



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

DOES HEGEL HAVE AN ETHICS?

Author(s): Allen W. Wood

Source: *The Monist*, Vol. 74, No. 3, Hegel Today (JULY 1991), pp. 358-385

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27903248>

Accessed: 02-05-2016 02:04 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Monist*

DOES HEGEL HAVE AN ETHICS?

Kierkegaard complained that Hegel's system, for all its pretensions to completeness, was lacking an ethics.¹ Even readers more sympathetic to Hegel have often agreed with this, saying that Hegel intended to replace ethics with some form of empirical social science.²

The basis for denying that Hegel has an ethics is found in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (PR), which is surely the "ethical" portion of Hegel's system if anything is.³ In the Preface to PR, Hegel scorns philosophical attempts to "teach the world how it ought to be." It is not philosophy's task, he insists, to give advice of this sort; besides, philosophy, as the "thought of the world," always comes on the scene too late to give it anyway. Philosophy's function is not to criticize what exists, but rather to "comprehend what is," to perceive the "rationality of the actual," so as to gain "peace with the world" and enjoy "the rose in the cross of the present" (PR Preface 25–28, cf. VPR 2:89). These statements seem to disavow ethics in favor of theodicy: the task of philosophy is not to tell us what should be, but only to help us understand what is in such a way as to reconcile us to it.

Hegel distinguishes "Morality" (*Moralität*), which is the standpoint of the "ought," from "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*), the customary morality of an actual society (PR §141,R). Ethical truth, Hegel says, is nothing but recognized law and custom, as rationally comprehended by philosophy (PR Preface 13). Hegel has often been taken to agree with "communitarian" moral and social theorists, who think that moral norms and values are to be sought in the institutions and traditions of a living community, and hold that it is a misconception of philosophy's task, or at least an exaggerated conception of its capacities, to suppose that philosophical theory can go beyond such cultural and historical realities, either to ground them or to stand in judgment of them.

Not surprisingly, this reading of Hegel has usually made him out to be a social and political conservative; it has often been coupled with the image of Hegel as apologist for the Prussian reaction of 1819. Thus Rudolf Haym saw Hegel's social philosophy as the most extreme possible form of quietism, a principled benediction on the political status quo, absolutely unqualified in its sanctification of whatever exists:

Copyright © 1991, *THE MONIST*, La Salle, IL 61301.

“As far as I can see, in comparison with the famous saying about the rationality of the actual in the sense of Hegel’s Preface, everything Hobbes and Filmer, Haller or Stahl have taught is relatively liberal doctrine. The theory of God’s grace and the theory of absolute obedience are innocent and harmless in comparison with that frightful dogma *pronouncing the existing as existing to be holy*”.⁴

It is now generally recognized that Haym’s image of Hegel’s political thought is a gross distortion both of its philosophical content and of its stance on the political issues of Hegel’s day. Less often appreciated is the way in which Hegel’s theodicy of the modern state differs in its intent from traditional theodicy, providing for an ethical theory whose import may be highly critical of existing social arrangements, including those of the Prussian state of Hegel’s time. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the roots of Hegel’s ethical theory in his philosophy, and to see what kind of ethical theory it is.

1. *The Need of Philosophy*

Hegel understands the core of his philosophy as speculative logic, the self-evolving system of “thought determinations” which provide everyday thinking with its content, and also give us the clue to rationally comprehending the real structure of the world. Yet Hegel conceives the fundamental aim of his philosophy, or as he calls it, “the need of philosophy” (D 20/89), not in abstract metaphysical terms, but in light of his understanding of the unique spiritual predicament of human beings in modern society. Hegel sees modern culture as one in which human beings have emerged from a natural, unreflective relation to themselves and to the world, and seek instead to establish all their relationships on their own freedom. People can no longer accept a religious view of the world founded on the conception of an alien, transcendent God to whose inscrutable wisdom their reason must bow in humble submission. In the same way, they can no longer accept a social order founded on relations of authority, sanctified by tradition or even on an order of nature.

The principle of modern society, in Hegel’s view, is “subjective freedom,” the demand by individual subjects that all the social relationships in which they are involved should be mediated by their own thought and will, and that their particular desires, choices and agency should find satisfaction in all their actions (PR §§121–124, 132R, 152R, 162R, 185R, 206R, 228R, 299R). Accordingly, a modern state can be founded on

nothing but rational will (PR §258R), just as the duties of individuals can have no foundation except their subjective will and judgment (PR §§138, 148). Thus for Hegel the decisive event separating modernity from everything which went before was the French Revolution, “the overthrow of all existing and given conditions within an actual major state and the revision of its constitution from first principles and purely in terms of *thought*, with the intention of giving it . . . a purely *rational* basis” (PR §258R).

Hegel is also aware that the modern principle of subjective reflection has a tendency to alienate individuals—from one another, from their social relationships, from the rational order of the cosmos, and, consequent upon all these, from themselves. He sees this tendency at work in the atomistic individualism of Enlightenment social theory, in the empty yearning characteristic of Romantic religious sensibility, and in the perverse, subjectivistic turn which the thought of his age often gives to ethical and political thinking. The “need of philosophy” is to re-establish, through reason’s conceptual thought, the harmony between self and world which has been rent by a culture based on subjective reflection.

Hegel does not turn against the principle of subjective will, as do the Romantic traditionalists of his age (Burke, Müller, deMaistre, Bonald, Schlegel, Lammenais). Like Hegel, these men insist on the essentially social, collective and historically situated character of human reason; unlike him, they regard this insistence as the ground for rejecting the very conception of an individual reason, reflecting on and judging its social foundations. For them, the principle of individual reason is merely negative, destructive, even satanic, something to be combatted and merely suppressed. For Hegel, the task is rather one of reconciliation: to find a place for subjectivity within a social order founded on a collective spirit, while demonstrating to the individual intellect that its own subjective reason is identical with that objective reason which manifests itself in nature, history and the institutions of society. The final end of this demonstration is to liberate of the subject by showing it that the world to which it relates neither limits nor opposes its activity, but on the contrary fulfills and actualizes it. This liberation gives the subject “absolute freedom” as “being with oneself in an other,” through which “every relation of dependence on something other than itself is eliminated” (PR §23).

This is the sense in which Hegel intends that philosophy should be “the true theodicy.” Philosophy is “a reconciliation of the spirit, even of spirit which has grasped itself in its freedom and in the wealth of its actuality” (VGP 3:455/546). Thus Hegelian theodicy has a highly distinctive aim. It is

not interested in *consoling* us for the evils we suffer as individuals, by referring them to a transcendent inscrutable Wisdom. Its purpose is rather to *liberate* us as rational agents, by showing us that the world around us is fundamentally an expression of rational will.

2. Hegelian Theodicy

We can see this if we compare Hegel's theodicy with a more orthodox theodicy, for example, the rational theodicy of Leibniz. Leibnizian theodicy may be described as *totalitarian* but *wholesale*. It is *totalitarian* in the sense that it attempts to show that the world displays divine wisdom down to its smallest detail. God's providence leaves nothing to chance; every event has its place in the divine plan; the knowledge of that plan (if we could obtain it) would reveal to us that even the most painful, even the most seemingly monstrous and absurd happenings in the course of the world have been required for God to produce the most perfect world. On the other hand, Leibnizian theodicy is *wholesale*, because it does not claim that we can be made privy to the specifics of the divine plan. Instead, the theodicist proves in general terms that the plan which governs this world is the best possible one. How each contingent fact makes it so is something known to God, but unknowable to us.

