as a fact like having brown hair or using our eyes for sight), even if for that matter, as a matter of our finitude and facticity we are 'attuned', as the Heideggerians say, to those guidelines.

Such content as generated by the concept of *Geist* must be both normative and explanatory and include both a conception of explaining actions, of getting a sense of people doing such and such because they take it that this is a standard of rightness or goodness in what they are doing, and of their own interpretive sense of what that

²⁷ See TW 7, p. 52; trans. p. 39.

requires²⁸. The form of the self-conscious form of life should not be taken to be that of a general concept or rule which has instances of itself. (That is the way 'the understanding' in Hegel's sense would take it.) It must rest instead on something like a 'practice' in which the practice shows itself in the individual acts that manifest the practice. Without the manifestations, there is no practice, and without the practice, there are no such manifestations²⁹. Each individual actor is a concrete universal to himself in that each is the bearer of a form that unites him with all others³⁰.

²⁸ This has much in common with Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following (about which a metaphorical ton has already been written). There are important connections to Hegel's views in Wittgenstein's discussion which have been importantly drawn not in terms of a mere comparison but in terms of where the arguments are going. See M. Haase, *The Laws of Thought and the Power of Thinking*, «Canadian Journal of Philosophy», XXXV, 2011, pp. 249-297; Id., *Three Forms of the First Person Plural*, in *Rethinking Epistemology*, ed. by A. Günter and C. James, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 229-256; Id., *Geist und Gewohnheit: Hegels Begriff der anthropologischen Differenz*, in *Selbstbewusstes Leben*, ed. by C. Kietzmann and A. Kern, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017, pp. 389-426; Id. with W. Gobsch, *Philosophie des Pöbels*, in *Orientierung durch Kritik: Essays zum philosophischen Werk Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofers*, ed. by W. Gobsch and J. Held, Hamburg, Meiner, 2021. See also T. Pinkard, *Forms of Thought, Forms of Life*, in *Wittgenstein and Hegel: Reevaluation of Difference*, ed. by J. Mácha and A. Berg, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2019; Id., *Saying, Showing, Thinking, Meaning, Understanding – The Connecting Threads from Kant to Wittgenstein*, in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Analytic Philosophy*, ed. by J. Conant and J. Held, London, Palgrave, forthcoming.

²⁹ This is, I take it, what Wittgenstein is getting at when he notes «In order to describe the phenomenon of language, one must describe a praxis, not a one-time occurrence no matter what kind it may be» («Um das Phänomen der Sprache zu beschreiben, muß man eine Praxis beschreiben, nicht einen einmaligen Vorgang, welcher Art immer er sei»). L. Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1974, p. 335. See also the discussion in Haase, *Three Forms*.

³⁰ See ViG, p. 138; LPWH, p. 116. Hegel makes one of his relatively more clear statements about how this kind of holistic, dialectical unity is to be conceived:

The standards which give content to thought and action thus are those that follow from the form of life that is *Geist* – that is, self-conscious life. It is thus tempting to interpret Hegel as committed to the view that whatever expresses the human form of life is a form of freedom. Hegel's point is that the relative indeterminacy brought on by self-consciousness and the division within *Geist* because of self-consciousness means that at different times and different places, different forms of life will have different expressions³¹. For many, that will sound like a particularly lazy version of relativism. However, as even casual readers of Hegel's philosophy of history know, this is also embedded in a conception of history as progress of sorts in which these different times are all knitted together. The progress in question is not that of freedom but a progress in the consciousness of freedom, in the extent of how aware one is about where one's freedom lies.

Each of these different shapes of *Geist* is a communal self-formation with freedom as its hidden core. To be free, as we have seen, is to think and act in terms of an authority that is not external to oneself. Freedom is thus not connecting to a metaphysical realm that is beyond the world of experience, nor is it the exercise of some exotic causality, nor is it equivalent to expressing oneself or one's «essence», nor is it self-realization. Freedom has to do with *knowing* that you are free, knowing that you are subject to no alien authority. Hegel states this upfront: «the only difference between African and Asiatic peoples and those of Greece, Rome and modern times is just this: That the latter know, it is for them, that they are free, that this exists for them. The former are also free, but they do not know it, and they do not exist as free»³². (For now, we can simply set aside Hegel's

«The state itself is an abstraction which has its purely universal reality in the citizens who belong to it; but it does have reality, and its purely universal existence must take a determinate form in the will and activity of individuals».

