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1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Our Commitment to Individualism and Our Problems with It

1.1.1 Thinking for Oneself. In this short chapter, I will survey the major issues that this book will address – plus some additional issues in social philosophy that Hegel analyzes in his *Philosophy of Right* but that I won't have room to discuss in this book – in order to draw attention to Hegel's commitment to modern "individualism" as an indispensable point of departure, containing truths that must not be abandoned, though they must certainly be interpreted in ways that go beyond initial schematic or (as Hegel would put it) "abstract" formulations.

We tend to think that a person's decisions about what to believe should be based on her own thinking, rather than being a result of just taking things on authority. The idea of thinking for oneself is a major ingredient in the ideal of individual freedom. However, when we attempt to think objectively about the world as a whole, including ourselves as parts of that world, we may find reasons to wonder whether the idea of thinking for oneself is compatible with what we seem to learn about ourselves as parts of the world. Representatives of empirical sciences such as biology and psychology regularly tell us that there is no such thing as freedom. Even philosophers for whom freedom is an absolutely central concern, such as Kant, despair of explaining how it could be compatible with a scientific view of reality. Nor is this skepticism or despair about freedom limited to thinkers who are preoccupied with empirical science. Thinkers in the Continental European philosophical tradition that derives from Nietzsche and Heidegger often associate freedom with the modern "problem of the subject," and almost as often suggest that the only way to solve that problem is to

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abandon the notion of the "subject" (and the notion of freedom along with it).[1]

1.1.2 Theoretical Thinking for Oneself. Even assuming that a person can successfully think for herself, do we have any reason to think that such thinking can give her access to reality? In his *Meditations*, Descartes made it his project to start from scratch, taking nothing on authority, and arriving (he hoped) at knowledge of God and knowledge of the physical world, but his arguments for God's existence – which are indispensable to his later arguments for his knowledge of the physical world, as well – were attacked effectively by later philosophers such as Kant. Philosophers such as David Hume, who tried to dispense with God, wound up in considerable doubt about whether they could know the physical world, either. It began to look as though a self-thinker might not ever be able to get beyond knowledge of herself to knowledge of anything else.

1.1.3 Practical Thinking for Oneself. In the realm of practical thinking, we tend to think that a person has good reason to seek to meet her own needs, satisfy her own desires, and defend her own rights. Like thinking for oneself in deciding what to believe, concerning oneself with one's own needs, desires, and rights is part of living one's own life – part of taking oneself seriously. These are the things, it seems, that one has immediate reason to seek. However, if what I have immediate reason to seek is to meet my own needs, satisfy my own desires, and defend my own rights, what reason (if any) do I have to help others to meet their needs or satisfy their desires, and what reason do I have to respect their rights? Of course, to the extent that helping others or respecting their rights increases the probability that my own needs (and so on) will be met, the case is no different from the initial one. Likewise, if I happen to *want* to help others or to respect their rights.[2] But what if, in a particular case, helping others or respecting their rights will not

1 An argument along these lines that has been influential in the last couple of decades is Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Rorty claims to find similar conclusions in the writings of John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as in Heidegger.

2 Thus, to act on one's own desires is not necessarily to be selfish, since some of those desires may be desires that the needs or desires of other people should be satisfied. But of course it may be the case that one does *not* desire these things; and then if one is guided only by one's own desires, the result will be selfishness.

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increase the probability that my own needs (and so on) will be met – and I don't happen to want to help them or to respect their rights? What if, in a particular case (and taking reasonable calculations of all long-term consequences, and their probabilities, into account), theft, fraud, or coercion seem likely to serve my needs and satisfy my desires better than helping others or respecting their rights will?

This is the issue of the relationship between "rational egoism" and ethics, which philosophers since Plato have tried, in various ways, to address. None of their attempts is widely agreed to be successful or even promising, though each has its advocates. In Chapter 2, I will canvass several of these attempts (Plato, Thomas Hobbes and David Gauthier, and Kant) and I will give reasons for thinking that none of them is fully successful.