Leibniz does not try to persuade us that the evils we suffer and witness are not really evils. His theodicy rests on ethical *judgments*—about the value of cosmos variety and order, and of justice and happiness for spiritual beings—but it has itself no ethical *implications* for particular cases. It makes no attempt to replace or modify our antecedent judgments about what is good and bad in the world by revealing God's purposes to us. Instead, it tries to console us by showing that what we antecedently recognize as evils may be required if the best of all possible worlds is to be brought about, and providing us with completely general reasons for thinking that whatever evils we find are indeed an indispensable part of the best world.

Hegelian theodicy, on the other hand, is *retail* theodicy. The Hegelian system boldly claims to "comprehend the plan of divine providence" (VG 39/36). It tries to display for us the divine reason present in the known structure of nature, the recorded events of human history, even the actual structure of the social institutions around us. This may strike us as absurdly presumptuous, superstitiously gnostical, perhaps even blasphemous. Yet to Hegel, wholesale theodicy can never be adequate, because however tidy its syllogisms or rigorous its arguments, it can never be anything but an attempt to substitute feelings and representations of the divine for conceptual

thought about it. “The spiritual is not by nature abstract, but a living thing, a universal individual, a subjective, self-determining, decision-making being. We cannot truly know God’s nature unless we recognize its determinate elements” (VG 46–46/42–43). Hegelian theodicy seeks to know God’s plan because, as rational beings, we need to participate in this plan consciously, reflectively, with subjective freedom. Our inquiry into the divine plan is at the same time an inquiry into the specific nature of reason, hence a substantive inquiry to reason’s ends, into the nature of freedom, the right, and the good. For this reason, an adequate theodicy is necessarily a substantive ethical inquiry.

Hegelian theodicy is also *loose-fitting* rather than totalitarian; it does not pretend that every detail of what happens in the world is rational, or part of God’s plan. This is because Hegel holds that the divine reason has to be actualized in a *world*, which differs from God by being a transitory appearance of the divine, distinguished from God himself chiefly through the fact that contingency and imperfection play an essential part in its nature.

Contingency itself, therefore, is a necessary factor in God’s self-manifestation through a world. Moreover, this is not merely hypothetical or logical Leibnizian contingency, founded on the supposition that, had God (*per impossibile*) willed otherwise, another world might have existed in place of this one. Rather, some things which happen in this world happen contingently, because, of necessity, divine reason cannot extend to every detail of the world. Whatever belongs to this world, Hegel says, has *existence (Existenz)*, insofar as it arises from a ground (WL 6:119–120/477–478). An existence, however, always arises out of possibility, and the nature of possibility is that its opposite is equally possible. Consequently, the existent is always *contingent* (WL 6:205/545). Without contingency and imperfection in the world, there could be no world at all, because no distinction between God and the world could be drawn (EL §§151A, 163).⁵ For Hegel, then, contingency is a real, inevitable, irreducible fact about the transitory world. Contingency manifests itself in the “infinite wealth and manifoldness of forms” which goes to make up any concrete individual in the natural world; no concrete individual occurs necessarily. (Philosophy cannot satisfy Krug’s demand to deduce his pen from its *a priori* principles; what it can do, however, is demonstrate why such a deduction would be impossible [EN §250].)

With respect to the will, contingency manifests itself as “arbitrariness” (*Willkür*), the will’s capacity, often mistakenly identified with freedom, of doing the opposite of anything it might choose to do (EL §145A, PR §15). A world with voluntary agents in it is necessarily a world in which par-

ticular, finite interests are vulnerable to malevolent deeds. Any world is therefore a fallen world; likewise, for a being which is free and at the same time finite, evil in each particular case has permanently the character of something possible, but evil in general has the character of something necessary (PhG §§775–778; PR §139; EL §24A3).

Hegel's God, unlike Leibniz's, does not determine what happens in the world down to the last detail. The divine plan, in itself necessary and perfectly rational, also necessarily actualizes itself in a transitory and imperfect world, in which the falling of a sparrow, or the life and death of a human individual, or even the fate of a nation, is always in some degree delivered over to contingency. Thus (religiously speaking) providence (or, philosophically speaking, reason) explains why all living individuals are subject to sickness and mortality (EN §375); but it cannot explain why any individual must die in *this* manner at *this* time. Hegelian theodicy explains why your fate and mine are in general the plaything of good and evil will, but if we suffer injustice, it does not try to explain why. Leibnizian theodicy, of course, also demurs at this point, but it attributes its inability to our ignorance of the divine plan. Hegelian theodicy, by contrast, attributes it to the fact that in the plan of providence there simply cannot be any reason or explanations for such irreducible contingencies.

Hegel's theodicy, therefore, despite its retail character, promises no consolation for most of the evils which challenge traditional theodicies—the destruction of a city by earthquake, the premature death of a child from disease, the wrongful sufferings of the innocent at the hands of the wicked and powerful. In the face of these things, all Hegel's theodicy will say is that since contingency is itself a necessary part of the world's rational order, it is the unavoidable fate of particular individuals to be subject to contingent evils and misfortunes. If we seek theodicy as a refuge from the cruel absurdity of our fate as individuals, Hegelian theodicy will leave us disappointed, perhaps even traumatized—since it tells us that the absurdity is real, even that it is an inevitable part of the rational structure of the world that the lives of individuals should be treated cruelly in this way.

From this it should be obvious that the aims of Hegelian theodicy are different from those of a more orthodox theodicy. Hegelian theodicy does not seek to give us the passive assurance that all is ultimately well with the world, that even the sufferings of individuals, in all their apparently cruel absurdity, are ultimately meaningful, ultimately for the best. On the contrary, Hegel admits that the fate of individuals is at the mercy of contingency, and does not offer us any religious consolation for the tragedy to which that fact exposes us. What sort of consolation, then, does it offer us?

The absolute Idea, for Hegel, lies beyond the theoretical idea of the true, even beyond the practical idea of the good; it is that living truth which is the source of both (WL 6:548/824). In the same way, the consolation of Hegelian philosophy goes beyond the mere knowledge that divine providence rules the world, even beyond the "ought" which guides reason in actualizing itself there. The consolation of Hegelian theodicy is offered to us not as suffering individuals, but only as thinkers and active combatants in the cause of reason. Its aim is to give us an understanding of what that cause is, and then to show us that for all the accidents, imperfections and sorrows of this finite world, our cause will ultimately be victorious in it.

Hegelian theodicy seeks the rose in the cross of the present, but without ever denying the reality of the cross. Not only does it consign the fate of individuals to contingency, but it recognizes that there is conflict and regression even in the necessary course of things. Hegel maintains that the modern principle of subjective freedom was possible only through the inevitable breakdown of the beautiful harmony of Greek ethical life, the loss of ethical community experienced in the Roman Empire (PR §357) and the long period of spiritual alienation endured by the world during the Christian middle ages (PR §358). Hegelian theodicy says not that *all* is for the best, but only that the necessary course of things is for the best; and even of the necessary course of things, it says not that each stage is good, only that it belongs to a path of development which is ultimately good.