³¹ See ViG, p. 157; LPWH 131: «We must merely note for the present that *Geist* begins in a state of infinite potentiality – but no more than potentiality – which contains its absolute substance as something as yet in-itself [*das Ansich*], as the object and goal which it only attains as the end result in which it at last achieves its actuality» (translation altered).

³² TW 18, p. 40.

remarks on Asiatic peoples and Africans. He was wrong on those points, and criticizing him for holding those views is nowadays a bit like shooting fish in a barrel. But, as easy as it is to engage in virtue signaling by jumping all over him on this point, I shall put that discussion off until later.) Freedom involves *knowing* by what authority one thinks and acts, and full freedom realizes itself when one realizes that the authority lies with oneself and one can make that real, actual, and, as is always the case in Hegel's thought, this conception of authority cannot become real (*wirklich*, actual) unless certain social conditions are met, and that the historically indexed conceptions of authority may under social and reflective pressure unravel.

The capacity for freedom lies therefore in self-consciousness itself and the distance within oneself from oneself that it brings with it. Self-consciousness, however, taken apart from its embodied and historical setting is empty. Hegel calls it a «contentless form»³³ and says about the relation that self-consciousness establishes with itself and its environment that «The person (*Mensch*) who in itself (*an sich*) is rational has not made any further progress when he is rational for himself. The in itself is preserved, and, nonetheless, the distinction is enormous. No new content emerges, but yet this form is an enormous difference. All of the difference in world history rests on this distinction»³⁴. The «form» of which Hegel speaks is the form of self-conscious life itself.

If freedom is not to be empty and abstract, the standards must come from outside the merely empty form of self-consciousness. That form involves reason, which itself must develop historically. Thus, all we have to go on is our own open-ended sense of what, as members of this or that historical community (or communities), we are supposed to do in the concrete circumstances.

³³ TW 3, p. 579; trans. p. 457: «The unification of both aspects has not yet been shown; that unification wraps up this series of shapes of spirit, for in it spirit arrives at the point where it knows itself not only as it is *in itself*, or according to its absolute *content*, and not only as it is *for itself* according to its contentless form, or according to the aspect of self-consciousness. Rather, it knows itself as it is *in and for itself*».

³⁴ TW 18, p. 40.

That in turn seems to invite the lazy relativist reading of history back again. As we saw at the beginning, one of the charges against Hegel was that he conflated how one would approach the history of ideas with the actual events of history. (This has a basis in terms of how Hegel formed the lineaments of his philosophy of history in his 1807 *Phenomenology*³⁵). Hegel incorporated the contingency of history more explicitly in his later course of lectures on the topic. Moreover, Eduard Gans, in his own lectures on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in Berlin (with Hegel's blessing), pointed out that for Hegel (and him) «History will forever stand in contradiction to right; history does not follow its course in syllogisms»³⁶. To the extent that Gans and Hegel were in close contact and that Hegel supported Gans' reading, this offers us some opening to rethink Hegel's ideas on that.

4. *Knots in the Development*

Although this of course might come as a surprise to more traditional interpreters of Hegel's philosophy of history, the key to understanding how this hangs together comes from Hegel's own description of his views in his *Science of Logic* where Hegel speaks of his system of thoughts as a web:

³⁵ Eckart Förster has argued – I think very convincingly – that Hegel changed his mind about the nature of the book he was writing about halfway through. He was both lecturing on the history of philosophy and becoming acquainted with Goethe's work on the metamorphosis of plants. Out of those two influences and what he had already written for his book, he came to the idea that *Geist* itself could metamorphosize into different forms and like the history of philosophy, those metamorphoses might manifest a kind of rational structure to themselves. See E. Förster, *The twenty-five years of philosophy: a systematic reconstruction*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2012.

³⁶ E. Gans and J. Braun, *Naturrecht und Universalrechtsgeschichte: Vorlesungen nach G.W.F. Hegel*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2005, p. 216. «Ewig wird die Geschichte mit dem Recht in Widerspruch sein, die Geschichte wandelt nicht im Syllogismus» (This is taken from Immanuel Hegel's – Hegel's son's – notes on Gans' lectures. The course was given in 1832-1833, one year after Hegel's death).

