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Robert B. Pippin

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PART I

*Spirit*

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## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: leading a free life*

## I

In Hegel's *Encyclopedia* system, what contemporary philosophers would call practical philosophy is called the "philosophy of spirit [*Geist*]." By "practical philosophy" most philosophers nowadays would mean an account of the distinct sorts of events for which we may appropriately demand reasons or justifications from subjects whom we take to be responsible for such events occurring. As it is sometimes put, to focus appropriately on that issue we also need to ask for a broad delimitation of the practical normative domain (whatever is done for reasons, purposively, where reference to such reasons is essential in understanding what was done), and so are asking about the possibility that there are these distinct sorts of events, actions, things done for reasons.<sup>1</sup> That there may be no such distinction, that there might be just natural objects and their properties and ontologically uniform natural events, has been a major issue in modern practical philosophy for some time now. We often ask as well, sometimes as an independent question in practical philosophy, sometimes as tightly interwoven with an answer to the first, for an assessment of what rightly should count as such reasons or justifications, as distinct from what subjects might as a matter of fact themselves count as such reasons.<sup>2</sup> In accounts that tie acting well to the exercise of practical reason, these discussions obviously include claims we take to be of the

<sup>1</sup> See Anscombe's well-known account of "a certain sense of the question 'why?'" in Anscombe (2000), pp. 11ff.

<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, the most distinctive feature of Hegel's account of this issue is that he treats the boundary between natural events and spiritual activities not as a hard and fast either/or. There can be considerable overlap of issues regarding the sort of account that would be appropriate. This is clear in his unusual account of "Anthropology" and such issues as the relevance of geography and diet and unreflective habits of mind characteristic of a people or tribe as all parts of an account that is still essentially of human conduct, not animal behavior. This can lead to some unusual discussions. See for example, his account of boredom at EPG:92; PM, 69.

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highest importance – ethical and moral sorts of reasons, questions of right or justice, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Within his comprehensive practical philosophy, the heart of Hegel's answer to both sorts of questions consists in a theory of freedom. This theory is at the heart of the account of the ontological distinctness of actions, and at the heart of what could loosely be called Hegel's value theory. The basic features of this theory are well known, at least in a textbook sort of way, but it also comes with presuppositions and implications that either resist attempts at interpretive clarity or, if clarified in a certain way, have seemed quite objectionable. The theory ascribed to Hegel in what follows has two basic components: that for Hegel freedom consists in being in a certain reflective and deliberative relation to oneself (which he describes as being able to give my inclinations and incentives a "rational form"), which itself is possible, so it is argued, only if one is also already in certain (ultimately institutional, norm-governed) relations to others, if one is a participant in certain practices. This account is resistant to any analysis of these forms of self- and other-relation that would isolate the possibility and the very content of any self-understanding from social and political structures at a time, so it is much less straightforwardly psychological than many other modern theories.

This is the feature of Hegel's account that is probably the most well known, but mostly with respect to the question of the nature of social norms, social institutions, and social practices. That is, it is well known that Hegel is an opponent of "methodological individualism" in accounts of such things. Such norms, institutions, and practices should not, in his view, be accounted for as built up out of, or as consisting in, or as sustained by, the individually held beliefs or commitments of individuals, or as created by the individual decisions (or putatively undistorted rational choices) of individuals. Being opposed to this view means one holds that there would be no possible content to such individual mindedness unless such individuals were not already members of complex social networks, or that the relation of dependence between individuals and social structures does not go from social structures to the individuals who sustain it, but the other way around. I want to suggest something

<sup>3</sup> We also obviously demand and give reasons for what we believe, and while Hegel is suspicious of any strict separation between theoretical and practical reason (see the discussion in chapter 5), and as insistent on taking account of conceptual change in both arenas, a full account of the relation between theoretical and practical "sense-making" would be an independent study. I shall here just concentrate on the practical issue. Some suggestions about how Hegel views the general problem (the theory of conceptual content) is given in chapters 3 and 4.

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much stronger: that Hegel thinks that something like this reversal of methodological individualist logic is necessary to explain the conditions of the possibility of agency itself.