Taken in the abstract, the principle of Hegelian theodicy amounts to little more than the confidence that by and large, and in the long run, the human world makes sense and the struggle for humanity's cause always turns out all right in the end. It is a principle designed for rational contemplators of human history who are at the same time historical agents, and whose theoretical aim of finding the direction in the human story cannot be divorced from their practical struggle to make the story come out satisfactorily. It should not surprise us that this attitude is closely akin to a wide range of modern, secular conceptions of human history. Hegel's emphasis on divine immanence, on the divine as an unconscious reason working through the contingencies of the world, renders his theodicy halfway secularized already.

3. The Rational and the Actual

Because Hegel's theodicy is retail rather than wholesale, there is less interest in its general principle than in its more specific account of the course of human history. For the same reason, Hegelian theodicy has substantive ethical implications. It tries to determine the course of reason in the world,

and this involves it in the business of distinguishing what is good from what is bad in the actual course of things. If Hegelian theodicy were also totalitarian, then it would be committed to discovering the divine plan at work in every detail of the world's history, and would be committed (in Haym's words) to sanctifying "the existing as existing." However, because it fits the world loosely, leaving room for misfortune and contingent evil, Hegelian theodicy has no such commitments. It allows for a critique of what exists—not passively, by preserving intact our antecedent beliefs about what ought to be and ought not to be, but actively, by distinguishing between the immanent reason which guides the world's course and the contingent defects which reason must wear in the sphere of the finite.

This is why Hegel always stresses the difference between "actuality" and mere "existence" whenever he expounds his famous saying:

The rational is actual, and the actual is rational.

An existence counts as actual only to the extent that it fully expresses and corresponds to its essence (EL §142). The transitory existents we encounter in everyday life (including human beings and states) often fail to be actual in many respects. They are less than fully rational, and they express the divine imperfectly, because in them divine reason is encumbered with contingency. The task of philosophy, however, is to discover the rational essence in the world, and so it properly ignores these imperfections, in order to focus attention instead on the rational Idea, which is always present at least to some degree.

The state is not a work of art; it exists in the world, and hence in the sphere of arbitrariness, contingency and error, and bad behavior may disfigure it in many respects. But the ugliest man, the criminal, the invalid or the cripple is still a living human being; the affirmative aspect—life—subsists in spite of such deficiencies, and it is with this affirmative aspect that we are here concerned (PR §258A).

What is actual is rational. But one must know, distinguish, what is in fact actual. In common life, [we speak as if] everything is actual, but [in philosophy] there is a distinction between the world of appearance and actuality. The actual has also an external existence, which displays arbitrariness and contingency. . . . The temporal and transitory certainly exists, and may cause us enough distress; but in spite of that, it . . . is no true actuality (VGP 2: 110–111/95–96).

When the understanding turns its 'ought' against trivial, external and transitory objects, institutions, conditions, etc., which perhaps may have great relative actuality for a certain time and in a certain sphere, it may be right, and in such cases it may find much which does not correspond to universally correct determinations. For who is not clever enough to see much in his environment

which is not in fact as it ought to be? But this cleverness is wrong to imagine that such objects and their 'ought' have any place within the interests of philosophical science (EL §6).

"Philosophical science," in the strict sense, is pure rational theodicy. It does not deal with mere contingent existences, but considers only the rational Idea whose (contingent, imperfect) appearances they are. Thus philosophical science, in the strict sense, can neither criticize nor defend any existing state, since it is not its business to consider any particular state, to compare it with the rational Idea of the state and determine how far it has achieved actuality, how far it has fallen short of actuality through bad luck or human error and wickedness. What Hegel's philosophy justifies is not the status quo, but God; what it hallows is not the existing order but the divine Idea revealing itself in the world.

It is very easy to misunderstand Hegel's assertion that "philosophy cannot teach the state how it ought to be" (PR Preface 25). Hegel does not say this because philosophy deals only with the state as it exists, and still less because what exists cannot be improved upon. On the contrary, he says it because the *sole* task of philosophy, in the strict sense, is to expound the Idea, the rational and therefore the only true actuality, which is the measure of contingent existence. In that sense, it could be said that philosophy deals *only* with what "ought to be," and *not at all* with what exists in the contingent world. If Hegel chooses not to put it that way, this is because he wants to persuade us to think of the rational Idea not as a mere "ought to be," but as a truer reality than the contingent world which imperfectly expresses it. Philosophy in the strict sense cannot tell the existing state how it ought to be only because philosophy in the strict sense has nothing whatever to say about the contingently existing state as such.

There is, however, also another, quite different, point behind Hegel's frequent, emphatic yet cryptic and paradoxical remarks disparaging the "ought" (PhG ¶¶249, 425, 619, WL 6:544/820; EL §§6, 234; PR Preface 27). Because Hegelian theodicy is a retail theodicy, it proposes to discern the plan of providence at work in the world. The genuinely ideal is what shows itself to accord with immanent reason, and ideals which run counter to it, opposing themselves to it as a mere "ought to be," thereby show themselves to be *worse* than what is actual. "The true ideal," Hegel insists, "is not what ought to be actual but what is actual, and the only actuality. If an ideal is held to be too good to exist, there must be some fault in the ideal itself, since actuality is too good for it" (VGP 2:110/95).

Hegel does not hold that an ideal is defective whenever it diverges from what exists; to say that would be to hallow the existing as such. Hegel's

claim is rather than an ideal is defective if it is held to be “too good to exist.” An ideal is defective if it is not founded in the rational nature of that to which it is applied. Where ideals have such a basis, there will be an essential tendency in the existent to make it actual, since the ideal is nothing but the actuality of that to which it is applied. An ideal to which no such tendency corresponds is alien to the *Bestimmung*, the nature, destiny and vocation, of that to which it is addressed. Such an ideal is bound to remain a mere “ought” without actuality, and it is well that it should remain so.

From this standpoint, we can see Hegel’s polemics against the “ought” as based on a distinctively Aristotelian variety of ethical naturalism, which identifies the good of an entity with the actuality of its essence or nature. Their target is the view, present in Kant and exaggerated by Fichte, that practical reason has primacy over theoretical reason, and that this entails that the only truly rational order is a purely ideal one, entirely independent of what exists, eternally confronting the existent as its “ought to be.” On the contrary, Hegel maintains with Plato that the truly actual is the order of Ideas, which may be used to judge the realm of contingent existence only because it grounds and animates it. Hegel denies that we can derive our ideals from pure reason alone, irrespective of what goes on in the world. With Aristotle, he maintains that we discover the good of a thing along with its nature. Thus philosophical science, though it deals with an order more perfect than the empirical one, must begin with the empirical, reworking it through thought to discover its essence (EL §12). The meaning of Hegel’s attack on the “ought” is that rational action in the world proceeds not from ideals set up independently of what is, but from a rational comprehension of what is.