Here and there in this web [*in diesem Netze*] there are knots, more firmly tied than others, which give stability and direction to the life and consciousness of spirit; they owe their firmness and power simply to the fact that, having been brought before consciousness, they stand as independent concepts of its essential nature. The most important point for the nature of spirit is the relation, not only of what it implicitly is *in itself* to what it *actually* is, but of what it knows *itself* to be to what it actually is; because spirit is essentially consciousness, this self-knowledge is a fundamental determination of its actuality³⁷.

Just as in a system of thought, history too forms a «web» in which there are «knots» that are tied. Hegel notes that amidst the swirling chaos of history, *Geist* confronts special problems for itself – some self-made, some simply the result of natural forces – and

the solution of its problem creates new problems for it to solve, so that it multiplies the materials on which it operates. Thus we see how the spirit in history issues forth in innumerable directions, indulging and satisfying itself in them all [...] Each of the creations in which it found temporary satisfaction presents itself in turn as a new material, challenging the spirit to develop it further still³⁸.

Geist is moving forward in time, confronting its problems, finding solutions, finding that the solutions themselves create new problems in their wake and sometimes undermining the initial solution itself. In the churn of historical movement, some fixed points precipitate and form more solid ground for new movement. In that movement, even the most fixed of all such ‘tied knots’ are at any time revisable. Mastery and servitude as the basis of political unity may function for a long time as a fixed knot but then unravel – perhaps slowly and then more rapidly – as new ideas along with new technologies and new forms of economic life emerge as solutions. Absolute monarchy spawned the creation of an idea of ‘rights’ to provide an absolute countercheck to such monarchism. Since all

³⁷ TW 6, p. 27; trans. p. 17.

³⁸ ViG, p. 36; LPWH, p. 33.

such ‘tied knots’ are provisory, some get discarded along the way as having solved their original problem only to have created new problems that in turn have made them unviable, even to the point where «there have been several great periods of development which have come to an end without any apparent continuation»³⁹.

Hegel’s insight is to see that indeed there may be a powerful logic to the development of these ‘knots’ that is precisely not just a history of ideas but a history of the complex ways in which different forms of life have organized themselves around the issue of freedom, in particular, who or which groups get to exercise the kind of authority in determining how that form of life is to organize itself and legitimate itself in its own eyes or in the eyes of others. This includes politics, private life, the economy, the class structure of the society, its religion, its system of education and much else besides.

In 1836, Eduard Gans provided a prescient and short snapshot of how the Hegelian philosophy of history was to be further developed. Gans noted

They [the Saint-Simonians] have rightly remarked that slavery is not yet over, that it has formally ceased to exist but it is materially present in its most completed form. As the master and the slave, then later the patrician and plebeian, and then the feudal lord and vassal stood opposite each other, so now stand the idle rich [*der Müßige*] and the worker [...]. Is it not slavery to exploit a person like an animal, even if he were free to die of hunger otherwise? [...] the history that follows [us] will have to record in its pages more than once the struggle of the proletarians against the middle classes of society⁴⁰.

³⁹ ViG, p. 152; LPWH, p. 127.

⁴⁰ E. Gans, *Rückblicke auf Personen und Zustände*, Berlin, Veit, 1836, pp. 100-101. Gans resorts to speaking of the «mittleren Klassen» rather «the bourgeoisie» since the use of the French term to capture the sense of this new emerging social and political polarity had not yet taken root. On the widespread use of the French term in languages other than French to become the iconic catchall term for the new ruling capitalist class, J.E. Seigel, *Modernity and bourgeois life: society, politics, and culture in England, France and Germany since 1750*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012. Marx later put Gans’ short description of the dualisms of

History doesn't proceed according to syllogisms, but it does have a kind of logic to its shape. The history of past forms of life (for example, plebians versus patricians or lords versus vassals) had to do with the way in which an elite both dominated the non-elite (the issue of authority in Hegelian terms) and used that domination to exploit the non-elite by grabbing enough of the difference between what the non-elite produced and what they could be compelled to restrict their consumption in order to give the elite not only great advantages in consumption but also in terms of erecting what we think of as advances in civilization (great palaces, art, instruments of warfare, etc.). These were all held together by a sense of who or what had the authority to take some things off the table concerning what the external standards governing thought and action were. (Marx was later to turn this into the theory of the production of surplus value, but that is only one direction in which the Gans-as-Hegelian thought might lead. It could go other ways with different accounts of the elites limiting the consumption patterns of the non-elites and skimming the difference off for themselves).