1.1.4 Social Affiliation. Then there is the issue of the relation between individuality, on the one hand, and common needs and social relationships, on the other. Even assuming that theft, fraud, and coercion are (for whatever reason) out of the picture: If each person seeks, initially, to meet her own needs, and so on, it looks as though interactions between people are likely to take the form of bargaining over possible exchanges between them, in which each seeks maximum need or desire satisfaction or the maximum success of her freely chosen life-plan. Then several questions arise: (1) What about the value of welfare, which it seems may sometimes need to be purchased at the cost of some reduction in freedom (for example, of freedom of contract, or of the freedom to dispose of one's own property as one wishes)? And (2) what about the value of participating in non-self-centered relationships such as love, family, friendship, or fellow-citizenship, as these are (one might say) "traditionally" conceived? At first glance anyway, it looks as though a society of "self-actualizing" individuals – who live their own lives, think for themselves, seek to meet their own needs, and so forth – may not be able to ensure (except by compromising their guiding ideal) that their unlucky members don't sometimes just fall by the wayside. This is the issue that has set libertarians, who present themselves as the advocates of individual freedom, against welfarists and socialists for a century and a half now. And it also looks as though a member of such a society may not be able to participate in relationships such as love, family, friendship, and fellow citizenship, because her point of departure, in thinking about her relations with other people, will always be herself – her own life, her own needs, and so on – so that the closest she will be able to

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get to other people will be negotiating about trade-offs between their self-centered concerns and her own (and about how the rights of each will be respected). The suggestion that the individual may *need or desire* to have non-self-centered relationships just underlines the issue: How can she arrive at such relationships by *negotiating* with others about how everybody's needs (and rights) – for these things among others – will be satisfied? For negotiation itself seems to involve a self-centered approach to one's life. Something like this issue has been on the minds of romantic critics of Enlightenment individualism from the first reaction against the French Revolution down to present-day "communitarianism."[3] And finally (3), will a society of self-actualizing individuals support a functioning democracy? Can we expect people who pursue their private interests in the manner of the so-called "liberty of the moderns" also to be active citizens, concerned with the public interest, in the manner of the republican tradition (the "liberty of the ancients")?

1.1.5 Universal or Theological Affiliation. Finally, there is the related issue of the affiliation with reality as a whole, and the resulting sense of meaning, value, and identity, that a person can find in a relationship to God. Can a person avail herself of these, while at the same time being reasonably skeptical – as the ideal of thinking for oneself seems to require – about the motives and the claims of purveyors of purported divine revelation and comfort? Does the ideal of thinking for oneself (and thus preserving, at least, one's freedom), together with reasonable assumptions about knowledge, lead to the conclusion that one can't have knowledge about God – knowledge that could free one from debilitating kinds of skepticism – and that one must simply choose between debilitating skepticism, on the one hand, and blind (and, to that extent, unfree) "faith," on the other? Would the ideal of thinking for oneself entail rejecting such a God's love, in any case, on the grounds that one should stand (like Lucifer) on "one's own two feet"? Is Sigmund Freud right in his view that religion is essentially a form of psychic infantilism, so that a true adult will have nothing to do with it?[4]

3 Early critics of the Enlightenment who had some thoughts along these lines include Johann Gottfried Herder, Edmund Burke, Novalis (Friedrich Hardenberg), Friedrich Schlegel, and Joseph de Maistre. Present-day "communitarians" who have expressed similar thoughts include Robert Bellah, Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Charles Taylor.

4 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), pp. 20, 21, 22. Freud gives a memorable brief account of the view opposed to his

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1.2. Hegel Endorses Individualism – as a Point of Departure

1.2.1 Self-Determination. Hegel was well aware of the challenge to human freedom that seems to be presented by the empirical sciences. He was so concerned about the apparent flimsiness of Kant's defense of freedom that in an early phase of his own thinking, he sympathized with F. W. J. Schelling's complaints, against Kant, that Kant underestimated the significance of nature. However, the point of departure of Hegel's mature philosophical system, in the *Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, is the concept of a determinate being, the "something" (*Etwas*), which is what it is by virtue of itself rather than by virtue of its relations to other somethings: that is, the point of departure is self-determination.[5] Hegel finds major problems with this point of departure, problems that are summed up in his concept of "negation," or being what one is by virtue of one's relations to others; and those problems propel the unfolding of his philosophical system. Some of the things that he says in the course of that unfolding, such as that "what is rational, is actual, and what is actual is rational" (EG §6), may raise questions about whether Hegel does in fact adhere to the idea of freedom as thinking for oneself, in the sense of being free to criticize the actual world. But it's clear, at least in his point of departure, that Hegel could not give self-determination a more central role than he does; so we will have to see how this thought unfolds, in his system, and what the doctrines that appear to conflict with it actually mean.