4. *Hegel and Prussia*

The PR was published at a fateful moment in the history of the Prussian state. Since its humiliating defeat by Napoleon’s army in 1807, Prussia had been under the influence of political reformers, led by Baron Karl Freiherr vom Stein (Chancellor, 1808–1810) and his successor Karl Friedrich von Hardenberg (Chancellor, 1810–1824). The reformers reorganized the army, streamlined and centralized the state bureaucracy, abolished serfdom, guild trade monopolies and other feudal institutions, making way for economic modernization. Under their influence, the King in 1815 had issued a solemn promise to give his people a written constitution, providing for an Estates assembly or representative legislature.⁶

The prospect of these political reforms united the reformers’ domestic opponents within the Prussian nobility and the restoration reactionaries in

other German states, who viewed the progressive developments in Prussia with alarm. In March of 1819, only a few months after Hegel assumed his professorship in Berlin, the assassination of the reactionary writer Kotzebue by a radical student gave the conservatives the occasion they needed. In August a conference of German states was convened in at Carlsbad, in Austrian territory and under the auspices of Metternich, one of the most adamant opponents of the reform movement in Prussia. It was aimed ostensibly at stemming the influence of "demagogues" in the universities who had long been fomenting disorder and had now begun to inspire acts of murder. Following the Carlsbad Decrees issued in September, several prominent academics were dismissed from their positions, including J. F. Fries, Hegel's old enemy, whose student had perpetrated the assassination of Kotzebue. Leaders of the politically active student fraternities (*Burschenschaften*), including several of Hegel's own students and assistants, were arrested and imprisoned. The deeper purpose, as far as Prussia was concerned, was to discredit the reform movement, and see to it that the King never kept his promises of political reform.⁷

The Carlsbad decrees also instituted a censorship of all politically sensitive publications. Under these new circumstances, Hegel decided to revise the PR, which was almost certainly completed in draft by the middle of 1819, before submitting it to the judgment of the censors. The final version, submitted in 1820 and published early in 1821, was carefully prepared with a view to appeasing the censors. Especially in the Preface, Hegel emphasizes that his philosophy aims only at comprehending the affirmative factor in any existing state, not at telling the state how it ought to be. He also goes out of his way to attack Fries in an attempt to dissociate himself from the victims of the "demagogue persecutions." Perhaps it is significant that Hegel's appointment to the prestigious chair of philosophy in Berlin was arranged by Privy Councillor Karl von Altenstein; he, along with Chancellor Hardenberg, was a prominent reformer who nevertheless survived the political sea-change of 1819 and kept his position during the period of reaction which followed. Like Altenstein and Hardenberg, Hegel was an advocate of the reforms who nevertheless chose to make his peace with the reaction, hoping for the eventual return of better days.

Hegel's Preface succeeded in placating the censors, but in its detailed contents the PR consistently advocates the position of the erstwhile reform movement on the most sensitive issues of the day. Hegel advocates a constitutional, not an absolute, monarchy (PR §260). Hegel's rational state includes a bicameral Estates assembly, strikingly similar to the constitutional plans drawn up early in 1819 by Chancellor Hardenberg and Interior

Minister Wilhelm von Humboldt (PR §§298–314).⁸ In Hegel's day the Prussian officer corps and the higher levels of the civil service were open only to the hereditary nobility; Stein had attempted without success to open them to the bourgeoisie. In Hegel's rational state, all citizens regardless of birth are eligible for military command and the civil service (PR §271). Hegel advocates public criminal trials and trial by jury (PR §228); neither institution existed in Prussia during his lifetime.

These proposals were not radical or subversive; indeed, until the middle of 1819, most of them had been the official position of the Prussian monarch and his government. But Hegel's inclusion of them in his exposition of the Idea of the modern state cannot be read as anything but a significant criticism of important political institutions and administrative policies within the Prussian state as it then existed. In effect, Hegel is saying that until Prussia becomes a constitutional monarchy with a representative Estates assembly, it is not fully rational, and so it has not yet achieved full actuality as a modern state.

Before 1820, Hegel seems to have been confident that this progressive direction toward self-actualization was imminent, perhaps inevitable. We see this plainly in two formulations of his thesis about the actuality of the rational and the rationality of the actual, presented in his lectures between 1817 and 1820. "What is actual becomes rational, and the rational becomes actual" (VPR19 51). Here the relation of rationality and actuality is a dynamic one; what is rational is not the status quo, but progressive change. The nature of such change as Hegel expected it is explicit in another formulation: "What is rational must happen, since on the whole the constitution is only its development" (VPR17 157).

5. *Hegel's System of Right*

What is of greatest *philosophical* interest, of course, is not the details of Hegel's political critique of his own age, but the theoretical strategy through which he arrived at this critique. Above we have followed the path from Hegel's distinctive, quasi-secular rational theodicy to an ethical theory rooted in the nature of human beings, a theory of the same general type as Aristotelian naturalism. It is now time to characterize this theory a bit more precisely.

The basis of Hegel's ethical thought is a self-actualization theory, founded on an image of human beings as spiritual beings. Or rather, it is founded on a system of such images, each image corresponding to a determinate way in which human nature may be actualized. PR is a system based on stages of the "free will" (PR §§21–24), each stage corresponding to a

distinctive kind of object in which the free will expresses itself or “gives itself existence.” Since Hegel’s general name for objects which give existence to a free will is “right” (PR §29), these are stages in the development of right (PR §§30–33).

The system passes through three main stages: “abstract right,” “morality” and “ethical life.” Abstract right corresponds to the image of the free will as a “person,” a will having the capacity for abstract and arbitrary choices (PR §§34–39). As a person, I am actualized when I have a certain external sphere within which I may exercise this capacity (PR §41). This sphere includes all the external objects in which I may actualize my abstractly free will by subjecting them to my control; it centers on my own body, but extends to all my property. Morality is founded on the will as “subject,” which actualizes itself through its own actions (PR §105). This sphere is concerned with reflection on our actions and our responsibility for them (PR §§115–120), and our evaluation of them as expressions of a good or bad will (PR §129). In consequence, it concerns also the ends we set, especially the idea of the good, since it is the accordance of our knowledge and intention with the good which constitutes a good will (PR §131). The sphere of morality is also the sphere of subjective freedom, which is the distinctive principle of the modern world (PR §§121–124).

These two images of ourselves (as persons and as subjects) are, however, abstractions, in Hegel’s view. They are insufficient to complete the sense of a person’s identity as a free being, and insufficient to determine the content of our personal rights or our moral duties. In both respects, these images need to be made concrete and actual by being embodied in a system of social institutions which provide individuals with a fuller sense of who they are, and which give determinate content to their rights and duties. This takes place, within Hegel’s system, at the level of ethical life, which comprises the institutions of the family, civil society and the state.

The conception of ethical life involves Hegel’s distinctive critique of Enlightenment liberal social theories, which attempt to found a system of social institutions entirely on abstract theories of right or morality. For Hegel, such theories are insufficient to yield any determinate content, and a society founded on them alone could not even guarantee the personal rights or subjective freedom of its members. They have besides a dangerously atomizing tendency; they cut people off from the determinate social relationships in which alone it is possible for them to gain a true sense of identity and worth. Right and morality, on the contrary, must be rooted in a living system of social institutions in which individuals gain a definite sense of who they are and how they relate to others. We may participate in such a

system as autonomous, thinking beings by coming to understand it rationally (PR §147R), but no more than the system of nature is it the voluntary creation of individuals by arbitrary agreement (PR §§258–260).