5. *Is «After Hegel» Just Hegel Again?*

Following out the Gans line on Hegel puts us in a position to think of a slightly different way to think of what Hegel was after that is not quite «using Hegel against Hegel» so much as it is asking about what Hegel was trying to achieve and whether there are better ways consistent with his overall system to achieve those ends.

It does put into a different light some of Hegel's more puzzling (and for many, more troubling) commitments. Hegel does praise the state in general in oftentimes extravagant ways (and it was always suspected by a few that he really meant just the Prussian state, not just the state in general). On the other hand, it would not be surprising that Hegel praised the concept of the state. By the 18th century, the state had come to be the keynote institution poised to replace (or perhaps to cancel and preserve) monarchy, i.e., rule by a prince, as

past historical shapes to work in the opening lines on the section about class struggle in the *Communist Manifesto*. (Marx was one of Gans' students).

the master concept of modern life. Rather than rule by a personal prince, the sovereignty of an abstraction – the state – came to be the place where genuine rule was to lie, and princes had to serve the state, not the other way around. The rule of law and a constitutional legal order were the hallmarks of a state, and with it came a new order in society – civil society, the ‘public’ and public opinion. Hegel himself makes it clear that he is using ‘state’ in a special sense to be distinguished from the ordinary sense (just as he explicitly does in distinguishing *Moralität* from *Sittlichkeit*, two words which in ordinary German mean roughly the same thing)⁴¹. He says:

The spiritual individual, the people – in so far as it is internally differentiated so as to form an organic whole – is what we call the state [...] in this context, the word ‘state’ is used in a more comprehensive sense...what we have previously called the *spirit of the people*, i.e., its self-consciousness in relation to its own truth and essence, and what it recognizes as truth, period – in short, those spiritual powers which live within the people and rule over it⁴².

The state is the unity of the different basic elements of a people coming to a consciousness of themselves as a distinct people. In that development, there are various ‘knots’ that are tied within it, but they remain (however tightly tied) always provisory. A people as a ‘state’ is thus always a work in progress. As Hegel also notes: «Even when *Geist* is frustrated, it remains true to its character as a spiritual being, a being whose purpose is *not the finished product* but *the activity of production*, so that it still affords the spectacle of having exhibited its active nature»⁴³. In the concept of history as the progress of the consciousness of freedom, history is not so much grasped as a totality at the end of its development and available to full comprehension but rather as an always continuously developing totality – as «not the finished product but the activity of production». The ideals of Romantic nationalism, for example, that suppose that the identity of the collective facing its problems is itself fixed in advance

⁴¹ See TW 7, p. 88; trans. p. 63.

⁴² ViG, p. 114; LPWH, p. 96 (translation altered by me).

⁴³ ViG, p. 36; LPWH, p. 33 (Italics added by me).

and only needs expression and development are simply not in line with this Hegelian line of thought. For the Hegelian, nothing is fixed *in advance* even though there are knots in the development that are hard to untie.

Hegel's other 'big idea' – that the development of the modern state has to be in the direction of monarchy – has also been a point of contention especially among those who find that equally alarming to his overall views about the state. However, as Eduard Gans also pointed out in his own lectures on Hegel's philosophy (again with Gans' lectures having Hegel's blessing and also provoking the rankles of the Prussian crown prince because of Gans' reputed republicanism), Hegel's conception of a state with a monarch at its pinnacle conflated 'head of state' with 'monarch', and a republic with an elected president as head of state fits the bill just as well as a monarch does and perhaps even better⁴⁴. Hegel's other claim for the monarchy was that in the modern state (in Hegel's sense) «the particular is subordinated to a power whose nature is necessarily such that the particular spheres can exist independently outside it – in other words, a monarchy»⁴⁵ – in other words, where the different collectivities of such a state (which Hegel thought amounted to the Estates and an updated version of the medieval-early modern Corporations) could each think and act with an authority that belonged especially to them and thus would be realizations of freedom – such that within the unity of a constitution together with its institutions and practices such collectivities would «collaborate towards the realization of a single purpose by which they are all sustained: in short, they [would] form an organic whole»⁴⁶. Within this whole presided over by a monarch, there was necessary room for Hegel's rather limited acknowledgement of pluralism in social life: Within a modern, universalist 'form of life' in which all are free there is a place for different 'ways of life' arranged in terms of different perspectives on the same problems – which in turn provokes a different set of virtues

⁴⁴ Gans and Braun, *Naturrecht*, pp. 214-215.