This last point will quickly become quite complicated. Along with many of the features now taken for granted as constitutive of an event counting as an action – that it be intentional under some description, that it admits a distinct sort of response to a “Why?” question, that it involves some sort of relationship between conative and doxastic elements, and so forth – I want to say that Hegel adds an element not usually raised and which leads him to the issues of sociality just suggested. Put most simply, for the action to count as mine, it must make a certain kind of sense to the agent, and that means it must fit in intelligibly within a whole complex of practices and institutions within which *doing this now* could have a coherent meaning. In Hegel’s account, I can bring about something, and know what it is I am doing, and can have reflectively endorsed the action as, all things considered, what I ought to be doing, and can be doing it voluntarily, uncoerced – parading up and down in front of a reviewing stand, say – yet the action could be part of a practice that has either gone dead in a certain way, or requires of the agent further commitments incompatible with others necessary within some form of life. On some very minimalist conception of “conditions of agency” we still might want to say that the parading was an action, at least in the sense that it is not an event like other naturally occurring events. But on the view of Hegel’s I want to explore, this would not be a sufficiently wide view of the conditions of agency necessary in order to capture what is important in marking someone off as an agent and a deed as an attributable action. On his view, that is, all of the standard conditions could be fulfilled, yet we would not want to say that the action is truly “mine,” such that I can fully or truly stand behind it, own up to it, claim ownership of it.<sup>4</sup> (A society in which the role of parenthood changed such that one found the new requirements “without meaning” or incoherent would not be one in which I simply found that my preferences were not being satisfied, although it is always possible and trivial to re-describe the situation that way.) And these sorts of conditions of meaningfulness are not aspects I can secure or achieve alone, either by some form of reflection or decision or by getting clearer or seeing better. It is certainly possible

<sup>4</sup> Again, this way of thinking about the issue assumes the possibility of degrees of agency and thus degrees of freedom. Ultimately it also requires Hegel’s Aristotelian account of partial realizations understood as partial because of some whole or full realization.

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that an individual can, *qua* individual, suffer some failure of meaning, as in pathological boredom or depression. But any given social world is also a nexus of common significances, saliences, taboos, and a general shared orientation that can also either be sustained or can fail. Indeed one of the most interesting aspects of such a social condition, shared meaningfulness, or intelligibility, is that it can fail, go dead, lose its grip, and a very great deal of what interests Hegel is simply what such shared practical meaningfulness must be that it could fail, and how we should integrate our account of action into a fuller theory of the realization of such a condition and its failure. (His general name for the achievement and maintenance of such a form of intelligible life is “*Sittlichkeit*” and his case for this sort of priority of *Sittlichkeit* over strictly individualist accounts of mindedness-in-action has not, I want to argue, been properly appreciated.)<sup>5</sup>

The essential desideratum for Hegel in any theory of freedom like the above is a demonstration of the possibility of an actual and experienced identification with one's deeds and practices and social roles, the conditions necessary for the deeds to be and to be experienced as my own. This is what allows him to assume that one might be said to have uniquely, causally brought about some deed as the result of some psychological process and mental causation, and to have done so upon rational deliberation, but that one could still experience one's own deeds as strange, alien, only a partial “expression” of who one is. (This is the crucial issue in any self-realization theory of freedom like Hegel's.)

Secondly, these relational states of individual mindedness and common like-mindedness are argued to be constitutive of freedom, to render such an identification possible (such that I can stand behind, own up what I have done as truly mine) because they are *rational*. (That is the key condition of the intelligibility issue noted above.) Accordingly, so Hegel purports to show, there are a variety of commitments in the modern world<sup>6</sup> that can be shown to be indispensable elements of a rationally

<sup>5</sup> This is not the sort of “priority” which aims to treat individuals as mere epi-phenomena, or as less “real.” It is also true that for Hegel there could be no such thing as this determinate common mindedness or *Sittlichkeit* unless individuals were minded in some way rather than another. He is quite aware (as in his discussion of Socrates) that in periods of crisis all commonality can break down, and individuals are “thrown back on themselves” for normative balance.