In each of the institutional relations of ethical life, the individual acquires an identity more concrete than either of the abstract identities which correspond to abstract right and morality. In the family, individuals are members, belonging to a social group founded on love, kinship and intimate acquaintance (PR §158). In the state, individuals are citizens, members of a self-contained and sovereign community, whose institutions result from rational human choice, and whose existence is for its citizens a universally valid end in itself (PR §258,R). To this community, they relate not merely through feeling but also through reason.

Civil society holds a special place in Hegel's system because he regards it as *the* distinctively modern social institution. Civil society includes the economic system based on an open market, in which each individual finds a place through free choice of an occupation. In civil society, people take on several related identities: as human beings with economic needs, *bourgeois* participating in the common labor of the system (PR §190R), as members of a determinate estate or social position (PR §201), involved in a definite trade or profession (PR §§207, 250–256). It is also chiefly in civil society that concreteness is given to the images of the individual as person and subject. Individuals are persons with rights mainly because they fall under the legal system of civil society (PR §209); it is mainly through their private relationships in civil society, mediated by their subjective choice, that individuals enjoy subjective freedom, and are able to develop their individuality as moral subjects (PR §207).

6. *The Objective Good*

Hegel's system of right involves a version of ethical naturalism. Like Aristotelian ethical naturalism, it proposes to identify the human good with the actualization of an objective human nature. Views of this kind are, of course, very controversial, and it would not be appropriate here to try to resolve all the objections which are raised against them. It is worth noting, however, that Hegel's position is sensitive to the considerations which lie behind some of the most common objections.

Some think that Aristotelian ethical naturalism is implausible because the notion of a single "human nature" for all human beings is highly artificial, belied by the tremendous historical, cultural and individual diversity of people and their various goals in life. A second kind of objection derives

from the fear that a conception of the human good, when it is conceived objectively, independently of the actual desires and preferences of individual human beings, is an invitation to notorious abuses. When my interests are in question, those who think they know what my “objective good” consists in will feel justified in ignoring my wishes for my own life and substituting their better informed judgment for my less enlightened one. Aristotelian naturalism thus opens the door to paternalism (or worse).

The second sort of objection has the most punch, but it feeds on the first, and its force is diminished considerably if we are dealing with a variety of ethical naturalism which denies that human nature, and the human good, are fixed and unchanging. (In the next section, we will see that Hegel’s ethical naturalism does deny this.) To the degree that the human good is varied and complex, it is that much less likely that anyone could be in a position to know what is good for others. Further, if there simply is no such thing as my “objective good” as distinct from the objects of my actual desires and preferences, then your claim to be promoting that good is necessarily bogus; all there is left for it to be is an ideological cover for your tyrannical desire to impose your will on my life.

Even apart from this, however, there is a general answer to the second sort of objection. To say that there is an objective human good, or even that my objective good may differ from what I actually desire or prefer for myself, does not necessarily imply that anyone else ever knows more about my objective good than I do. Still less does it entail that anyone (even someone who truly has such knowledge) has the right to force my objective good on me without my consent. There are several steps in the argument from Aristotelian naturalism to paternalism which are equally dubious whether the argument is presented by a defender of paternalism or a critic of Aristotelian naturalism.

Hegel’s ethics provides an additional reason for rejecting the argument, based on its claim that at least for human beings in modern society, an important part of their *objective* good consists in their enjoyment of what Hegel calls “subjective freedom.” We have subjective freedom when we take subjective satisfaction in the exercise of our agency (PR §121), and this means that our good must come to us through the mediation of our own arbitrary will and consciousness (PR §§185R, 206R). To promote someone’s objective good independently of their will (still more, in direct defiance of it) is therefore to destroy an important part of that same objective good, as Hegel conceives it. This means that people’s subjective desires can be at variance with their objective good, but when this is so we can hope to achieve that good only by helping them to recognize this good, so that their subjective wants and choices will be in harmony with it.

Some contemporary ethical naturalists have attempted to link people's objective good with their desires and preferences in a different way, by directly identifying an individual's objective good with what that individual would prefer if fully informed and lucidly aware of all the relevant facts.⁹ This "idealized preference theory" of the objective good (or IPT, as I will call it) differs from Hegel's theory in two important ways. First, IPT, by identifying a person's objective good with what they would choose or prefer under certain ideal conditions, makes the content of the objective good dependent on people's actual *dispositions* to choose or prefer; Hegel's theory derives the objective good from the nature of human beings as spiritual beings, not from hypothetical judgments about what actual people would choose or prefer. Second, Hegel's theory includes the satisfaction of people's *actual* subjective choices as part of the content of their objective good; for IPT, on the other hand, my objective good is whatever I *would* prefer under idealized conditions. You can promote my objective good, according to IPT, if you give me what I would prefer under those conditions, even if this means thwarting the preferences I actually have.

In both these respects, I submit, Hegel's theory is distinctly preferable to IPT. Owing to the second difference, Hegel's theory is inherently anti-paternalistic in a way which IPT is not. Owing to the first difference, Hegel's theory is capable of addressing some urgent questions which IPT cannot. For example, we might need a theory of the objective human good to help us decide questions about how our children are to be raised. IPT tells us that the objective good of a newborn child is what it would prefer if its preferences were fully and lucidly informed. But the child's dispositions to prefer, including its dispositions to prefer under idealized conditions, are among the things influenced by our childrearing practices; apparently, IPT's advice concerning these practices has to be either seriously incomplete or based on circular reasoning. Hegel's theory, on the other hand, tries to specify the objective good independently of people's desires and preferences, whether actual or idealized. It will advise us to raise children in such a way that their informed desires and preferences will be directed toward their objective good. This piece of good advice may sound trivial and obvious, but IPT can make no sense of it except as an outright tautology.¹⁰

This points to a more basic problem with IPT, which derives from the faint-heartedness of its commitment to ethical realism. proponents of IPT may claim to be "stark raving moral realists,"¹¹ but it is not difficult to make better sense than they do simply by raving more starkly than they do. For when the chips are down, they seem to believe that desires and preferences (even *purely hypothetical* desires and preferences) are more real

than plain old objective goodness and badness. According to the old scholastic adage, *Nihil appetimus, nisi sub ratione boni*: “We desire nothing except on the ground that it is good.”¹² Just as our beliefs aim at what is *true* (true no matter what anyone may believe), so our considered desires, at least, aim at what we deem to be *good*—good not because we do or would desire or prefer it, but good in such a way as to provide a *ground* for desires and preferences.