⁴⁵ ViG, pp. 146-47; LPWH, p. 123.

⁴⁶ ViG, p. 147; LPWH, p. 123.

and second natures in the agricultural, trade-craft-industrial, and learned-bureaucratic estates (the so called ‘universal estate’)⁴⁷.

It also puts into perspective Hegel’s insistence that political life begins with a distinction between rulers and ruled, the most primitive being that between masters and slaves (or in general with mastery and servitude), and as Hegel notes, the very difference between ruler and ruled seems *prima facie* to be at odds with the idea that the purpose of political unity is the realization of freedom⁴⁸. The difficulty is put into sharper relief when the contrast is drawn between practical knowledge of how to live one’s life versus technical knowledge of some specific domain. In those areas where, as Hegel puts it, only some are free, the contrast is obscured. Where only «some are free», the kind of bases for practical reason having to do with how best to lead one’s life are thought to be impossible to ascertain for certain (large) classes of people (generally, all those not in elite circles) so that they must be paternalistically governed by the wiser (the elite). To the extent that the non-elite accept this – as by and large they will be told they must accept it by those who formulate the small-scale philosophies of the ruling elite – they are not free (or, rather, their freedom is restricted to matters about living that are not considered basic to the form of life). It is only when the idea comes into fashion that they really are free, that they have as good a capability for knowledge about how to lead their lives as do the elite, that they are on the brink of a far reaching social transformation, perhaps even on revolution. Hegel speaks of «the most immense practical consequences» of the concept of freedom such that «when

⁴⁷ See the in depth studies of Hegel’s version of pluralism in C. Yeomans, *The expansion of autonomy: Hegel’s pluralistic philosophy of action*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015 and Id., *The politics of German idealism: law and social change at the turn of the 19th century*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2023.

⁴⁸ See ViG, p. 138; LPWH, p. 116: «The state as an abstraction only acquires life and reality through the constitution; but as it does so, a difference arises between those who command and those who obey, those who rule and those who are ruled. Yet obedience seems incompatible with freedom, and those who command would seem to be doing the opposite of what is required by the very basis of the state, the concept of freedom».

individuals and peoples have once grasped the idea of the abstract concept of freedom as existing for itself, [the concept] has this uncontrollable strength, precisely because it is the ownmost essence of *Geist*, and indeed as *Geist*'s actuality itself»⁴⁹.

The progress of the consciousness of freedom is thus of a different order than consciousness of the progress of technology or of other technical matters. In the world where «all are free», each is entitled to exercise their own authority in determining matters of how they are to live ethically. Of course, as we have seen, left at that, such authority is empty and provides no guidance. Now, one modern alternative to the Hegelian approach would be a version of liberalism, namely, the idea that each person is entitled to make their own ethical choices about how best to live, but the facts on the ground mean that political life must be organized not on ethical grounds but around issues of stability, prosperity, defense and the like – matters on which technical knowledge, not ethical knowledge, is required, and since there is no reason to think that a person who is capable of ethical choices has any special expertise in, say, wagon wheel making, surgery or for that matter mathematical economic theory, the political world will be best led by technocrats of various sorts. Hegel rejected that. The political world has an ethical component, namely, the realization of freedom, and its institutions and practices are justified to the extent that they embody freedom⁵⁰. Thus, Hegel finds it perfectly consistent to reject that form of technocratic liberalism – it is, after all, only another version of the «unhappy consciousness» – while still holding that «systematic education and the pursuit of universal ends and principles *are the property of everyone*; they are shared by the citizens with the government, and by the government with the citizens» together with the claim that «what constitutes the state is in fact the business of those who possess education and knowledge [*gebildeten Erkenntnis*], and not that of the people at large»⁵¹. Or to

⁴⁹ TW 10, §482, p. 301.

⁵⁰ In Hegel's ultra-compressed summary of this in §29 of the *Philosophy of Right*, he says: «Right is any existence [Dasein] in general which is the existence of the free will. Right is therefore in general freedom, as Idea». TW 7, p. 80; trans. p. 58.

⁵¹ ViG, p. 146; LPWH, p. 122 (italicizing by me).

put it in a different form: All are free, but most people are not qualified in the technical matters that are necessary for running the state, and they also therefore have little say in choosing those with the technical knowledge to do so since that also requires technical knowledge to pick those people out. The technicians on the other hand have to build a trust in those who are otherwise excluded that they have their interests and rights in mind in making the choices they do.