<sup>6</sup> Even with such extremely vague and abstract formulations, problems begin. The formulation suggests a commitment-free agent deliberating and opting for one or another commitment. Hegel's picture is of “always already” institutionally bound persons capable of deliberating retrospectively about the “objective rationality” of such positions. His account places much less emphasis on the issue of choice than virtually any theory other than Spinoza's. For his clearest criticism of

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sufficient and therewith free life. One of his clearest formulations occurs in the *Lectures on Fine Art*:

In a state which is really articulated rationally all the laws and organizations are nothing but a realization of freedom in its essential characteristics. When this is the case, the individual's reason finds in these institutions, only the actuality of his own essence, and if he obeys these laws, he coincides, not with something alien to himself, but simply with what is his own [*mit ihrem eigenen*]. Freedom of choice [*Willkür*], of course, is often equally called 'freedom'; but freedom of choice [*Willkür*] is only non-rational freedom, choice and self-determination issuing not from the rationality of the will but from fortuitous impulses and their dependence on sense and the external world. (A, 98; TWA, Bd.13, 136 )

In one of his most challenging and interesting claims, Hegel argues that this means that such deeds and practices can be said to be both "subjectively" and "objectively" rational (as indicated by the emphasis above). Hence again the unique aspects of Hegel's theory: he denies that we can separate the moral-psychological, individual dimension of freedom (the possibility of the "freedom of the will") from social relations of dependence and independence said to be equally constitutive of freedom (the freedom to act), and he assesses these social arrangements in light of their rationality, even though he does not have a wholly subjective or faculty or psychological view of reason, as if reason were a power an individual could exercise in trying to figure out "what anyone" or "any impartial judge" would do. Hegel has what could be considered a historicized or social or pragmatic conception of practical reason. He understands practical reason as a kind of interchange of attempts at justification among persons each of whose actions affects what others would otherwise be able to do, and all this for a community at a time. My purpose in the following is to defend the interpretive claim that these are Hegel's views and to propose a defense of the claims themselves against various objections.

But difficult problems emerge immediately. In the first place, this is not the way Hegel would formulate the issue. He takes himself to be a systematic thinker and so would be quite wary of such a delimitation of topics, at least without a great deal more scene setting whereby the ultimate inseparability of such a topic (freedom) from several others, especially in what he calls a "*Science of Logic*," could be made out. Although these systematic ambitions have led to a good deal of criticism

considering the problem of freedom as the problem of *Willkür*, the freedom of choice, see the Remark and the Addition to §15 in *The Philosophy of Right*.

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of Hegel and supposedly make his philosophy dated and of mere historical interest, the core issues in practical philosophy have always been extremely difficult for any philosopher to isolate. They raise issues in philosophy of mind, self-knowledge, first-person authority, the nature of rationality, causation and ontology, the metaphysics of action, and many others. Any treatment of such a range of issues must remain consistent, must fit together in some way, and by and large that is all a systematic treatment means.<sup>7</sup> So Hegel's explicitness and ambitions about such inevitable systematic requirements are in themselves not that unusual, and can even be quite illuminating, as I hope to show. I will not explore every aspect of the logical issues involved but no adequate treatment of Hegel's practical philosophy can ignore claims about the relation among "idea," "concept," and "actuality," the claim that "the Concept gives itself its own actuality," that "spirit is a product of itself," that "the inner" and "the outer" in human actions enjoy a relation of "speculative identity," and several other indispensable components of his overall argument.

But generalities aside, there are three aspects of Hegel's distinctive treatment that have generated the most controversy and which cannot be avoided in any adequate interpretation.

The historical dimension of the systematic project is notorious in its ambition. Hegel's account of what makes an event a deed (truly or fully), and even a righteous or evil deed, appears to be inextricably linked to the grandest of grand narratives, an account of a continuous human (more properly, in his account, Western) struggle to understand what it is to be a human being; a progressive self-educative enterprise with a beginning, middle, and some sort of end (wherein we learn that we are absolutely free beings, and therewith learn what a free life consists in). Hegel, in other words, tries to do justice to the fact that attention to the possibility and importance of freedom, at least when freedom is understood

<sup>7</sup> I concentrate here on methodological systematicity. That is admittedly a simplification of a much deeper problem in Hegel's treatment of practical phenomena. To wit: at the end of the day Hegel will want to deny a profoundly important pillar of modern liberal thought, the "autonomy" of various value spheres or normative domains, the irreducible and incommensurably different domains defined by the good versus the bad, the beautiful versus the ugly, the useful (having exchange value) versus the useless (not having such value), the sacred versus the profane, the just versus the unjust. Those who have such objections to this aspect of liberalism in favor of some more holistic or even "totalistic" approach have often argued to the comprehensiveness of religion, as in political theology, or of politics or of economics, and have rightly inspired much suspicion. One way or another Hegel will want to see all such norm-governed activities as manifestations of the actualization of freedom. Before we can understand what he means by this, and why he thinks that normative perspective is so comprehensive, we must begin with the problem of what he understands by the "actualization of freedom," and this study undertakes that preliminary project.