John Stuart Mill does not necessarily make any mistake when he uses what people desire as *evidence* for what is good or desirable for them (though he does presuppose that the desires to which he refers are not pathological or misinformed).¹³ But there has to be something wrong with any attempt to *identify* someone’s good with that person’s desires or preferences (whether actual or under idealized conditions). For goodness is necessarily different from desiredness and preferredness, even from idealized desiredness and preferredness. As the scholastic maxim says, goodness is what provides the rationale for all desire and preference in the first place. Desires and preferences tend to aim at what desirers and preferers believe to be the objective good; they themselves would tell you that if their belief is wrong, then their desires and preferences should be different from what they are. Moreover, they want their desires and preferences to be fully and lucidly informed mainly because they think that this will lead them to desire and prefer what is objectively good. That it will do so, however, is not a tautology (as IPT would make it) but a substantive thesis based on our confidence that knowledge of the objective good is within our reach, and clear, informed thinking will actually bring us closer to it. On the other hand, if (as the IPT advocates, along with the ethical anti-realists, contend) there is nothing which is really and objectively good prior to and independently of even the most lucidly informed desires and preferences, then there is no interest in the information and no point to the lucidity. Because they take place *sub ratione boni*, all desiring and preferring are simply groundless and aimless, founded on a vast and rather ridiculous deception.

7. Ethical Naturalism Historicized

Hegel’s ethical naturalism directly addresses the first objection we raised to ethical naturalism: the claim that there is no such thing as “human nature” fixed and independent of human knowledge, will and free choice. Like Aristotelian ethical naturalism, Hegel’s theory of the human good is closely bound up with the idea that human beings are essentially both thinking beings and social beings. Hegel conceives the human essence collectively under the name of “spirit,” and he identifies the *Bestimmung* of spirit, its

essence and vocation, as “freedom” (PR §4). Part of his reason for choosing this term is that he thinks spirit is different from all merely natural entities through the fact that its nature is not something fixed apart from its own awareness and agency, but instead essentially a self-conscious and self-producing nature.

Spirit is active by nature, and its activity is its essence; it is its own product . . . Its freedom does not consist in static being, but in a constant negation. The business of spirit is to produce itself, to make itself its own object, and to gain knowledge of itself; in this way, it exists for itself. . . Spirit produces and actualizes itself in light of its knowledge of itself; it acts in such a way that all its knowledge of itself is also actualized. Thus everything depends on spirit’s self-awareness; if spirit knows that it is free, then it is altogether different from what it would be without this knowledge (VG 55/48).

Spirit is essentially the search for knowledge of its own nature, and the quest to actualize the nature it knows. In other words, spirit is fundamentally *historical*. In the resulting form of ethical naturalism, the human nature which is to be actualized is a product of history. Hegel’s is an *historicized* ethical naturalism.

This means there is considerable room in Hegel’s ethics for plurality in the objective good, and a relativity of what is objectively good to cultural and historical circumstances. The ethical standards of an age actualize spirit as it *knows itself* in that age, and this means: as it *is* in that age. The ethical principles which are valid in the modern state are therefore different from the principles which were valid in ancient Greek society (PR §57A). Even within modern society, Hegel thinks there are a plurality of different social estates or positions (*Stände*), each with its own characteristic ethical disposition (PR §201). This is part of the “articulation” (*Gliederung*) of modern society, which goes hand in hand with its emphasis on the principle of subjective freedom (PR §207). People with different social roles and dispositions may have different conceptions of the good, and they may be equally right. What is objectively good for one social type may not be the same as what is objectively good for another type.

(In fact, Hegel is more open to criticism on the grounds that his conception of the human good is *too flexible* than on the ground that it is too uniform and rigid. For instance, it is his view that only urban males have a need for such things as an education in science and philosophy, participation in the public sphere and free choice of a profession. Women, he thought, are better suited to a shallower, more impressionistic education and a life confined to the sphere of the family (PR §166), while the agricultural classes were more disposed to subservience than to freedom

(PR §204A). Of course Hegel too set limits to the relativity and variability of the human good, insisting that the rights of persons are “eternal human rights.” It is difficult to criticize his universalism in this respect without at the same time endorsing what is objectionable in his view of women and the peasantry, or even leaving oneself open to the possibility of still more objectionable forms of pluralism about the human good.)

The view that the good is plural and relative in such ways does not imply any qualification on the objectivity of the good. The fact that the color of an animal’s fur changes as it matures does not make its color at any given time less of an objective fact. Likewise, the cultural variation and historical alteration of human nature involve varieties and changes in what is objectively good and right without diminishing the objectivity of what is good and right at a given place and time. To pursue another analogy, the fact that different pieces of string have different lengths does not make the length of any one of them less of an objective fact. In the same way, the content of my objective good may differ from the content of yours, but both may be equally objective, not dependent on what anyone thinks or prefers.

Even so, we should be careful not to exaggerate Hegel’s view of the relativity and variability of the objective good. There is a familiar tension in ethical thought between a “transcendental” approach and a more “historicist” or “contextualist” approach. The transcendentalist thinks there is some general foundation for such ethical standards, such as a categorical imperative or a utility principle; historical and cultural variables enter moral reasoning only in the application of this fundamental principle. The historicist tends to regard all standards of reflective appraisal as given within a historical context, and immune to any sort of appraisal from outside. Many are tempted to associate Hegel with the historicist or contextualist approach, but to do this is seriously to oversimplify Hegel’s position.

It is true that Hegel regards all concrete ethical standards as belonging to some determinate form of ethical life, having a determinate place in the history of spirit. He denies that any contentful moral standards or principles can be generated from a Kantian standpoint of “pure reason,” which abstracts from historically generated social relationships. But Hegel is equally distant from any form of historicist skepticism or historical relativism, which would treat the ethical systems of different ages of peoples as rationally incommensurable and equally lacking in any deeper rational foundation. History for Hegel is the history of spirit’s self-*knowledge*. Different self-conceptions of spirit represent different levels of spirit’s self-awareness. An ethical life founded on a deeper knowledge of spirit is essentially superior, because it actualizes spirit’s freedom more fully. Hegel’s

way of looking at history as a process of human learning and maturation is the obvious prototype for the “reconstruction of historical materialism” undertaken recently by Habermas (which has far more affinity with Hegel than with the Marxian doctrine of historical materialism).¹⁴

In particular, Hegel’s system of modern ethical life is supposed to have objective rational validity, which is founded on Hegel’s conviction that modern European society represents a deeper understanding, and a fuller actualization, of spirit’s freedom than non-European societies, or earlier stages of European society. This conviction is defended in Hegel’s philosophy of history, which portrays human history as the self-development of spirit, whose highest form thus far is to be found in the modern European nation-state. The self-images of human beings as persons and subjects are, according to Hegel’s account, also the products of history. Generally speaking, Hegel credits Christianity with introducing the idea that all human beings are both persons and subjects (PR §62R; VG 62–63/54). More specifically, the awareness of each individual as a person with rights is supposed to be the outcome of the “struggle for recognition” and the master-servant dialectic (EG §§430–436). The conception of individuals as moral subjects is taken to be more recent, a result of the effect of spreading the Christian religion of self-alienation among the naive and freedom-loving Germanic peoples of the Roman empire and northern Europe (PR §358; VPG 422–426, 487/351–354, 407).