1.2.2 Not Dogmatism. In regard to knowledge of reality, one of Hegel's earliest publications was a discussion of the skepticism of his day – "On the Relationship of Skepticism to Philosophy" (1802) (TWA 2:213–272/Skep) – in which he argues, not (initially) that this skepticism can be overcome, but that it doesn't go far enough! So he can't be accused of telling people merely to believe whatever the people around

own – the view according to which there is an affiliation with reality as a whole, and a resulting sense of meaning, value, and identity, that is the root experience of religion and that naturalistic atheism may or may not be able to appreciate and enjoy – in his discussion in Chapter 1 (pp. 10–21) of the "'oceanic' feeling" that was described for him by his friend, Romain Rolland.

5 Actually, the Logic's point of departure is in the concept of "being," as such. Determinate being, and the "something" that is what it is by virtue of itself (has "reality" [*Realität*] and "being-within-self" [*Insichsein*]), are specifications of what is supposed to be implicit in being, as such. Details on this are given in Chapter 3.

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them believe. I will show in Chapter 3 how Hegel's own conception of knowledge and reality, in the Logic, is based upon and supersedes – preserves while cancelling or correcting – this intensified skepticism. Contrary, then, to the impression that one might get from Hegel's German-professorial manner, he is not a dogmatist; instead, he takes the ideal of thinking for oneself at least as seriously as any other leading modern philosopher.

1.2.3 Ethics Based on Freedom. Like Kant, Hegel approaches ethics, and the issue of egoism and self-interest, by way of the idea of the self and the idea of being oneself or governing oneself – which he usually refers to as "freedom." He assumes that an organism that is capable of being itself or governing itself cannot "gain" anything that would compensate it for a failure to do that. The key element in being oneself or governing oneself, as Hegel analyzes it in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* (§§5 and 11–21), is stepping back from whatever inclinations, desires, or drives one may experience, and asking whether acting on them would fit into the big picture of a life that makes sense as a whole.[6] Simply to act on one's desires, as one happens to experience them, is to be governed by something that has nothing to do with a self, as such, but derives – through non-rational, causal processes – from whatever environment and biological heritage one happens to have been born into. To be oneself, on the other hand, is to examine these "givens" from the higher point of view of a life that makes sense as a whole, and to accept or reject them on that basis. This idea of being effectively *self*-governed, rather than being governed by what is other than oneself, was what Kant formulated with his contrast between the "hypothetical imperatives" of desire-satisfaction, on the one hand, and the "categorical imperative," on the other hand, whose authority is based not on any felt desire,

6 This idea is expressed in PR §5, in which Hegel describes "the element of pure indeterminacy or of the 'I''s pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure thinking of oneself." For a more colloquial description, see PR §11A (emphasis added): "The human being, as wholly indeterminate, *stands above* his drives and can determine and posit them as his own. The drive is part of nature, but to posit it in this 'I' depends upon my will, which therefore cannot appeal to the fact that the drive is grounded in nature"; and PR §14: "'I' is the *possibility* of determining myself to this or to something else, of *choosing* between these determinations [namely, "its various drives"] which the 'I' must in this respect regard as external."

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as such, but on thought, which goes beyond desire and thus makes it possible for the agent to have an effective self (whose dictates Kant identified with those of morality). Declaring that "knowledge of the will first gained a firm foundation and point of departure in the philosophy of Kant, through the thought of its infinite autonomy" (PR §135R), Hegel unambiguously endorses this Kantian conception of freedom as creating a self that can govern itself.

Here again, Hegel will have a great deal to say about the way in which this sort of "freedom" needs to be articulated, concretely. That is the subject of the entire *Philosophy of Right*, as well as of the preparatory argument presented in the *Science of Logic* and the *Philosophy of Spirit*. But by taking this conception as his point of departure, Hegel makes it clear that – as it is for modern individualism in general, and certainly in its Kantian form – thinking for and being oneself is, in his view, not something to be rejected, but something the "truth" of which must be preserved throughout the subsequent development of his philosophical system.

1.2.4 Self-Determination and Social Affiliation. Turning to the issue of the relationship between individuality, on the one hand, and common needs and social relationships, on the other: The first topics that Hegel takes up, in elaborating the concrete implications of "freedom" in the *Philosophy of Right*, are property and contract. It is clear to him that exchange, and the ownership that it presupposes, are primary features of a world in which people are free. Later he tells us that one of the major domains of ethical life, "civil society," is intended, as a system, to allow "private persons who have their own interest as their end" (PR §187) to go about their business. That is, the mature Hegel – who has not studied Adam Smith and the other political economists for nothing – is very aware of the central role, in developed societies, of bargaining and exchange, and thus of contract, and of individuals who act (in certain contexts, at least) in "self-centered" ways. Once again, that central role is far from being his last word on the subject of social life. But it is something that he endorses just as clearly as he does each of the other individualist principles that I have mentioned. So Hegel is going to have to show us how the apparently non-"individualist" social institutions that he will also endorse – in particular, the family, public welfare-promoting institutions, and the state – are consistent with the germ of truth in this idea of the "self-centered," contracting individual: how love, family,