Hegel, so we might put it, was committed to the rule of law (to a *Rechtsstaat*) but clearly not to a democratic state. This surely has something to do, so one might think, with why Hegel thought that the progress of the consciousness of freedom had as its culmination the commitment to the idea that all are free but at the same time also relegated all non-Europeans (and especially Africans of all kinds) to the backrooms of history. This is consistent with his view: On the one hand, he says quite clearly and explicitly in print that those arguing for racial domination of any type

hoped to prove that human beings are by nature so differently endowed with mental or spiritual capacities that some can be dominated like animals. But descent affords no ground for granting or denying freedom and dominion to human beings. Man is implicitly rational; herein lies the possibility of equal justice for all men and the futility of a rigid distinction between races which have rights and those which have none⁵².

While this might look like simply an outright contradiction with Hegel's obvious dismissal of non-Europeans, the connection between Hegel's evident racism and Hegel's explicit denial of any basis for racism by now should itself be obvious. One can be in favor of equal rights, be utterly and irrevocably opposed to slavery of any sort, and still hold racist views. Hegel's own version of *Sittlichkeit* no doubt incorporated a general sense even without his being fully aware of it that non-Europeans should have equal rights to Europeans but not equal social or political standing simply because they lacked, and perhaps essentially lacked, some kind of technical knowledge about how to live their lives – being in some respects too childlike – and thus non-

⁵² TW 10, §393, p. 57.

Europeans were fated to be socially subordinate to Europeans even if the abstract rights all possessed were the same.

How intrinsic to Hegel's system was this? Hegel's favorite student, Friedrich Wilhelm Carové, saw the problem clearly and also put into practice what he took to be the consequences he thought should be drawn from Hegel's system, namely, that abolishing slavery was not enough, that racism had to be fought out on its own, and he even convinced the Heidelberg faculty in 1849 to award an honorary doctorate to the African-American fugitive (and therefore ex-) slave, author and abolitionist activist, James Pennington, which was conferred at an elaborate ceremony at the university⁵³. What was required was a more expansive sense of *Sittlichkeit* as a kind of moral ethos, a form of life, and the direction was tending towards was something like democracy not merely as a form of government and showing up to vote on election days but as a form of life itself, of learning to live with each other as ethical equals and not just as each equally possessing abstract rights. Literal Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* was beginning to crack under the pressures of the version of freedom Hegel thought it embodied since it manifested a conception of the best life as one involving subordination on the part of some, and those subordinated could not be criticized when they fought back, nor could Hegelians such as Carové be criticized as misrepresenting Hegelianism.

For Hegel, history is to be grasped as a totality, but to use Sartre's term, it is always a detotalized totality. Hegelian history is indeed a story of progress, but from the standpoint of Hegel's dialectic, it is best understood not as progress *toward* a predefined goal – that would be dogmatism – but progress *from* a set of problems to a solution that sometimes ties a new knot in the progression without our having a further idea of where the progression is ultimately going⁵⁴. That much at least is dialectical, where «the solution of

⁵³ S. Lentz, „Wer helfen kann, der helfe!“ *deutsche SklavereigegnerInnen und die atlantische Abolitionsbewegung, 1780-1860*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, vol. 261, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020, pp. 377-379.

⁵⁴ This distinction of «progress toward» and «progress from» is adapted from Philip Kitcher who speaks not of a model of «a particular kind of travel, in which

[*Geist*'s] problem creates new problems for it to solve, so that it multiplies the materials on which it operates. Thus we see how *Geist* in history issues forth in innumerable directions, indulging and satisfying itself in them all»⁵⁵. This is not «using Hegel against Hegel» to reinforce our own prior commitments but to see whether self-conscious life is ineluctably driven into a self-transformation when its «own time» can no longer exercise any real affective hold on us in 'our own time'.

the destination is specified in advance and progress consists in coming ever closer to it», but rather is «progress from» a set of problems rather than «progress to» an already defined endpoint. The endpoint of the progression only emerges (as might be guessed) at the end, not before. See P. Kitcher and J.-C. Heilinger, *Moral progress*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 24. In this way, Hegel's version of history would differ greatly from Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose* which is written more or less from the standpoint of where things are likely to go in the future and how the present stands in relation to furthering or hindering that progress.

⁵⁵ ViG, pp. 35-36; LPWH, p. 33.