In that sense it is highly misleading to say simply that for Hegel different ethical principles are valid at different times. Hegel himself sometimes puts things this way, and it is also true in the sense that different ethical principles may correspond to different stages in spirit’s development. But it is wrong to put things in such a way if that is supposed to imply that the different ethical principles of different times and cultures are incommensurable or all on an equal footing. The function of ethical principles, in Hegel’s view, is to actualize spirit’s understanding of freedom. A given set of principles and social institutions is ethically valid when it actualizes spirit’s freedom according to the highest form of self-understanding which spirit has attained. In that sense, two different systems of ethical principles of institutions in different ages could be called equally valid if each adequately actualized its own age’s understanding of spirit’s freedom. But different forms of spiritual self-understanding are not incommensurable. Some have a deeper and more adequate understanding of spirit, and their ethical principles actualize spirit’s freedom more fully.

This means that for Hegel the standards of ethical life have no transcendental foundation outside history, but they do have a rational

foundation within it. Thus Hegel's system of right, though historically situated, also claims objective validity, in the sense that the ethical institutions it expounds are intended to correspond to the deepest conception which the human spirit has yet formed of itself, and to answer to the needs of human nature in its fullest historical development so far.

8. *Society and the Individual*

Hegel's theory deals with the actualization of human nature as the actualization of *spirit*. This is Hegel's term for a *social* human nature, as found in a people, a culture, or the whole of humanity considered as a collective subject. The traditional polemic against Hegel at this point is that he is concerned only with the actualization of states or fantastic supra-personal entities, not with the self-actualization of individuals.

Common though it is, such a charge is clearly and directly refuted by Hegel's procedure in PR. Hegel identifies the precise starting point for his ethical theory in PR not as spirit, but as the will (PR §4). This is plainly the will of an individual, making its own choices (PR §§11–15), framing its own individual conception of happiness (PR §§17–20), seeking to actualize its freedom in objects of various kinds outside itself (PR §§26–29). Hegel's system of right in PR is simply the system of such objects (PR §33). The first stage of the system deals with the abstract right of the person. Its concern with individual will is evident from the fact that it privileges private property as the only legitimate form of abstract right (PR §46). The will's second stage, morality, is equally concerned with individual responsibility, welfare, subjective freedom and conscience. The system does not deal with spirit proper, the actualization of a social or collective good, until it reaches the stage of ethical life (PR §156). There such goods are introduced because it is argued that they are necessary to the actualization of the same individual will which has been the focus of the system from the start.

Thus Hegel's ethical theory is based entirely on *individual* self-actualization. Nevertheless, it is not an individualistic (still less an egoistic) theory because there is more to my self-actualization than my self-interested good (my individual welfare or happiness). According to Hegel, the concrete individual will is a unity of two moments, "universality" and "particularity" (PR §7). The particular side of the will begins with its natural desires (PR §11); from these desires, through reflective choice, the individual makes for itself a "sum of satisfaction" which is its happiness or welfare (PR §§20, 123). Only this counts as the individual's self-interested good. The individual's self-actualization, however, includes also the actualization of the will's "universality," or substantive freedom (PR §24). In

other words, Hegel thinks that we do not actualize ourselves fully *as individuals* unless we successfully pursue ends larger than our own individual good, in fact, larger than anyone's individual good. This means that Hegel's ethical theory, though founded on individual self-actualization, really does make all those claims in behalf of irreducibly collective goods that liberal individualists fear it does; only such claims are not as obviously objectionable or as easily refuted as the individualists would like to think.

As individual subjects, we are related to such ends abstractly in the sphere of morality in the form of our duty to promote the welfare of others (PR §112), the universal welfare (PR §130), along with our own welfare. But we relate to universal ends concretely only in the higher sphere of ethical life, where social institutions put us into concrete relationships with others. Through membership in a family, and again through participation in an organized profession within the economic sphere of civil society, individuals acquire ethical ends, which go beyond their self-interest (PR §§158, 253). These limited ends, according to Hegel, pass over into an absolutely universal end: the state (PR §256).

Hegel locates the absolutely universal end in the state because the state alone is a self-sufficient individuality, not part of a larger whole. To those who would relate their actions to some larger entity (such as "humanity" or a "cosmopolitan world society") Hegel points out that such entities are nothing real, only abstractions. We do not actualize freedom by entertaining such empty moralistic imaginings, but only by relating ourselves to something which truly actualizes the power of our reason in the world. The state, Hegel insists, is "the absolute power on *earth*" (PR §331). For this reason, it is also the fundamental vehicle of world history. History for Hegel is a progressive succession of spiritual principles, which actualize themselves successively in the political constitutions and spiritual cultures of nation-states (PR §344). If I want my actions to have universal historical significance for humanity as a whole, I must see them not in relation to the abstract principles of cosmopolitan moralists, but instead regard myself as a child of my age and people, and view my deeds as expressions of the principle embodied in my state and my time.

The state is an absolute end, which has priority to the self-interest of individuals. But it has this status only because the self-actualization of the individual will demands it. In other words, we actualize our nature as human beings only if we pursue unselfish ends, ethical ends; the highest of these is the state. Hegel regards the state as an absolutely universal end in itself, not a means to the self-interested good of its members. In the liberal tradition the notion of such an end is usually treated as a scandal, a dangerous piece

of metaphysical obscurantism whose only function is to dupe people into offering up their freedom and happiness on the alter of some tyrannical ideology. But it is merely a dogma, and not in the least self-evident, that everything worth valuing and all ends worth pursuing are reducible to the self-interested good of human individuals. People do care very much about the way their social institutions are arranged. It is not obvious that the value of institutions is merely instrumental, a function of the way social arrangements promote private good. Mill, after all, thought it reasonable for people to value virtuous traits of character for their own sake, even though he regarded virtue as “originally” valuable only as a means to happiness.¹⁵ If it makes sense to ascribe intrinsic value to behavioral dispositions in this way, why should it be unreasonable to do the same for social institutions which, after all, consist largely of systems of such dispositions?

Hegel regards the state as an absolute end only because it is “rational,” and he describes rationality as “the unity and interpenetration of universality and individuality” (PR §258R). In other words, what makes the state an end in itself is the way it systematically harmonizes the rights, the subjective freedom and the self-interested good of its members. The state is an “infinite” end, distinct from and higher than the ends of individuals, only because it systematically unifies these “finite” ends.

It is therefore a gross distortion of Hegel’s ethical thought to associate it with the image of individuals letting themselves be sacrificed, sheep-like, to the good of the state. Hegel does think that in time of war the state may demand the sacrifice of “finite” ends, including the welfare of its members, in its behalf (PR §324). He holds that wars are occasionally necessary in the relations between states, but war is nevertheless an abnormal condition in the life of a state, something which always has the property that it ought to cease (PR §338). War as a phenomenon in the life of the state is of special theoretical interest to Hegel because it allows us, for once, to distinguish the universal good of the state from the particular good of its particular members. Hegel thinks the distinction is easy to overlook precisely because necessarily, the good of the state harmonizes with the particular interests of its members under normal circumstances. Where it is otherwise, the state is defective, and its very existence is insecure (PR §265A).

This is why Hegel rejects the idea that patriotism consists in the disposition to make extraordinary sacrifices for one’s country. On the country, he insists that it is nothing more than the “certainty, founded on truth” that in pursuing all my various ends I always related myself at the same time to the state as my universal and ultimate end.