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as self-determination of some sort and when freedom so understood is counted as a possibility for each individual, not merely a few, and as universally valuable, is all relatively recent in the philosophical tradition and is characteristic especially of the modern Western epoch in philosophy. One might then ask: why and when did the theoretical question begin to look the way it now does, and why and when did the political question of justice come to depend so much on the question of freedom?<sup>8</sup> Of what significance is it that the modern Western epoch (apparently) alone understands itself (if it does) as the aspiration towards a free life for each, in common, and what does it mean that for many centuries in this tradition this aspiration was not a significant factor in the political lives or philosophies of human beings otherwise very much like us?

In the second place, the most controversial element of Hegel's systematic treatment is a deep suspicion of the ontology often presupposed as an unquestioned matter of course in modern discussions of action, agency, and freedom – the isolation of subjects as ontologically distinct individuals and of a subject's reasons as episodic or dispositional and perhaps uniquely causal mental states. As we shall see, for Hegel, by contrast, a certain sort of mindedness is constitutive of and so inseparable from the action itself, and being an individual subject is something like a collective or social normative achievement and the putative independence of such subjects is thus always intertwined with a distinct sort of profound, even ontological dependence.

In the third place, and because of this systematicity, Hegel has a great many other things to say about the nature and activity of "spirit" (*Geist*," Hegel's terms for the distinctly human form of mindedness and the distinctly human doings he counts as actions) than those aspects that intersect with questions of normativity, action, and our justification of deeds to each other. Some of what he says has few contemporary resonances and is obscure. *Truly* self-sufficient (and so free) activity is ascribed only to something called "the Absolute," and Hegel sometimes seems to describe "the work of reason" as if that work were a real element in the universe – indeed, as if it were the underlying structural element of the whole, the "*most* real" element – and to reject accounts that construe reason as anything like a mere human faculty or power.

<sup>8</sup> It is of course possible to distinguish the question of the nature and extent of human freedom (what it would be to act freely) from questions of metaphysics, to distinguish the question of the social and political conditions of liberty from the question of the freedom of the will. As already briefly noted above, given the systematic ambitions just mentioned, Hegel does not divide things up this way.

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However, precisely because he is a systematic and in his famous term “dialectical” thinker, we can assume with some initial confidence that Hegel cannot mean to deny the legitimacy and indeed unavoidability of distinct questions about the relevant characteristics of action just *qua* action (as performed by responsible individuals), about the nature of human freedom (the domain of what he calls “subjective spirit and objective spirit”), and the right way to understand the quality of the reasons appealed to by individuals in a society at a time, even when all are understood in their proper systematic context, not to mention the relation between the quality of those reasons and the degree of freedom realized. It is never the case that when discussing the nature–spirit relation in the *Encyclopedia* or the role of morality in objective spirit or, especially, the progressive and elevated nature of the individual experience of freedom in modernity when compared with antiquity, that he appeals directly to some sweeping claim about the necessary “unfolding of the Absolute” in order to *account* for some claim he wants to make about a deficiency or a transition to a more adequate understanding of spirit in some picture of agency or some claim of right. According to his own treatment, the domain of human action and the problem of freedom deserve their own sort of account; Hegel tries to provide one, and he does so in terms internal to the topic at issue. Such questions are not simply “cancelled” when they are progressively “elevated” and “transcended” (“*aufgehoben*,” in Hegel’s famous triple-meaning term), whether that development ultimately links individuality with social dependence, insists on the inseparability of a subject’s putatively privately “owned” intention with a public deed, or insists that the intelligibility and justifiability of any such deed is also always “institution-bound” in some way. Even within an appropriately broader context, individual subjects still exist as such and they remain reflective and social agents, and the way individual subjects construe what it is they are doing and why still play essential roles in Hegel’s account.

This is not to deny that such a relatively independent treatment of the problems of agency and ethics as proposed here can be indifferent to Hegel’s systematic ambitions. But part of how we should be guided in attempting to understand *those* ambitions must be an orientation from the way the parts are treated. For example, in the traditional interpretation, finite human subjects are understood to become free when they realize – primarily in philosophy, but in mediated forms of awareness or self-knowledge present in art, religion, and ethical life – that they are not merely finite but also vehicles in some sense of the self-realization of “the