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friendship, welfare, fellow citizenship, and indeed active citizenship itself (the "liberty of the ancients") can be reconciled with modern individualism.[7]

1.2.5 Self-Determination and Universal Affiliation. Finally, regarding the question of the affiliation with reality as a whole, and the resulting sense of meaning, value, and identity, that a person may be able to find in a relationship to God: Hegel's discussion of God, and God's relation to the world, is identical with his discussion of freedom. This has led more than one commentator to suppose that for Hegel, only God is free, and we finite human beings are only "vehicles" for this freedom that actually belongs to God, and not to us. However, as I said earlier (1.2.1), Hegel begins his system not with God, but with self-determination. God (as "Absolute Spirit") is the system's final concept, not its starting point. Hegel's discussion, from its beginning, is aimed at finding out what it would be for something – initially, a finite thing – to belong to itself. He does indeed conclude that belonging to oneself (being self-determining) necessarily involves going beyond one's finite characteristics, and he calls the result of that going-beyond "infinite" and divine. But he also says that this infinite or divine thing is *not "a power existing outside" the finite* (WL 5: 160/GW 21:133,39–1/145–146); rather, it is the finite's going beyond itself. Thus, there is reason to think that he takes very seriously his starting point, in the idea of something that is self-determining: that he does not regard us merely as "vehicles" for something that is other than us, but rather as having a very intimate relationship with the infinite or the divine. He certainly doesn't assert that God simply is us, finite humans. But neither does he assert that God is something simply *other than* us ("a power existing outside"). However, exactly, it is to be understood (on which, see Chapters 3–6, and 3.22 in particular), this intimate relationship is where Hegel thinks we find the possibility of an affiliation with reality as a whole that is not the abandonment, but rather the full realization, of adult thinking-for-oneself. Since he presents this relationship and this possibility as subjects of (philosophical) *knowledge*, rather than of mere (individual) "faith," his claims go well beyond what can be found in most modern philosophers – though

7 See 6.10. I analyze some of these issues in Hegel's social philosophy in more detail in "Hegel on 'Ethical Life' and Social Criticism," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001): 571–591, and "How Hegel Reconciles Private Freedom and Citizenship," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 7 (1999): 419–433.

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not (as it happens) beyond what pre-modern philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas, thought that they could offer. The novelty of Hegel's claims, in this area, is simply that the route by which he arrives at them starts, as I have been saying, with a full and explicit endorsement of the modern emphasis on individuality and thinking for oneself.[8]

8 I don't mean this remark to imply that individuality and the individual's thinking for herself were less fundamental concerns for Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas than they are for modern philosophers. I think they were probably just as fundamental for these pre-modern thinkers (see, for example, 2.6). But modern philosophers, starting with Descartes, seem to make more of a fuss about these matters than their predecessors did; and this sometimes leads commentators on the history of philosophy to suppose that pre-modern thinkers were less concerned about them than modern ones are.

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2

NATURALISM, PLATO, KANT, AND HEGEL ON REASON, FREEDOM, RESPONSIBILITY, ETHICS, AND GOD

In this chapter, I turn to a more detailed exposition of how Hegel, and several other major thinkers including the "naturalists" or "empiricists" – Thomas Hobbes and David Hume and their successors – and Plato and Kant, develop the idea of the individual who thinks for herself and is responsible for her actions. What does this thinking for oneself involve, in practice? Do we have reason to regard it as something that can really happen, so that it is truly appropriate to hold people responsible – to praise them or blame them – for their actions? Would the individual's thinking for herself reduce or increase the likelihood that she would treat other individuals in a way that is in keeping with morality or ethics? And how would a person who thinks for herself relate to "God"? Should she reject the idea of God, as someone whose existence is unproven and who (if real) would interfere with her thinking for herself, or is there a conception of God that is consistent with, and even reinforces, the idea of individual freedom and thinking for oneself – and whose existence might even be provable?

2.1. Kant and Hegel on the Will

In 1.2.2, I sketched Hegel's conception of an individual's practical freedom, which depends on her stepping back from whatever inclinations, desires, or drives she may experience, and asking whether acting on them would fit into the big picture of a life that makes sense as a whole.[1] I

1 This idea is expressed in PR §5, in which Hegel describes "the element of pure indeterminacy or of the 'I''s pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of

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