[“Patriotism is] the consciousness that my substantial and particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of an other (in this case, the state), and in the latter’s relation to me as an individual. As a result, this other immediately ceases to be an other for me, and in my consciousness of this, I am free” (PR §268).

More generally, Hegel distinguishes the ethical ends of individuals from their self-interested ends, but the distinction is not between two ends which are fundamentally opposed (as with duty and inclination in Kantian ethics). On the contrary, the very concept of the ethical consists in a fundamental harmony of universal and particular (PR §155). Ethical conduct is conduct which fulfills me through satisfying society’s demands on me. It takes care of my interests, but without attempting to maximize them, and it leads me without reluctance or a sense of self-sacrifice to abandon the selfish course whenever I can do so without great cost and when doing so enables me to help those to whom I am bound by concrete ethical relationships.

Such conduct is not easy to account for on the basis of orthodox liberal moral or economic theories, which view people as devoted chiefly to maximizing their own self-interest, and capable of deviating from purely egoistic behavior only when they rise to the moral point of view, which demands that we sacrifice our self-interest entirely whenever it conflicts with what we see to be impartially good. On the other hand, ethical conduct is exhibited most of the time by decent, healthy people, who are neither saints nor sociopaths. Hegel thinks it is only from ethical conduct that we can expect the actuality of the good; this is why he scorns the “good will” of the moralists, which never gives us anything but an empty “ought” (PR §141).

9. Conclusion

Hegel’s conception of ethical life is badly misunderstood if it is taken as a rejection of all critical reflection on social mores and an endorsement of an attitude of pious acceptance toward existing social usages and customary morality. Hegel’s exposition of ethical life in PR involves an empirical analysis of the institutions of modern society, but it does not reduce ethics to sociology. The aim of the analysis is to show how modern social institutions actualize human nature according to the modern world’s best understanding of that nature. Hegel wants to argue that, setting aside contingencies, the institutions of the modern state are rational, they fully actualize the freedom of spirit as it interprets itself to itself in the modern world.

This theodicy of the modern state gives an explicitly rational form to our participation in the state, so that we act in a way which is not only rational in content, but also rational in form (PR Preface 13). Hegel's system of right also serves as a *critical* theory of society, because it is supposed to provide us with the Idea of the state, according to which contingently existing states may be judged as regards their contingent defects.

Hegel has an ethics. Hegel does not reduce ethics to sociology, but his ethical theory is sensitive to the empirical details of society and history in ways that more abstract ethical theories are not (at least on what they themselves regard as the proper level of ethical *theory*). Hegel's ethical theory is founded on Hegel's rational theodicy, but because Hegelian theodicy differs fundamentally from more familiar kinds, the resulting ethical theory is not quietistic or mystical. On the plane of meta-ethics, Hegelian ethical theory is a variety of ethical naturalism or realism, while on the plane of normative ethics, it is a variant of Aristotelian self-actualization theory, one which emphasizes the historical development of human nature through the development of human beings' knowledge of that nature. Since such a theory relies heavily on the empirical facts of human society and history, Hegel's ethical theory can always be controverted on those grounds. (From a late twentieth-century perspective, it is especially easy to question Hegel's notion that the modern nation state is the form of community which best provides for human self-actualization.) But the distinctive type of ethical theory Hegel developed surely deserves more attention than it has been given either by historians of ethics or by moral philosophers.

Allen W. Wood

NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1942), p. 108; cf. *Stages on Life's Way*, tr. W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 219.

2. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 200; W. H. Walsh, *Hegelian Ethics* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1984), pp. 11, 55.

3. All translations from Hegel's works are my own. Standard English translations will normally be cited along with the original, with English pagination following German pagination, separated by a slash (/).

Writings of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)

- Werke* *Hegel: Werke: Theorie Werkausgabe*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970. Cited by volume.
- D *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie* (1801), *Werke* 2.
The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy, translated by H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977.
- EL *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* I (1817, rev. 1827, 1830), *Werke* 8.
Hegel's Logic, translated by William Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. Cited by Paragraph (§) number. Additions are indicated by an "A".
- EG *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* III (1817, rev. 1827, 1830), *Werke* 10.
Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, translated by William Wallace and A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. Cited by Paragraph (§) number. Additions are indicated by an "A".
- EN *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* II (1817), rev. 1827, 1830), *Werke* 9.
Hegel's Philosophy of Nature, translated by Michael J. Petry. New York: Humanities Press, 1970. Cited by paragraph (§) number.
- PhG *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), *Werke* 3.
Phenomenology of Spirit, translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Cited by paragraph (§) number.
- PR *Philosophie des Rechts* (1821), *Werke* 7.
Hegel's Philosophy of Right, translated by H. B. Nisbet, edited by Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. Cited by Paragraph (§) number. Remarks are indicated by an "R", Additions by an "A". Preface and sometimes longer paragraphs cited by page number in German edition only.
- VG *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Hamburg, 1955).
Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction, translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. Cited by page number.
- VGP *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* Bd. 1–3, *Werke* 18–20.
Lectures on the History of Philosophy, translated by Elizabeth Haldane. New York: Humanities Press, 1968. Cited by volume and page.

- VPG *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie, Werke 12.*
The Philosophy of History, translated by J. Sibree. New York: Dover, 1956. Cited by page number.
- VPR *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie*, edited by K.-H. Ilting. Stuttgart: Frommann Verlag, 1974. Including notes and transcriptions from Hegel's lectures of 1818–1819 (transcription by C. G. Homeyer), 1821–1822, 1822–1823 (transcription by H. G. Hotho), 1824–1825 (transcription by K. G. von Griesheim), 1831 (transcription by D. F. Strauss). Cited by volume and page number.
- VPR17 *Die Philosophie des Rechts: Die Mitschriften Wannemann (Heidelberg 1817–1818) und Homeyer (Berlin 1818/19)*, edited by von K.-H. Ilting Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 1983. Cited by page number.
- VPR19 *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819/1820*, anonymous transcription or transcriptions edited by Dieter Henrich. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1983. Cited by page number.
- WL *Wissenschaft der Logik (1812–1816), Werke 5–6.* Cited by volume and page number.
Hegel's Science of Logic, translated by A. V. Miller. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969. Cited by page number.

4. Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit* (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1857), pp. 367–68.

5. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 282–86.

6. For a good general account of this period by a distinguished historian, see Friedrich Meinecke, *The Age of German Liberation, 1795–1815* (1906), ed. P. Paret and H. Fischer (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977).

7. For an account of the downfall of the Prussian reform movement, see Herbert Simon, *The Failure of the Prussian Reform Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955).

8. Humboldt's constitutional plan may be found in his *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Behr, 1904) 12:225–296; for the text of Hardenberg's plan, see Alfred Stern, *Geschichte Europas 1815–1871* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1894) 1:649–653.

9. Exponents of this view include: Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 45–54; and Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), pp. 171–84.

10. I owe this objection to IPT to a conversation with Milton Wachsborg.

11. See Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), pp. 171–72.

12. See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Akademie Ausgabe 5:59; translation by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 61.

13. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1979) p. 34.
14. Habermas, *Zur Rekonstruktion des historischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976); see also *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, tr. T. McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1979), chs. 3–4.
15. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, p. 37.